

Oliphant Margaret

# The Perpetual Curate



Маргарет Олифант  
**The Perpetual Curate**

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# Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	17
CHAPTER IV	22
CHAPTER V	26
CHAPTER VI	30
CHAPTER VII	35
CHAPTER VIII	40
CHAPTER IX	47
CHAPTER X	51
CHAPTER XI	57
CHAPTER XII	61
CHAPTER XIII	65
CHAPTER XIV	68
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	71

# Oliphant Mrs. Margaret

## The Perpetual Curate

### CHAPTER I

Carlingford is, as is well known, essentially a quiet place. There is no trade in the town, properly so called. To be sure, there are two or three small counting-houses at the other end of George Street, in that ambitious pile called Gresham Chambers; but the owners of these places of business live, as a general rule, in villas, either detached or semi-detached, in the North-end, the new quarter, which, as everybody knows, is a region totally unrepresented in society. In Carlingford proper there is no trade, no manufactures, no anything in particular, except very pleasant parties and a superior class of people – a very superior class of people, indeed, to anything one expects to meet with in a country town, which is not even a county town, nor the seat of any particular interest. It is the boast of the place that it has no particular interest – not even a public school: for no reason in the world but because they like it, have so many nice people collected together in those pretty houses in Grange Lane – which is, of course, a very much higher tribute to the town than if any special inducement had led them there. But in every community some centre of life is necessary. This point, round which everything circles, is, in Carlingford, found in the clergy. They are the administrators of the commonwealth, the only people who have defined and compulsory duties to give a sharp outline to life. Somehow this touch of necessity and business seems needful even in the most refined society: a man who is obliged to be somewhere at a certain hour, to do something at a certain time, and whose public duties are not volunteer proceedings, but indispensable work, has a certain position of command among a leisurely and unoccupied community, not to say that it is a public boon to have some one whom everybody knows and can talk of. The minister in Salem Chapel was everything in his little world. That respectable connection would not have hung together half so closely but for this perpetual subject of discussion, criticism, and patronage; and, to compare great things with small, society in Carlingford recognised in some degree the same human want. An enterprising or non-enterprising rector made all the difference in the world in Grange Lane; and in the absence of a rector that counted for anything (and poor Mr Proctor was of no earthly use, as everybody knows), it followed, as a natural consequence, that a great deal of the interest and influence of the position fell into the hands of the Curate of St Roque's.

But that position was one full of difficulties, as any one acquainted with the real state of affairs must see in a moment. Mr Wentworth's circumstances were, on the whole, as delicate and critical as can be imagined, both as respected his standing in Carlingford and the place he held in his own family – not to speak of certain other personal matters which were still more troublesome and vexatious. These last of course were of his own bringing on; for if a young man chooses to fall in love when he has next to nothing to live upon, trouble is sure to follow. He had quite enough on his hands otherwise without that crowning complication. When Mr Wentworth first came to Carlingford, it was in the days of Mr Bury, the Evangelical rector – his last days, when he had no longer his old vigour, and was very glad of "assistance," as he said, in his public and parish work. Mr Bury had a friendship of old standing with the Miss Wentworths of Skelmersdale, Mr Francis Wentworth's aunts; and it was a long time before the old Rector's eyes were opened to the astounding fact, that the nephew of these precious and chosen women held "views" of the most dangerous complexion, and indeed was as near Rome as a strong and lofty conviction of the really superior catholicity of the Anglican Church would permit him to be. Before he found this out, Mr Bury, who had unlimited confidence in preaching and improving talk, had done all he could to get the young man to "work," as the good Rector called it, and had voluntarily placed all that difficult district about the canal under the charge of the Curate of

St Roque's. It is said that the horror with which, after having just written to Miss Leonora Wentworth to inform her what "a great work" his young friend was doing among the bargemen, Mr Bury was seized upon entering St Roque's itself for the first time after the consecration, when the young priest had arranged everything his own way, had a very bad effect on his health, and hastened his end. And it is indeed a fact that he died soon after, before he had time to issue the interdict he intended against Mr Wentworth's further exertions in the parish of Carlingford. Then came Mr Proctor, who came into the town as if he had dropped from the skies, and knew no more about managing a parish than a baby; and under his exceptional incumbency Mr Wentworth became more than ever necessary to the peace of the community. Now a new *régime* had been inaugurated. Mr Morgan, a man whom Miss Wodehouse described as "in the prime of life," newly married, with a wife also in the prime of life, who had waited for him ten years, and all that time had been under training for her future duties – two fresh, new, active, clergymanly intellects, entirely open to the affairs of the town, and intent upon general reformation and sound management – had just come into possession. The new Rector was making a great stir all about him, as was natural to a new man; and it seemed, on the whole, a highly doubtful business whether he and Mr Wentworth would find Carlingford big enough to hold them both.

"We could not have expected to begin quite without difficulties," said Mrs Morgan, as she and her husband discussed the question in the drawing-room of the Rectory. It was a pretty drawing-room, though Mr Proctor's taste was not quite in accordance with the principles of the new incumbent's wife: however, as the furniture was all new, and as the former rector had no further need for it, it was of course, much the best and most economical arrangement to take it as it stood – though the bouquets on the carpet were a grievance which nothing but her high Christian principles could have carried Mrs Morgan through. She looked round as she spoke, and gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head: she, too, had her share of disagreeables. "It would not look like Christ's work, dear," said the clergyman's wife, "if we had it all our own way."

"My dear, I hope I am actuated by higher motives than a desire to have it all my own way," said the Rector. "I always felt sure that Proctor would make a mess of any parish he took in hand, but I did not imagine he would have left it to anybody who pleased to work it. You may imagine what my feelings were to-day, when I came upon a kind of impromptu chapel in that wretched district near the canal. I thought it a Little Bethel, you know, of course; but instead of that, I find young Wentworth goes there Wednesdays and Fridays to do duty, and that there is service on Sunday evening, and I can't tell what besides. It may be done from a good motive – but such a disregard of all constituted authority," said the Rector, with involuntary vehemence, "can never, in my opinion, be attended by good results."

"Mr Wentworth, did you say?" said Mrs Morgan, upon whose female soul the Perpetual Curate's good looks and good manners had not been without a certain softening effect. "I am so sorry. I don't wonder you are vexed; but don't you think there must be some mistake, William? Mr Wentworth is so gentlemanly and nice – and of very good family, too. I don't think he would choose to set himself in opposition to the Rector. I think there must be some mistake."

"It's a very aggravating mistake, at all events," said Mr Morgan, rising and going to the window. It was, as we have said, a very pretty drawing-room, and the windows opened upon as pretty a bit of lawn as you could see, with one handsome cedar sweeping its dark branches majestically over delicious greensward; but some people did think it was too near George Street and the railway. Just at that moment a puff of delicate white vapour appeared over the wall, and a sudden express-train, just released from the cover of the station, sprang with a snort and bound across the Rector's view, very imperfectly veiled by the lime-trees, which were thin in their foliage as yet. Mr Morgan groaned and retreated – out of his first exaltation he had descended all at once, as people will do after building all their hopes upon one grand event, into great depression and vexation, when he found that, after all, this event did not change the face of existence, but indeed brought new proofs of mortality in

the shape of special annoyances belonging to itself in its train. "On the whole," said the Rector, who was subject to fits of disgust with things in general, "I am tempted to think it was a mistake coming to Carlingford; the drawbacks quite overbalance the advantages. I did hesitate, I remember – it must have been my better angel: that is, my dear," he continued, recollecting himself, "I would have hesitated had it not been for you."

Here there ensued a little pause. Mrs Morgan was not so young as she had been ten years ago, all which time she had waited patiently for the Fellow of All-Souls, and naturally these ten years and the patience had not improved her looks. There was a redness on her countenance nowadays which was not exactly bloom; and it stretched across her cheeks, and over the point of her nose, as she was painfully aware, poor lady. She was silent when she heard this, wondering with a passing pang whether he was sorry? But being a thoroughly sensible woman, and above indulging in those little appeals by which foolish ones confuse the calm of matrimonial friendship, she did not express the momentary feeling. "Yes, William," she said, sympathetically, casting her eyes again on the objectionable carpet, and feeling that there *were* drawbacks even to her happiness as the wife of the Rector of Carlingford; "but I suppose every place has its disadvantages; and then there is such good society; and a town like this is the very place for your talents; and when affairs are in your own hands – "

"It is very easy talking," said the vexed Rector. "Society and everybody would turn upon me if I interfered with Wentworth – there's the vexation. The fellow goes about it as if he had a right. Why, there's a Provident Society and all sorts of things going on, exactly as if it were his own parish. What led me to the place was seeing some ladies in grey cloaks – exactly such frights as you used to make yourself, my dear – flickering about. He has got up a sisterhood, I have no doubt; and to find all this in full operation in one's own parish, without so much as being informed of it! and you know I don't approve of sisterhoods – never did; they are founded on a mistake."

"Yes, dear. I know I gave up as soon as I knew your views on that subject," said Mrs Morgan. "I daresay so will the ladies here. Who were they? Did you speak to them? or perhaps they belonged to St Roque's."

"Nobody belongs to St Roque's," said the Rector, contemptuously – "it has not even a district. They were the two Miss Wodehouses."

Mrs Morgan was moved to utter a little cry. "And their father is churchwarden!" said the indignant woman. "Really, William, this is too much – without even consulting you! But it is easy to see how *that* comes about. Lucy Wodehouse and young Wentworth are – ; well, I don't know if they are engaged – but they are always together, walking and talking, and consulting with each other, and so forth – a great deal more than I could approve of; but that poor elder sister, you know, has no authority – nor indeed any experience, poor thing," said the Rector's wife; "that's how it is, no doubt."

"Engaged!" said the Rector. He gave a kindly glance at his wife, and melted a little. "Engaged, are they? Poor little thing! I hope she'll be as good as you have been, my dear; but a young man may be in love without interfering with another man's parish. I can't forgive that," said Mr Morgan, recovering himself; "he must be taught to know better; and it is very hard upon a clergyman," continued the spiritual ruler of Carlingford, "that he cannot move in a matter like this without incurring a storm of godless criticism. If I were sending Wentworth out of my parish, I shouldn't wonder if the 'Times' had an article upon it, denouncing me as an indolent priest and bigot, that would neither work myself nor let my betters work; that's how these fellows talk."

"But nobody could say such things of you," said Mrs Morgan, firing up.

"Of me! they'd say them of St Paul, if he had ever been in the circumstances," said the Rector; "and I should just like to know what he would have done in a parish like this, with the Dissenters on one side, and a Perpetual Curate without a district meddling on the other. Ah, my dear," continued Mr Morgan, "I daresay they had their troubles in those days; but facing a governor or so now and then, or even passing a night in the stocks, is a very different thing from a showing-up in the 'Times,'

not to speak of the complications of duty. Let us go out and call at Folgate's, and see whether he thinks anything can be done to the church."

"Dear, you wouldn't mind the 'Times' if it were your duty?" said the Rector's wife, getting up promptly to prepare for the walk.

"No, I suppose not," said Mr Morgan, not without a thrill of importance; "nor the stake," he added, with a little laugh, for he was not without a sense of humour; and the two went out to the architect's to ascertain the result of his cogitations over the church. They passed that sacred edifice in their way, and went in to gaze at it with a disgust which only an unhappy priest of high culture and aesthetic tastes, doomed to officiate in a building of the eighteenth century, of the churchwarden period of architecture, could fully enter into. "Eugh!" said Mr Morgan, looking round upon the high pews and stifling galleries with an expressive contraction of his features – his wife looked on sympathetic; and it was at this unlucky moment that the subject of their late conference made his appearance cheerfully from behind the ugly pulpit, in close conference with Mr Folgate. The pulpit was a three-storeyed mass, with the reading-desk and the clerk's desk beneath – a terrible eyesore to the Rector and his wife.

"I can fancy the expediency of keeping the place in repair," said the Curate of St Roque's, happy in the consciousness of possessing a church which, though not old, had been built by Gilbert Scott, and cheerfully unconscious of the presence of his listeners; "but to beautify a wretched old barn like this is beyond the imagination of man. Money can't do everything," said the heedless young man as he came lounging down the middle aisle, tapping contemptuously with his cane upon the high pew-doors. "I wonder where the people expected to go to who built Carlingford Church? Curious," continued the young Anglican, stopping in mid career, "to think of bestowing *consecration* upon anything so hideous. What a pass the world must have come to, Folgate, when this erection was counted worthy to be the house of God! After all, perhaps it is wrong to feel so strongly about it. The walls *are* consecrated, though they are ugly; we can't revoke the blessing. But no wonder it was an unchristian age."

"We have our treasure in earthen vessels," said Mr Morgan, somewhat sternly, from where he stood, under shelter of the heavy gallery. Mr Wentworth was shortsighted, like most people nowadays. He put up his glass hastily, and then hurried forward, perhaps just a little abashed. When he had made his salutations, however, he returned undismayed to the charge.

"It's a great pity you have not something better to work upon," said the dauntless Curate; "but it is difficult to conceive what can be done with such an unhallowed type of construction. I was just saying to Folgate –"

"There is a great deal of cant abroad on this subject," said Mr Morgan, interrupting the young oracle. "I like good architecture, but I don't relish attributing moral qualities to bricks and mortar. The hallowing influence ought to be within. Mr Folgate, we were going to call at your office. Have you thought of the little suggestions I ventured to make? Oh, the drawings are here. Mr Wentworth does not approve of them, I suppose?" said the Rector, turning sternly round upon the unlucky Curate of St Roque's.

"I can only say I sympathise with you profoundly," said young Wentworth, with great seriousness. "Such a terrible church must be a great trial. I wish I had any advice worth offering; but it is my hour for a short service down at the canal, and I can't keep my poor bargees waiting. Good morning. I hope you'll come and give us your countenance, Mrs Morgan. There's no end of want and trouble at Wharfside."

"Is Mr Wentworth aware, I wonder, that Wharfside is in the parish of Carlingford?" said the Rector, with involuntary severity, as the young priest withdrew calmly to go to his "duty." Mr Folgate, who supposed himself to be addressed, smiled, and said, "Oh yes, of course," and unfolded his drawings, to which the clerical pair before him lent a disturbed attention. They were both in a high

state of indignation by this time. It seemed indispensable that something should be done to bring to his senses an intruder so perfectly composed and at his ease.

## CHAPTER II

Meanwhile Mr Wentworth, without much thought of his sins, went down George Street, meaning to turn off at the first narrow turning which led down behind the shops and traffic, behind the comfort and beauty of the little town, to that inevitable land of shadow which always dogs the sunshine. Carlingford proper knew little about it, except that it increased the poor-rates, and now and then produced a fever. The minister of Salem Chapel was in a state of complete ignorance on the subject. The late Rector had been equally uninformed. Mr Bury, who was Evangelical, had the credit of disinterring the buried creatures there about thirty years ago. It was an office to be expected of that much-preaching man; but what was a great deal more extraordinary, was to find that the only people now in Carlingford who knew anything about Wharfside, except overseers of the poor and guardians of the public peace, were the Perpetual Curate of St Roque's – who had nothing particular to do with it, and who was regarded by many sober-minded persons with suspicion as a dilettante Anglican, given over to floral ornaments and ecclesiastical upholstery – and some half-dozen people of the very *élite* of society, principally ladies residing in Grange Lane.

Mr Wentworth came to a hesitating pause at the head of the turning which would have led him to Wharfside. He looked at his watch and saw there was half an hour to spare. He gave a wistful lingering look down the long line of garden-walls, pausing upon one point where the blossomed boughs of an apple-tree overlooked that enclosure.

There was quite time to call and ask if the Miss Wodehouses were going down to the service this afternoon; but was it duty? or, indeed, putting that question aside, was it quite right to compound matters with his own heart's desire and the work he was engaged in, in this undeniable fashion? The young priest crossed the street very slowly, swinging his cane and knitting his brows as he debated the question. If it had been one of the bargemen bringing his sweetheart, walking with her along the side of the canal to which Spring and sweet Easter coming on, and Love, perhaps, always helpful of illusions, might convey a certain greenness and sentiment of nature – and echoing her soft responses to the afternoon prayers – perhaps the Curate might have felt that such devotion was not entirely pure and simple. But somehow, before he was aware of it, his slow footstep had crossed the line, and he found himself in Grange Lane, bending his steps towards Mr Wodehouse's door. For one thing, to be sure, the Canticles in the evening service could always be sung when Lucy's sweet clear voice was there to lead the uncertain melody; and it was good to see her singing the 'Magnificat' with that serious sweet face, "full of grace," like Mary's own. Thinking of that, Mr Wentworth made his way without any further hesitation to the green door over which hung the apple-blossoms, totally untroubled in his mind as to what the reverend pair were thinking whom he had left behind him in the ugly church; and unconscious that his impromptu chapel at Wharfside, with its little carved reading-desk, and the table behind, contrived so as to look suspiciously like an altar, was a thorn in anybody's side. Had his mind been in a fit condition at that moment to cogitate trouble, his thoughts would have travelled in a totally different direction, but in the mean time Mr Wentworth was very well able to put aside his perplexities. The green door opened just as he reached it, and Lucy and her elder sister came out in those grey cloaks which the Rector had slandered. They were just going to Wharfside to the service, and of course they were surprised to see Mr Wentworth, who did not knock at that green door more than a dozen times in a week, on the average. The Curate walked between the sisters on their way towards their favourite "district." Such a position would scarcely have been otherwise than agreeable to any young man. Dear old Miss Wodehouse was the gentlest of chaperones. Old Miss Wodehouse people called her, not knowing why – perhaps because that adjective was sweeter than the harsh one of middle age which belonged to her; and then there was such a difference between her and Lucy. Lucy was twenty, and in her sweetest bloom. Many people thought with Mr Wentworth that there were not other two such eyes in Carlingford. Not that they were brilliant or penetrating, but as blue as

heaven, and as serene and pure. So many persons thought, and the Perpetual Curate among them. The grey cloak fell in pretty folds around that light elastic figure; and there was not an old woman in the town so tender, so helpful, so handy as Lucy where trouble was, as all the poor people knew. So the three went down Prickett's Lane, which leads from George Street towards the canal – not a pleasant part of the town by any means; and if Mr Wentworth was conscious of a certain haze of sunshine all round and about him, gliding over the poor pavement, and here and there transfiguring some baby bystander gazing open-mouthed at the pretty lady, could any reasonable man be surprised?

"I hope your aunts were quite well, Mr Wentworth, when you heard from them last," said Miss Wodehouse, "and all your people at home. In such a small family as ours, we should go out of our wits if we did not hear every day; but I suppose it is different where there are so many. Lucy, when she goes from home," said the tender elder sister, glancing at her with a half-maternal admiration – "and she might always be visiting about if she liked – writes to me every day."

"I have nobody who cares for me enough to write every week," said the Curate, with a look which was for Lucy's benefit. "I am not so lucky as you. My aunts are quite well, Miss Wodehouse, and they think I had better go up to town in May for the meetings," added Mr Wentworth, with a passing laugh; "and the rest of my people are very indignant that I am not of their way of thinking. There is Tom Burrows on the other side of the street; he is trying to catch *your* eye," said the Curate, turning round upon Lucy; for the young man had come to such a pass that he could not address her in an ordinary and proper way like other people, but, because he dared not yet call her by her Christian name as if she belonged to him, had a strange rude way of indicating when he was speaking to her, by emphasis and action. It was singularly different from his usual good-breeding; but Lucy somehow rather liked it than otherwise. "He is not going to church for the sake of the service. He is going to please *you*. He has never forgotten what you did for that little boy of his; and, indeed, if you continue to go on so," said Mr Wentworth, lowering his voice, and more than ever bending his tall head to one side, "I shall have to put a stop to it somehow, for I am not prepared, whatever people say, to go in at once for *public* worship of the saints."

"I am going in here to call," said Lucy. She looked up very innocently in the Curate's face. "I promised the poor sick woman in the back room to see her every day, and I could not get out any sooner. I daresay I shall be at the schoolroom before you begin. Good-bye just now," said the young Sister of Mercy. She went off all at once on this provoking but unexceptionable errand, looking with calm eyes upon the dismay which overspread the expressive countenance of her spiritual guide. Mr Wentworth stood looking after her for a moment, stunned by the unexpected movement. When he went on, truth compels us to own that a thrill of disgust had taken the place of that vague general sense of beatitude which threw beauty even upon Prickett's Lane. The Curate gave but a sulky nod to the salutation of Tom Burrows, and walked on in a savage mood by the side of Miss Wodehouse, around whom no nimbus of ideal glory hovered.

"I am always afraid of its being too much for her, Mr Wentworth," said the anxious elder sister; "it upsets me directly; but then I never was like Lucy – I can't tell where all you young people have learned it; we never used to be taught so in my day; and though I am twice as old as she is, I know I am not half so much good in the world," said the kind soul, with a gentle sigh. "I should like to see you in a parish of your own, where you would have it all your own way. I hope Mr Morgan won't be meddling when he comes to have time for everything. I should almost think he would – though it seems unkind to say it – by his face."

"I am doing nothing more than my duty," said the Perpetual Curate, in morose tones. "This district was given into my hands by the late Rector. Mr Morgan's face does not matter to me."

"But I should like to see you in a parish of your own," said Miss Wodehouse, meaning to please him. "You know papa always says so. St Roque's is very nice, but –"

"If you wish me out of the way, Miss Wodehouse, I am sorry to say you are not likely to be gratified," said the Curate, "for I have no more expectation of any preferment than you have. Such chances don't come in everybody's way."

"But I thought your aunts, Mr Wentworth – " said poor Miss Wodehouse, who unluckily did not always know when to stop.

"My aunts don't approve of my principles," answered Mr Wentworth, who had his own reasons for speaking with a little asperity. "They are more likely to have me denounced at Exeter Hall. I will join you immediately. I must speak to these men across the street;" and the Curate accordingly walked into a knot of loungers opposite, with a decision of manner which Lucy's desertion had helped him to. Miss Wodehouse, thus left alone, went on with lingering and somewhat doubtful steps. She was not used to being in "the district" by herself. It disturbed her mild, middle-aged habits to be left straying about here alone among all these poor people, whom she looked at half wistfully, half alarmed, feeling for them in her kind heart, but not at all knowing how to get at them as the young people did. The unruly children and gossiping mothers at the poor doors discomposed her sadly, and she was not near so sure that her grey cloak defended her from all rudeness as she pretended to be when assenting to the enthusiasm of Mr Wentworth and Lucy. She made tremulous haste to get out of this scene, which she was not adapted for, to the shelter of the schoolroom, where, at least, she would be safe. "We never were taught so in my day," she said to herself, with an unexpressed wonder which was right; but when she had reached that haven of shelter, was seized with a little panic for Lucy, and went out again and watched for her at the corner of the street, feeling very uncomfortable. It was a great relief to see her young sister coming down alert and bright even before she was joined by Mr Wentworth, who had carried his point with the men he had been talking to. To see them coming down together, smiling to all those people at the doors who disturbed the gentle mind of Miss Wodehouse with mingled sentiments of sympathy and repulsion, bestowing nods of greeting here and there, pausing even to say a word to a few favoured clients, was a wonderful sight to the timid maiden lady at the corner of the street. Twenty years ago some such companion might have been by Miss Wodehouse's side, but never among the poor people in Prickett's Lane. Even with Lucy before her she did not understand it. As the two came towards her, other thoughts united with these in her kind soul. "I wonder whether anything will ever come of it?" she said to herself, and with that wandered into anxious reflections what this difference could be between Mr Wentworth and his aunts: which cogitations, indeed, occupied her till the service began, and perhaps disturbed her due appreciation of it; for if Lucy and Mr Wentworth got attached, as seemed likely, and Mr Wentworth did not get a living, what was to come of it? The thought made this tender-hearted spectator sigh: perhaps she had some experience of her own to enlighten her on such a point. At least it troubled, with sympathetic human cares, the gentle soul which had lost the confidence of youth.

As for the two most immediately concerned, they thought nothing at all about aunts or livings. Whether it is the divine influence of youth, or whether the vague unacknowledged love which makes two people happy in each other's presence carries with it a certain inspiration, this at least is certain, that there is an absolute warmth of devotion arrived at in such moments, which many a soul, no longer happy, would give all the world to reach. Such crowds and heaps of blessings fall to these young souls! They said their prayers with all their hearts, not aware of deriving anything of that profound sweet trust and happiness from each other, but expanding over all the rude but reverend worshippers around them, with an unlimited faith in their improvement, almost in their perfection. This was what the wondering looker-on, scarcely able to keep her anxieties out of her prayers, could not understand, having forgotten, though she did not think so, the exaltation of that time of youth, as people do. She thought it all their goodness that they were able to put away their own thoughts; she did not know it was in the very nature of those unexpressed emotions to add the confidence of happiness to their prayers.

And after a while they all separated and went away back into the world and the everyday hours. Young Wentworth and Lucy had not said a syllable to each other, except about the people in "the

district," and the Provident Society; and how that sober and laudable conversation could be called love-making, it would be difficult for the most ardent imagination to conceive. He was to dine with them that evening; so it was for but a very brief time that they parted when the Perpetual Curate left the ladies at the green door, and went away to his room, to attend to some other duties, before he arrayed himself for the evening. As for the sisters, they went in quite comfortably, and had their cup of tea before they dressed for dinner. Lucy was manager indoors as well as out. She was good for a great deal more than Miss Wodehouse in every practical matter. It was she who was responsible for the dinner, and had all the cares of the house upon her head. Notwithstanding, the elder sister took up her prerogative as they sat together in two very cosy easy-chairs, in a little room which communicated with both their bed-chambers up-stairs – a very cosy little odd room, not a dressing-room nor a boudoir, but something between the two, where the sisters had their private talks upon occasion, and which was consecrated by many a libation of fragrant tea.

"Lucy, my dear," said Miss Wodehouse, whose gentle forehead was puckered with care, "I want to speak to you. I have not been able to get you out of my mind since ever we met Mr Wentworth at the green door."

"Was there any need for getting me out of your mind?" said smiling Lucy. "I was a safe enough inmate, surely. I wonder how often I am out of your mind, Mary dear, night or day."

"That is true enough," said Miss Wodehouse, "but you know that is not what I meant either. Lucy, are you quite sure you're going on just as you ought –"

Here she made a troubled pause, and looked in the laughing face opposite, intent upon her with its startled eyes. "What have I done?" cried the younger sister. Miss Wodehouse shook her head with a great deal of seriousness.

"It always begins with laughing," said the experienced woman; "but if it ends without tears it will be something new to me. It's about Mr Wentworth, Lucy. You're always together, day after day; and, my dear, such things can't go on without coming to something – what is to come of it? I have looked at it from every point of view, and I am sure I don't know."

Lucy flushed intensely red, of course, at the Curate's name; perhaps she had not expected it just at that moment; but she kept her composure like a sensible girl as she was.

"I thought it was the other side that were questioned about their intentions," she said. "Am I doing anything amiss? Mr Wentworth is the Curate of St Roque's, and I am one of the district-visitors, and we can't help seeing a great deal of each other so long as this work goes on at Wharfside. You wouldn't like to stop a great work because we are obliged to see a good deal of – of one particular person?" said Lucy, with youthful virtue, looking at her sister's face; at which tone and look Miss Wodehouse immediately faltered, as the culprit knew she must.

"No – oh no, no – to be sure not," said the disturbed monitor. "When you say that, I don't know how to answer you. It must be right, I suppose. I am quite sure it is wonderful to see such young creatures as you, and how you can tell the right way to set about it. But things did not use to be so in my young days. Girls dare not have done such things twenty years ago – not in Carlingford, Lucy," said Miss Wodehouse; "and, dear, I think you ought to be a little careful, for poor Mr Wentworth's sake."

"I don't think Mr Wentworth is in any particular danger," said Lucy, putting down her cup, with a slight curve at the corners of her pretty mouth – "and it is quite time for you to begin dressing. You know you don't like to be hurried, dear;" with which speech the young housekeeper got up from her easy-chair, gave her sister a kiss as she passed, and went away, singing softly, to her toilette. Perhaps there was a little flutter in Lucy's heart as she bound it round with her favourite blue ribbons. Perhaps it was this that gave a certain startled gleam to her blue eyes, and made even her father remark them when she went down-stairs – "It seems to me as if this child were growing rather pretty, Molly, eh? I don't know what other people think," said Mr Wodehouse – and perhaps Mr Wentworth, who was just being ushered into the drawing-room at the moment, heard the speech, for he, too, looked as if he had never found it out before. Luckily there was a party, and no opportunity for sentiment. The

party was in honour of the Rector and his wife; and Mr Wentworth could not but be conscious before the evening was over that he had done something to lose the favour of his clerical brother. There was a good deal of Church talk, as was natural, at the churchwarden's table, where three clergymen were dining – for Mr Morgan's curate was there as well; and the Curate of St Roque's, who was slightly hot-tempered, could not help feeling himself disapproved of. It was not, on the whole, a satisfactory evening. Mr Morgan talked rather big, when the ladies went away, of his plans for the reformation of Carlingford. He went into statistics about the poor, and the number of people who attended no church, without taking any notice of that "great work" which Mr Wentworth knew to be going on at Wharfside. The Rector even talked of Wharfside, and of the necessity of exertion on behalf of that wretched district, with a studious unconsciousness of Mr Wentworth; and all but declined to receive better information when Mr Wodehouse proffered it. Matters were scarcely better in the drawing-room, where Lucy was entertaining everybody, and had no leisure for the Perpetual Curate. He took his hat with a gloomy sentiment of satisfaction when it was time to go away; but when the green door was closed behind him, Mr Wentworth, with his first step into the dewy darkness, plunged headlong into a sea of thought. He had to walk down the whole length of Grange Lane to his lodging, which was in the last house of the row, a small house in a small garden, where Mrs Hadwin, the widow of a whilom curate, was permitted by public opinion, on the score of her own unexceptionable propriety,<sup>1</sup> to receive a lodger without loss of position thereby. It was moonlight, or rather it ought to have been moonlight, and no lamps were lighted in Grange Lane, according to the economical regulations of Carlingford; and as Mr Wentworth pursued his way down the dark line of garden-walls, in the face of a sudden April shower which happened to be falling, he had full scope and opportunity for his thoughts.

These thoughts were not the most agreeable in the world. In the first place it must be remembered that for nearly a year past Mr Wentworth had had things his own way in Carlingford. He had been more than rector, he had been archdeacon, or rather bishop, in Mr Proctor's time; for that good man was humble, and thankful for the advice and assistance of his young brother, who knew so much better than he did. Now, to be looked upon as an unauthorised workman, a kind of meddling, Dissenterish, missionising individual, was rather hard upon the young man. And then he thought of his aunts. The connection, imperceptible to an ignorant observer, which existed between the Miss Wentworths and Mr Morgan, and Lucy, and many other matters interesting to their nephew, was a sufficiently real connection when you came to know it. That parish of his own which Miss Wodehouse had wished him – which would free the young clergyman from all trammels so far as his work was concerned; and would enable him to marry, and do everything for him – it was in the power of the Miss Wentworths to bestow; but they were Evangelical women, very public-spirited, and thinking nothing of their nephew in comparison with their duty; and he was at that time of life, and of that disposition, which, for fear of being supposed to wish to deceive them, would rather exaggerate and make a display of the difference of his own views. Not for freedom, not for Lucy, would the Perpetual Curate temporise and manage the matter; so the fact was that he stood at the present moment in a very perilous predicament. But for this family living, which was, with their mother's property, in the hands of her co-heiresses, the three Miss Wentworths, young Frank Wentworth had not a chance of preferment in the world; for the respectable Squire his father had indulged in three wives and three families, and such a regiment of sons that all his influence had been fully taxed to provide for them. Gerald, the clergyman of the first lot, held the family living – not a very large one – which belonged to the Wentworths; and Frank, who was of the second, had been educated expressly with an eye to Skelmersdale, which belonged to his aunts. How he came at the end to differ so completely from these excellent ladies in his religious views is not our business just at present; but in the mean time matters were in a very critical position. The old incumbent of Skelmersdale was eighty, and

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<sup>1</sup> She was the daughter of old Sir Jasper Shelton, a poor family, but very respectable, and connected with the Westerns.

had been ill all winter; and if the Miss Wentworths were not satisfied somehow, it was all over with their nephew's hopes.

Such were the thoughts that occupied his mind as he walked down Grange Lane in the dark, past the tedious, unsympathetic line of garden-walls, with the rain in his face. The evening's entertainment had stirred up a great many dormant sentiments. His influence in Carlingford had been ignored by this new-comer, who evidently thought he could do what he liked without paying any attention to the Curate of St Roque's; and, what was a great deal worse, he had found Lucy unapproachable, and had realised, if not for the first time, still with more distinctness than ever before, that she did not belong to him, and that he had no more right than any other acquaintance to monopolise her society. This last discovery was bitter to the young man – it was this that made him set his face to the rain, and his teeth, as if that could do any good. He had been happy in her mere society to-day, without entering into any of the terrible preliminaries of a closer connection. But now that was over. She did not belong to him, and he could not bear the thought. And how was she ever to belong to him? Not, certainly, if he was to be a Perpetual Curate of St Roque's, or anywhere else. He felt, in the misery of the moment, as if he could never go to that green door again, or walk by her sweet side to that service in which they had joined so lately. He wondered whether she cared, with a despairing pang of anxiety, through which for an instant a celestial gleam of consciousness leaped, making the darkness all the greater afterwards. And to think that three old ladies, of whom it was not in the nature of things that the young man could be profoundly reverent, should hold in their hands the absolute power of his life, and could determine whether it was to be sweet with hope and love, or stern, constrained, and impoverished, without Lucy or any other immediate light! What a strange anomaly this was which met him full in the face as he pursued his thoughts! If it had been his bishop, or his college, or any fitting tribunal – but his aunts! Mr Wentworth's ring at his own door was so much more hasty than usual that Mrs Hadwin paused in the hall, when she had lighted her candle, to see if anything was the matter. The little neat old lady held up her candle to look at him as he came in, glistening all over with rain-drops.

"I hope you are not wet, Mr Wentworth," she said. "It is only an April shower, and we want it so much in the gardens. And I hope you have had a nice party and a pleasant evening."

"Thank you – pretty well," said the Perpetual Curate, with less suavity than usual, and a sigh that nearly blew Mrs Hadwin's candle out. She saw he was discomposed, and therefore, with a feminine instinct, found more to say than usual before she made her peaceful way to bed. She waited while Mr Wentworth lighted his candle too.

"Mr Wodehouse's parties are always pleasant," she said. "I never go out, you know; but I like to hear of people enjoying themselves. I insist upon you going up-stairs before me, Mr Wentworth. I have so little breath to spare, and I take such a long time going up, that you would be tired to death waiting for me. Now, don't be polite. I insist upon you going up first. Thank you. Now I can take my time."

And she took her time accordingly, keeping Mr Wentworth waiting on the landing to say good-night to her, much to his silent exasperation. When he got into the shelter of his own sitting-room, he threw himself upon a sofa, and continued his thoughts with many a troubled addition. A young man, feeling in a great measure the world before him, conscious of considerable powers, standing on the very threshold of so much possible good and happiness, – it was hideous to look up, in his excited imagination, and see the figures of these three old ladies, worse than Fates, standing across the prospect and barring the way.

And Lucy, meantime, was undoing her blue ribbons with a thrill of sweet agitation in her untroubled bosom. Perhaps Mary was right, and it was about coming to the time when this half-feared, half-hoped revelation could not be postponed much longer. For it will be perceived that Lucy was not in much doubt of young Wentworth's sentiments. And then she paused in the dark, after she had said her prayers, to give one timid thought to the sweet life that seemed to lie before her so close at hand – in which, perhaps, he and she were to go out together, she did not know where, for

the help of the world and the comfort of the sorrowful; and not trusting herself to look much at that ideal, said another prayer, and went to sleep like one of God's beloved, with a tear too exquisite to be shed brimming under her long eyelashes. At this crisis of existence, perhaps for once in her life, the woman has the best of it; for very different from Lucy's were the thoughts with which the Curate sought his restless pillow, hearing the rain drip all the night, and trickle into Mrs Hadwin's reservoirs. The old lady had a passion for rain-water, and it was a gusty night.

## CHAPTER III

Next week was Passion Week, and full of occupation. Even if it had been consistent either with Mr Wentworth's principles or Lucy's to introduce secular affairs into so holy a season, they had not time or opportunity, as it happened, which was perhaps just as well; for otherwise the premonitory thrill of expectation which had disturbed Lucy's calm, and the bitter exasperation against himself and his fate with which Mr Wentworth had discovered that he dared not say anything, might have caused an estrangement between them. As it was, the air was thundery and ominous through all the solemn days of the Holy Week. A consciousness as of something about to happen overshadowed even the "district," and attracted the keen observation of the lively spectators at Wharfside. They were not greatly up in matters of doctrine, nor perhaps did they quite understand the eloquent little sermon which the Perpetual Curate gave them on Good Friday in the afternoon, between his own services, by way of impressing upon their minds the awful memories of the day; but they were as skilful in the variations of their young evangelist's looks, and as well qualified to decide upon the fact that there was "a something between" him and Miss Lucy Wodehouse, as any practised observer in the higher ranks of society. Whether the two had "ad an unpleasantness," as, Wharfside was well aware, human creatures under such circumstances are liable to have, the interested community could not quite make out; but that something more than ordinary was going on, and that the prettiest of all the "Provident ladies" had a certain preoccupation in her blue eyes, was a fact perfectly apparent to that intelligent society. And, indeed, one of the kinder matrons in Prickett's Lane had even ventured so far as to wish Miss Lucy "a 'appy weddin' when the time comes." "And there's to be a sight o' weddings this Easter," had added another, who was somewhat scandalised by the flowers in the bonnet of one of the brides-elect, and proceeded to say so in some detail. "But Miss Lucy won't wear no bonnet; the quality goes in veils: and there never was as full a church as there will be to see it, wishing you your 'ealth and 'appiness, ma'am, as aint no more nor you deserve, and you so good to us poor folks." All which felicitations and inquiries had confused Lucy, though she made her way out of them with a self-possession which amazed her sister.

"You see what everybody thinks, dear," said that gentle woman, when they had made their escape.

"Oh, Mary, how can you talk of such things at such a time?" the young Sister of Mercy had answered once more, turning those severe eyes of youthful devotion upon her troubled elder sister, who, to tell the truth, not having been brought up to it, as she said, felt much the same on Easter Eve as at other times of her life; and thus once more the matter concluded. As for Mr Wentworth, he was much occupied on that last day of the Holy Week with a great many important matters on hand. He had not seen the Wodehouses since the Good Friday evening service, which was an interval of about twenty hours, and had just paused, before eating his bachelor's dinner, to ponder whether it would be correct on that most sacred of vigils to steal away for half an hour, just to ask Lucy if she thought it necessary that he should see the sick woman at No. 10 Prickett's Lane before the morning. It was while he was pondering this matter in his mind that Mr Wentworth's heart jumped to his throat upon receipt, quite suddenly, without preparation, of the following note: —

"My dearest boy, — Your aunts Cecilia, Leonora, and I have just arrived at this excellent inn, the Blue Boar. Old Mr Shirley at Skelmersdale is in a very bad way, poor man, and I thought the *very best* thing I could do in my dearest Frank's *best* interests, was to persuade them to make you *quite an unexpected visit*, and see everything for themselves. I am in a terrible fright now lest I should have done wrong; but my dear, dear boy knows it is always his interest that I have at heart; and Leonora is so intent on having a *real gospel minister* at Skelmersdale, that she *never* would have been content with anything less than hearing you with her own ears. I hope and trust in Providence that you don't intone like poor Gerald. And oh, Frank, my dear boy, come directly and dine with us, and don't fly

in your aunt Leonora's face, and tell me I haven't been imprudent. I thought it would be best to take you unawares when you had everything prepared, and when we should see you just as you always are; for I am convinced Leonora and you only want to see more of each other to understand each other perfectly. Come, my dearest boy, and give a little comfort to your loving and anxious

*"AUNT DORA."*

Mr Wentworth sat gazing blankly upon this horrible missive for some minutes after he had read it, quite unaware of the humble presence of the maid who stood asking, Please was she to bring up dinner? When he came to himself, the awful "No!" with which he answered that alarmed handmaiden almost drove her into hysterics as she escaped down-stairs. However, Mr Wentworth immediately put his head out at the door and called after her, "I can't wait for dinner, Sarah; I am suddenly called out, and shall dine where I am going. Tell Cook," said the young parson, suddenly recollecting Lucy's client, "to send what she has prepared for me, if it is very nice, to No. 10 Prickett's Lane. My boy will take it; and send him off directly, please," with which last commission the young man went up despairingly to his bedroom to prepare himself for this interview with his aunts. What was he to do? Already before him, in dreadful prophetic vision, he saw all three seated in one of the handsome open benches in St Roque's, looking indescribable horrors at the crown of spring lilies which Lucy's own fingers were to weave for the cross above the altar, and listening to the cadence of his own manly tenor as it rang through the perfect little church of which he was so proud. Yes, there was an end of Skelmersdale, without any doubt or question now; whatever hope there might have been, aunt Dora had settled the matter by this last move of hers – an end to Skelmersdale, and an end of Lucy. Perhaps he had better try not to see her any more; and the poor young priest saw that his own face looked ghastly as he looked at it in the glass. It gave him a little comfort to meet the boy with a bundle pinned up in snowy napkins, from which a grateful odour ascended, bending his steps to Prickett's Lane, as he himself went out to meet his fate. It was a last offering to that beloved "district" with which the image of his love was blended; but he would have given his dinner to Lucy's sick woman any day. To-night it was a greater sacrifice that was to be required of him. He went mournfully and slowly up Grange Lane, steeling himself for the encounter, and trying to forgive aunt Dora in his heart. It was not very easy. Things might have turned out just the same without any interference – that was true; but to have it all brought on in this wanton manner by a kind foolish woman, who would wring her hands and gaze in your face, and want to know, Oh! did you think it was her fault? after she had precipitated the calamity, was very hard; and it was with a very gloomy countenance, accordingly, that the Curate of St Roque's presented himself at the Blue Boar.

The Miss Wentworths were in the very best sitting-room which the Blue Boar contained – the style in which they travelled, with a man and two maids, was enough to secure that; and the kitchen of that respectable establishment was doing its very best to send up a dinner worthy of "a party as had their own man to wait." The three ladies greeted their nephew with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The eldest, Miss Wentworth, from whom he took his second name Cecil, did not rise from her chair, but nevertheless kissed him in an affectionate dignified way when he was brought to her. As for aunt Dora, she ran into her dear Frank's arms, and in the very moment of that embrace whispered in his ear the expression of her anxiety, and the panic which always followed those rash steps which she was in the habit of taking. "Oh, my dear, I hope you don't think I'm to blame," she said, with her lips at his ear, and gained but cold comfort from the Curate's face. The alarming member of the party was Miss Leonora. She rose and made two steps forward to meet the unfortunate young man. She shook both his hands cordially, and said she was very glad to see him, and hoped he was well. She was the sensible sister of the three, and no doubt required all the sense she had to manage her companions. Miss Wentworth, who had been very pretty in her youth, was now a beautiful old lady, with snow-white hair and the most charming smile; and Miss Dora, who was only fifty, retained the natural colour of her own scanty light-brown locks, which wavered in weak-minded ringlets over her cheeks;

but Miss Leonora was iron-grey, without any complexion in particular, and altogether a harder type of woman. It was she who held in her hands the fate of Skelmersdale and of Frank Wentworth. Her terrible glance it was which he had imagined gleaming fierce upon his lilies – Lucy's lilies, his Easter decorations. It was by her side the alarmed Curate was made to sit down. It was she who took the foot of the table, and was the gentleman of the house. Her voice was of that class of voice which may be politely called a powerful contralto. Every way she was as alarming a critic as ever was encountered by a Perpetual Curate, or any other young man in trouble. Mr Wentworth said feebly that this was a very unexpected pleasure, as he met his aunt Leonora's eye.

"I hope it *is* a pleasure," said that penetrating observer. "To tell the truth, I did not expect it would be; but your aunt Dora thought so, and you know, when she sets her heart on anything, nobody can get any peace. Not that your aunt Cecilia and I would have come on that account, if we had not wished, for many reasons, to have some conversation with you, and see how you are getting on."

"Quite so, Leonora," said Miss Wentworth, smiling upon her nephew, and leaning back in her chair.

Then there was a little pause; for, after such a terrible address, it was not to be expected that the poor man, who understood every word of it, could repeat his commonplace about the unlooked-for pleasure. Miss Dora of course seized the opportunity to rush in.

"We have been hearing such delightful things about you, my dear, from the people of the house. Leonora is so pleased to hear how you are labouring among the people, and doing your Master's work. We take all the happiness to ourselves, because, you know, you are *our* boy, Frank," said the anxious aunt, all her thin ringlets, poor lady, trembling with her eagerness to make everything comfortable for her favourite; "and we have come, you know, specially to hear you on Easter Sunday in your own church. I am looking forward to a great treat: to think I should never have heard you, though it is so long since you were ordained! None of us have ever heard you – not even Leonora; but it is such a pleasure to us all to know you are so much liked in Carlingford," cried the troubled woman, growing nervous at sight of the unresponsive quiet around her. Miss Leonora by no means replied to the covert appeals thus made to her. She left her nephew and her sister to keep up the conversation unassisted; and as for Miss Wentworth, conversation was not her forte.

"I'm afraid, aunt, you will not *hear* anything worth such a long journey," said Mr Wentworth, moved, like a rash young man as he was, to display his colours at once, and cry no surrender. "I don't think an Easter Sunday is a time for much preaching; and the Church has made such ample provision for the expression of our sentiments. I am more of a humble priest than an ambitious preacher," said the young man, with characteristic youthful pretence of the most transparent kind. He looked in Miss Leonora's face as he spoke. He knew the very name of priest was an offence in its way to that highly Evangelical woman; and if they were to come to single combat, better immediately than after intolerable suspense and delay.

"Perhaps, Dora, you will postpone your raptures about Frank's sermon – which may be a very indifferent sermon, as he says, for anything we can tell – till after dinner," said Miss Leonora. "We're all very glad to see him; and he need not think any little ill-tempered speeches he may make will disturb me. I daresay the poor boy would be glad to hear of some of the people belonging to him instead of all that nonsense. Come to dinner, Frank. Take the other side of the table, opposite Dora; and now that you've said grace, I give you full leave to forget that you're a clergyman for an hour at least. We were down at the old Hall a week ago, and saw your father and the rest. They are all well; and the last boy is rather like you, if you will think that any compliment. Mrs Wentworth is pleased, because you are one of the handsome ones, you know. Not much fear of the Wentworths dying out of the country yet awhile. Your father is getting at his wit's end, and does not know what to do with Cuthbert and Guy. Three sons are enough in the army, and two at sea; and I rather think it's as much as we can stand," continued Miss Leonora, not without a gleam of humour in her iron-grey eyes, "to have two in the Church."

"That is as it may happen," said the Perpetual Curate, with a little spirit. "If the boys are of my way of thinking, they will consider the Church the highest of professions; but Guy and Cuthbert must go to Australia, I suppose, like most other people, and take their chance – no harm in that."

"Not a bit of harm," said the rich aunt; "they're good boys enough, and I daresay they'll get on. As for Gerald, if you have any influence with your brother, I think he's in a bad way. I think he has a bad attack of Romishness coming on. If you are not in that way yourself," said Miss Leonora, with a sharp glance, "I think you should go and see after Gerald. He is the sort of man who would do anything foolish, you know. He doesn't understand what prudence means. Remember, I believe he is a good Christian all the same. It's very incomprehensible; but the fact is, a man may be a very good Christian, and have the least quality of sense that is compatible with existence. I've seen it over and over again. Gerald's notions are idiocy to me," said the sensible but candid woman, shrugging her shoulders; "but I can't deny that he's a good man, for all that."

"He is the best man I ever knew," said young Wentworth, with enthusiasm.

"Quite so, Frank," echoed aunt Cecilia, with her sweet smile: it was almost the only conversational effort Miss Wentworth ever made.

"But it is so sad to see how he's led away," said Miss Dora; "it is all owing to the bad advisers young men meet with at the universities; and how can it be otherwise as long as tutors and professors are chosen just for their learning, without any regard to their principles? What is Greek and Latin in comparison with a pious guide for the young? We would not have to feel frightened, as we do so often, about young men's principles," continued aunt Dora, fixing her eyes with warning significance on her nephew, and trying hard to open telegraphic communications with him, "if more attention was paid at the universities to give them sound guidance in their studies. So long as you are sound in your principles, there is no fear of you," said the timid diplomatist, trying to aid the warning look of her eyes by emphasis and inflection. Poor Miss Dora! it was her unlucky fate, by dint of her very exertions in smoothing matters, always to make things worse.

"He would be a bold man who would call those principles unsound which have made my brother Gerald what he is," said, with an affectionate admiration that became him, the Curate of St Roque's.

"It's a slavish system, notwithstanding Gerald," said Miss Leonora, with some heat; "and a false system, and leads to Antichrist at the end and nothing less. Eat your dinner, Frank – we are not going to argue just now. We expected to hear that another of the girls was engaged before we came away, but it has not occurred yet. I don't approve of young men dancing about a house for ever and ever, unless they mean something. Do you?"

Mr Wentworth faltered at this question; it disturbed his composure more than anything that had preceded it. "I – really I don't know," he said, after a pause, with a sickly smile – of which all three of his aunts took private notes, forming their own conclusions. It was, as may well be supposed, a very severe ordeal which the poor young man had to go through. When he was permitted to say good-night, he went away with a sensation of fatigue more overpowering than if he had visited all the houses in Wharfside. When he passed the green door, over which the apple-tree rustled in the dark, it was a pang to his heart. How was he to continue to live – to come and go through that familiar road – to go through all the meetings and partings, when this last hopeless trial was over, and Lucy and he were swept apart as if by an earthquake? If his lips were sealed henceforward, and he never was at liberty to say what was in his heart, what would she think of him? He could not fly from his work because he lost Skelmersdale; and how was he to bear it? He went home with a dull bitterness in his mind, trying, when he thought of it, to quiet the aching pulses which throbbed all over him, with what ought to have been the hallowed associations of the last Lenten vigil. But it was difficult, throbbing as he was with wild life and trouble to the very finger-points, to get himself into the shadow of that rock-hewn grave, by which, according to his own theory, the Church should be watching on this Easter Eve. It was hard just then to be bound to that special remembrance. What he wanted at this moment was no memory of one hour, however memorable or glorious, not even though it contained

the Redeemer's grave, but the sense of a living Friend standing by him in the great struggle, which is the essential and unfailing comfort of a Christian's life.

Next morning he went to church with a half-conscious, youthful sense of martyrdom, of which in his heart he was half ashamed. St Roque's was very fair to see that Easter morning. Above the communion-table, with all its sacred vessels, the carved oaken cross of the reredos was wreathed tenderly with white fragrant festoons of spring lilies, sweet Narcissus of the poets; and Mr Wentworth's choristers made another white line, two deep, down each side of the chancel. The young Anglican took in all the details of the scene on his way to the reading-desk as the white procession ranged itself in the oaken stalls. At that moment – the worst moment for such a thought – it suddenly flashed over him that, after all, a wreath of spring flowers or a chorister's surplice was scarcely worth suffering martyrdom for. This horrible suggestion, true essence of an unheroic age, which will not suffer a man to be absolutely sure of anything, disturbed his prayer as he knelt down in silence to ask God's blessing. Easter, to be sure, was lovely enough of itself without the garland, and Mr Wentworth knew well enough that his white-robed singers were no immaculate angel-band. It was Satan himself, surely, and no inferior imp, who shot that sudden arrow into the young man's heart as he tried to say his private prayer; for the Curate of St Roque's was not only a fervent Anglican, but also a young Englishman *sans reproche*, with all the sensitive, almost fantastic, delicacy of honour which belongs to that development of humanity; and not for a dozen worlds would he have sacrificed a lily or a surplice on this particular Easter, when all his worldly hopes hung in the balance. But to think at this crowning moment that a villanous doubt of the benefit of these surplices and lilies should seize his troubled heart! for just then the strains of the organ died away in lengthened whispers, and Miss Leonora Wentworth, severe and awful, swept up through the middle aisle. It was under these terrible circumstances that the Perpetual Curate, with his heart throbbing and his head aching, began to intone the morning service on that Easter Sunday, ever after a day so memorable in the records of St Roque's.

## CHAPTER IV

Mr Wentworth's sermon on Easter Sunday was one which he himself long remembered, though it is doubtful whether any of his congregation had memories as faithful. To tell the truth, the young man put a black cross upon it with his blackest ink, a memorial of meaning unknown to anybody but himself. It was a curious little sermon, such as may still be heard in some Anglican pulpits. Though he had heart and mind enough to conceive something of those natural depths of divine significance and human interest, which are the very essence of the Easter festival, it was not into these that Mr Wentworth entered in his sermon. He spoke, in very choice little sentences, of the beneficence of the Church in appointing such a feast, and of all the beautiful arrangements she had made for the keeping of it. But even in the speaking, in the excited state of mind he was in, it occurred to the young man to see, by a sudden flash of illumination, how much higher, how much more catholic, after all, his teaching would have been, could he but have once ignored the Church, and gone direct, as Nature bade, to that empty grave in which all the hopes of humanity had been entombed. He saw it by gleams of that perverse light which seemed more Satanic than heavenly in the moments it chose for shining, while he was preaching his little sermon about the Church and her beautiful institution of Easter, just as he had seen the non-importance of his lily-wreath and surplices as he was about to suffer martyrdom for them. All these circumstances were hard upon the young man. Looking down straight into the severe iron-grey eyes of his aunt Leonora, he could not of course so much as modify a single sentence of the discourse he was uttering, no more than he could permit himself to slur over a single monotone of the service; but that sudden bewildering perception that he could have done so much better – that the loftiest High-Churchism of all might have been consistent enough with Skelmersdale, had he but gone into the heart of the matter – gave a bitterness to the deeper, unseen current of the Curate's thoughts.

Besides, it was terrible to feel that he could not abstract himself from personal concerns even in the most sacred duties. He was conscious that the two elder sisters went away, and that only poor aunt Dora, her weak-minded ringlets limp with tears, came tremulous to the altar rails. When the service was over, and the young priest was disrobing himself, she came to him and gave a spasmodic, sympathetic, half-reproachful pressure to his hand. "Oh, Frank, my dear, I did it for the best," said Miss Dora, with a doleful countenance; and the Perpetual Curate knew that his doom was sealed. He put the best face he could upon the matter, having sufficient doubts of his own wisdom to subdue the high temper of the Wentworths for that moment at least.

"What was it you did for the best?" said the Curate of St Roque's. "I suppose, after all, it was no such great matter *hearing* me as you thought; but I told you I was not an ambitious preacher. This is a day for worship, not for talk."

"Ah! yes," said Miss Dora; "but oh, Frank, my dear, it is hard upon me, after all my expectations. It would have been so nice to have had you at Skelmersdale. I hoped you would marry Julia Trench, and we should all have been so happy; and perhaps if I had not begged Leonora to come just now, thinking it would be so nice to take you just in your usual way – but she must have known sooner or later," said poor aunt Dora, looking wistfully in his face. "Oh, Frank, I hope you don't think I'm to blame."

"I never should have married Julia Trench," said the Curate, gloomily. He did not enter into the question of Miss Dora's guilt or innocence – he gave a glance at the lilies on the altar, and a sigh. The chances were he would never marry anybody, but loyalty to Lucy demanded instant repudiation of any other possible bride. "Where are you going, aunt Dora; back to the Blue Boar? or will you come with me?" he said, as they stood together at the door of St Roque's. Mr Wentworth felt as if he had caught the beginning threads of a good many different lines of thought, which he would be glad to be alone to work out.

"You'll come back with me to the inn to lunch?" said Miss Dora. "Oh, Frank, my dear, remember your Christian feelings, and don't make a breach in the family. It will be bad enough to face your poor dear father, after he knows what Leonora means to do; and I do so want to talk to you," said the poor woman, eagerly clinging to his arm. "You always were fond of your poor aunt Dora, Frank; when you were quite a little trot you used always to like me best; and in the holiday times, when you came down from Harrow, I used always to hear all your troubles. If you would only have confidence in me now!"

"But what if I have no troubles to confide?" said Mr Wentworth; "a man and a boy are very different things. Come, aunt Dora, I'll see you safe to your inn. What should I have to grumble about? I have plenty to do, and it is Easter; and few men can have everything their own way."

"You won't acknowledge that you're vexed," said aunt Dora, almost crying under her veil, "but I can see it all the same. You always were such a true Wentworth; but if you only would give in and say that you are disappointed and angry with us all, I could bear it better, Frank. I would not feel then that you thought it my fault! And oh, Frank, dear, you don't consider how disappointed your poor dear aunt Leonora was! It's just as hard upon us," she continued, pressing his arm in her eagerness, "as it is upon you. We had all so set our hearts on having you at Skelmersdale. Don't you think, if you were giving your mind to it, you might see things in a different light?" with another pressure of his arm. "Oh, Frank, what does it matter, after all, if the heart is right, whether you read the service in your natural voice, or give that little quaver at the end? I am sure, for my part –"

"My dear aunt," said Mr Wentworth, naturally incensed by this manner of description, "I must be allowed to say that my convictions are fixed, and not likely to be altered. I am a priest, and you are – a woman." He stopped short, with perhaps a little bitterness. It was very true she was a woman, unqualified to teach, but yet she and her sisters were absolute in Skelmersdale. He made a little gulp of his momentary irritation, and walked on in silence, with Miss Dora's kind wistful hand clinging to his arm.

"But, dear Frank among us Protestants, you know, there is no sacerdotal caste," said Miss Dora, opportunely recollecting some scrap of an Exeter Hall speech. "We are all kings and priests to God. Oh, Frank, it is Gerald's example that has led you away. I am sure, before you went to Oxford you were never at all a ritualist – even Leonora thought you such a pious boy; and I am sure your good sense must teach you –" faltered aunt Dora, trying her sister's grand tone.

"Hush, hush; I can't have you begin to argue with me; you are not my aunt Leonora," said the Curate, half amused in spite of himself. This encouraged the anxious woman, and, clasping his arm closer than ever, she poured out all her heart.

"Oh, Frank, if you could only modify your views a little! It is not that there is any difference between your views and ours, except just in words, my dear. Flowers are very pretty decorations, and I know you look very nice in your surplice; and I am sure, for my part, I should not mind – but then that is not carrying the Word of God to the people, as Leonora says. If the heart is right, what does it matter about the altar?" said aunt Dora, unconsciously falling upon the very argument that had occurred to her nephew's perplexed mind in the pulpit. "Even though I was in such trouble, I can't tell you what a happiness it was to take the sacrament from your hands, my dear, dear boy; and but for these flowers and things that could do nobody any good, poor dear Leonora, who is very fond of you, though perhaps you don't think it, could have had that happiness too. Oh, Frank, don't you think you could give up these things that don't matter? If you were just to tell Leonora you have been thinking it over, and that you see you've made a mistake, and that in future –"

"You don't mean to insult me?" said the young man. "Hush – hush; you don't know what you are saying. Not to be made Archbishop of Canterbury, instead of Vicar of Skelmersdale. I don't understand how you could suggest such a thing to me."

Miss Dora's veil, which she had partly lifted, here fell over her face, as it had kept doing all the time she was speaking – but this time she did not put it back. She was no longer able to contain

herself, but wept hot tears of distress and vexation, under the flimsy covering of lace. "No, of course, you will not do it – you will far rather be haughty, and say it is my fault," said poor Miss Dora. "We have all so much pride, we Wentworths – and you never think of our disappointment, and how we all calculated upon having you at Skelmersdale, and how happy we were to be, and that you were to marry Julia Trench – "

It was just at this moment that the two reached the corner of Prickett's Lane. Lucy Wodehouse had been down there seeing the sick woman. She had, indeed, been carrying her dinner to that poor creature, and was just turning into Grange Lane, with her blue ribbons hidden under the grey cloak, and a little basket in her hand. They met full in the face at this corner, and Miss Dora's words reached Lucy's ears, and went through and through her with a little nervous thrill. She had not time to think whether it was pain or only surprise that moved her, and was not even self-possessed enough to observe the tremulous pressure of the Curate's hand, as he shook hands with her, and introduced his aunt. "I have just been to see the poor woman at No. 10," said Lucy. "She is very ill to-day. If you had time, it would be kind of you to see her. I think she has something on her mind."

"I will go there before I go to Wharfside," said Mr Wentworth. "Are you coming down to the service this afternoon? I am afraid it will be a long service, for there are all these little Burrowses, you know – "

"Yes, I am godmother," said Lucy, and smiled and gave him her hand again as she passed him while aunt Dora looked on with curious eyes. The poor Curate heaved a mighty sigh as he looked after the grey cloak. Not his the privilege now, to walk with her to the green door, to take her basket from the soft hand of the merciful Sister. On the contrary, he had to turn his back upon Lucy, and walk on with aunt Dora to the inn – at this moment a symbolical action which seemed to embody his fate.

"Where is Wharfside? and who are the little Burrowses? and what does the young lady mean by being godmother?" said aunt Dora. "She looks very sweet and nice; but what is the meaning of that grey cloak? Oh, Frank, I hope you don't approve of nunneries, and that sort of thing. It is such foolishness. My dear, the Christian life is very hard, as your aunt Leonora always says. She says she can't bear to see people playing at Christianity – "

"People should not speak of things they don't understand," said the Perpetual Curate. "Your Exeter-Hall men, aunt Dora, are like the old ascetics – they try to make a merit of Christianity by calling it hard and terrible; but there are some sweet souls in the world, to whom it comes natural as sunshine in May." And the young Anglican, with a glance behind him from the corner of his eye, followed the fair figure, which he believed he was never, with a clear conscience, to accompany any more. "Now, here is your inn," he said, after a little pause. "Wharfside is a district, where I am going presently to conduct service, and the little Burrowses are a set of little heathens, to whom I am to administer holy baptism this Easter Sunday. Good-bye just now."

"Oh, Frank, my dear, just come in for a moment, and tell Leonora – it will show her how wrong she is," said poor aunt Dora, clinging to his arm.

"Right or wrong, I am not going into any controversy. My aunt Leonora knows perfectly well what she is doing," said the Curate, with the best smile he could muster; and so shook hands with her resolutely, and walked back again all the way down Grange Lane, past the green door, to his own house. Nobody was about the green door at that particular moment to ask him in to luncheon, as sometimes happened. He walked down all the way to Mrs Hadwin's, with something of the sensations of a man who has just gone through a dreadful operation, and feels, with a kind of dull surprise after, that everything around him is just the same as before. He had come through a fiery trial, though nobody knew of it; and just at this moment, when he wanted all his strength, how strange to feel that haunting sense of an unnecessary sacrifice – that troubled new vein of thought which would be worked out, and which concerned matters more important than Skelmersdale, weighty as that was. He took his sermon out of his pocket when he got home, and marked a cross upon it, as we have already said; but, being still a young man, he was thankful to snatch a morsel of lunch, and hasten out

again to his duty, instead of staying to argue the question with himself. He went to No. 10 Prickett's Lane, and was a long time with the sick woman, listening to all the woeful tale of a troubled life, which the poor sick creature had been contemplating for days and days, in her solitude, through those strange exaggerated death-gleams which Miss Leonora would have called "the light of eternity." She remembered all sorts of sins, great and small, which filled her with nervous terrors; and it was not till close upon the hour for the Wharfside service, that the Curate could leave his tremulous penitent. The schoolroom was particularly full that day. Easter, perhaps, had touched the hearts – it certainly had refreshed the toilettes – of the bargemen's wives and daughters. Some of them felt an inward conviction that their new ribbons were undoubtedly owing to the clergyman's influence, and that Tom and Jim would have bestowed the money otherwise before the Church planted her pickets in this corner of the enemy's camp; and the conviction, though not of an elevated description, was a great deal better than no conviction at all. Mr Wentworth's little sermon to them was a great improvement upon his sermon at St Roque's. He told them about the empty grave of Christ, and how He called the weeping woman by her name, and showed her the earnest of the end of all sorrows. There were some people who cried, thinking of the dead who were still waiting for Easter, which was more than anybody did when Mr Wentworth discoursed upon the beautiful institutions of the Church's year; and a great many of the congregation stayed to see Tom Burrows's six children come up for baptism, preceded by the new baby, whose infant claims to Christianity the Curate had so strongly insisted upon, to the wakening of a fatherly conscience in the honest bargeman. Lucy Wodehouse, without her grey cloak, stood at the font, holding that last tiny applicant for saving grace, while all the other little heathens were signed with the sacred cross. And strangely enough, when the young priest and the young woman stood so near each other, solemnly pledging, one after another, each little sun-browned, round-eyed pagan to be Christ's faithful servant and soldier, the cloud passed away from the firmament of both. Neither of them, perhaps, was of a very enlightened character of soul. They believed they were doing a great work for Tom Burrows's six children, calling God to His promise on their behalf, and setting the little feet straight for the gates of the eternal city; and in their young love and faith their hearts rose. Perhaps it was foolish of Mr Wentworth to suffer himself to walk home again thereafter, as of old, with the Miss Wodehouses – but it was so usual, and, after all, they were going the same way. But it was a very silent walk, to the wonder of the elder sister, who could not understand what it meant. "The Wharfside service always does me good," said Mr Wentworth, with a sigh. "And me, too," said Lucy; and then they talked a little about the poor woman in No. 10. But that Easter Sunday was not like other Sundays, though Miss Wodehouse could not tell why.

## CHAPTER V

Next day the Miss Wentworths made a solemn call at the Rectory, having known an aunt of Mrs Morgan at some period of their history, and being much disposed, besides, with natural curiosity, to ascertain all about their nephew's circumstances. Their entrance interrupted a consultation between the Rector and his wife. Mr Morgan was slightly heated, and had evidently been talking about something that excited him; while she, poor lady, looked just sufficiently sympathetic and indignant to withdraw her mind from that first idea which usually suggested itself on the entrance of visitors – which was, what could they possibly think of her if they supposed the carpet, &c., to be her own choice? Mrs Morgan cast her eye with a troubled look upon the big card which had been brought to her – Miss Wentworth, Miss Leonora Wentworth, Miss Dora Wentworth. "Sisters of his, I suppose, William," she said in an undertone; "now *do* be civil, dear." There was no time for anything more before the three ladies sailed in. Miss Leonora took the initiative, as was natural.

"You don't remember us, I daresay," she said, taking Mrs Morgan's hand; "we used to know your aunt Sidney, when she lived at the Hermitage. Don't you recollect the Miss Wentworths of Skelmersdale? Charley Sidney spent part of his furlough with us last summer, and Ada writes about you often. We could not be in Carlingford without coming to see the relation of such a dear friend."

"I am so glad to see anybody who knows my aunt Sidney," said Mrs Morgan, with modified enthusiasm. "Mr Morgan, Miss Wentworth. It was such a dear little house that Hermitage. I spent some very happy days there. Oh yes, I recollect Skelmersdale perfectly; but, to tell the truth, there is one of the clergy in Carlingford called Wentworth, and I thought it might be some relations of his coming to call."

"Just so," said Miss Wentworth, settling herself in the nearest easy-chair.

"And so it is," cried Miss Dora; "we are his aunts, dear boy – we are very fond of him. We came on purpose to see him. We are so glad to hear that he is liked in Carlingford."

"Oh – yes," said the Rector's wife, and nobody else took any notice of Miss Dora's little outburst. As for Mr Morgan, he addressed Miss Leonora as if she had done something particularly naughty, and he had a great mind to give her an imposition. "You have not been very long in Carlingford, I suppose," said the Rector, as if that were a sin.

"Only since Saturday," said Miss Leonora. "We came to see Mr Frank Wentworth, who is at St Roque's. I don't know what your bishop is about, to permit all those flowers and candlesticks. For my part, I never disguise my sentiments. I mean to tell my nephew plainly that his way of conducting the service is far from being to my mind."

"Leonora, dear, perhaps Mr Morgan would speak to Frank about it," interposed Miss Dora, anxiously; "he was always a dear boy, and advice was never lost upon him. From one that he respected so much as he must respect the Rector – "

"I beg your pardon. I quite decline interfering with Mr Wentworth; he is not at all under my jurisdiction. Indeed," said the Rector, with a smile of anger, "I might be more truly said to be under his, for he is good enough to help in my parish without consulting me; but that is not to the purpose. I would not for the world attempt to interfere with St Roque's."

"Dear, I am sure Mr Wentworth is very nice, and everything we have seen of him in private we have liked very much," said Mrs Morgan, with an anxious look at her husband. She was a good-natured woman, and the handsome Curate had impressed her favourably, notwithstanding his misdoings. "As for a little too much of the rubric, I think that is not a bad fault in a young man. It gets softened down with a little experience; and I do like proper solemnity in the services of the Church."

"I don't call intoning proper solemnity," said Miss Leonora. "The Church is a missionary institution, that is my idea. Unless you are really bringing in the perishing and saving souls, what is the good? and souls will never be saved by Easter decorations. I don't know what my nephew may

have done to offend you, Mr Morgan; but it is very sad to us, who have very strong convictions on the subject, to see him wasting his time so. I daresay there is plenty of heathenism in Carlingford which might be attacked in the first place."

"I prefer not to discuss the subject," said the Rector. "So long as Mr Wentworth, or any other clergyman, keeps to his own sphere of duty, I should be the last in the world to interfere with him."

"You are offended with Frank," said Miss Leonora, fixing her iron-grey eyes upon Mr Morgan. "So am I; but I should be glad if you would tell me all about it. I have particular reasons for wishing to know. After all, he is only a young man," she continued, with that instinct of kindred which dislikes to hear censure from any lips but its own. "I don't think there can be anything more than inadvertence in it. I should be glad if you would tell me what you object to in him. I think it is probable that he may remain a long time in Carlingford," said Miss Leonora, with charming candour, "and it would be pleasant if we could help to set him right. Your advice and experience might be of so much use to him." She was not aware of the covert sarcasm of her speech. She did not know that the Rector's actual experience, though he was half as old again as her nephew, bore no comparison to that of the Perpetual Curate. She spoke in good faith and good nature, not moved in her own convictions of what must be done in respect to Skelmersdale, but very willing, if that were possible, to do a good turn to Frank.

"I am sure, dear, what we have seen of Mr Wentworth in private, we have liked very much," said the Rector's sensible wife, with a deprecating glance towards her husband. The Rector took no notice of the glance; he grew slightly red in his serious middle-aged face, and cleared his throat several times before he began to speak.

"The fact is, I have reason to be dissatisfied with Mr Wentworth, as regards my own parish," said Mr Morgan: "personally I have nothing to say against him – quite the reverse; probably, as you say, it arises from inadvertence, as he is still a very young man; but –"

"What has he done?" said Miss Leonora, pricking up her ears.

Once more Mr Morgan cleared his throat, but this time it was to keep down the rising anger of which he was unpleasantly sensible. "I don't generally enter into such matters with people whom they don't concern," he said, with a touch of his natural asperity; "but as you are Mr Wentworth's relation – . He has taken a step perfectly unjustifiable in every respect; he has at the present moment a mission going on in my parish, in entire independence, I will not say defiance, of me. My dear, it is unnecessary to look at me so deprecatingly. I am indignant at having such a liberty taken with me. I don't pretend not to be indignant. Mr Wentworth is a very young man, and may not know any better; but it is the most unwarrantable intrusion upon a clergyman's rights. I beg your pardon, Miss Wentworth: you have nothing to do with my grievances; but the fact is, my wife and I were discussing this very unpleasant matter when you came in."

"A mission in your parish?" said Miss Leonora, her iron-grey eyes lighting up with a sparkle which did not look like indignation; at this point it was necessary that Miss Dora should throw herself into the breach.

"Oh, Mr Morgan, I am sure my dear Frank does not mean it!" cried the unlucky peacemaker; "he would not for the world do anything to wound anybody's feelings – it must be a mistake."

"Mr Morgan would not have mentioned it if we had not just been talking as you came in," said the Rector's wife, by way of smoothing down his ruffled temper and giving him time to recover. "I feel *sure* it is a mistake, and that everything will come right as soon as they can talk it over by themselves. The last Rector was not at all a working clergyman – and perhaps Mr Wentworth felt it was his duty – and now I daresay he forgets that it is not his own parish. It will all come right after a time."

"But the mission is effective, I suppose, or you would not object to it?" said Miss Leonora, who, though a very religious woman, was not a peacemaker; and the Rector, whose temper was hasty, swallowed the bait. He entered into his grievances more fully than his wife thought consistent with his dignity. She sat with her eyes fixed upon the floor, tracing the objectionable pattern on the carpet

with her foot, but too much vexed for the moment to think of those bouquets which were so severe a cross to her on ordinary occasions. Perhaps she was thinking secretly to herself how much better one knows a man after being married to him three months than after being engaged to him ten years; but the discovery that he was merely a man after all, with very ordinary defects, did not lessen her loyalty. She sat with her eyes bent upon the carpet, feeling a little hot and uncomfortable as her husband disclosed his weakness, and watching her opportunities to rush in and say a softening word now and then. The chances were, perhaps, on the whole, that the wife grew *more* loyal, if that were possible, as she perceived the necessity of standing by him and backing him out. The Rector went very fully into the subject, being drawn out by Miss Leonora's questions, and betrayed an extent of information strangely opposed to the utter ignorance which he had displayed at Mr Wodehouse's party. He knew the hours of Mr Wentworth's services, and the number of people who attended, and even about Tom Burrows's six children who had been baptised the day before. Somehow Mr Morgan took this last particular as a special offence; it was this which had roused him beyond his usual self-control. Six little heathens brought into the Christian fold in his own parish without the permission of the Rector! It was indeed enough to try any clergyman's temper. Through the entire narrative Miss Dora broke in now and then with a little wail expressive of her general dismay and grief, and certainty that her dear Frank did not mean it. Mrs Morgan repeated apart to Miss Wentworth with a troubled brow the fact that all they had seen of Mr Wentworth in private they had liked very much; to which aunt Cecilia answered, "Quite so," with her beautiful smile; while Miss Leonora sat and listened, putting artful questions, and fixing the heated Rector with that iron-grey eye, out of which the sparkle of incipient light had not faded. Mr Morgan naturally said a great deal more than he meant to say, and after it was said he was sorry; but he did not show the latter sentiment except by silence and an uneasy rustling about the room just before the Miss Wentworths rose to go – a sign apparent to his wife, though to nobody else. He gave Miss Wentworth his arm to the door with an embarrassed courtesy. "If you are going to stay any time at Carlingford, I trust we shall see more of you," said Mr Morgan: "I ought to beg your pardon for taking up so much time with my affairs;" and the Rector was much taken aback when Miss Wentworth answered, "Thank you, that is just what I was thinking." He went back to his troubled wife in great perplexity. What was it that was just what she was thinking? – that he would see more of them, or that he had spoken too much of his own affairs?

"You think I have been angry and made an idiot of myself," said Mr Morgan to his wife, who was standing looking from a safe distance through the curtains at the three ladies, who were holding a consultation with their servant out of the window of the solemn chariot provided by the Blue Boar, as to where they were to go next.

"Nonsense, dear; but I wish you had not said quite so much about Mr Wentworth," said the Rector's wife, seizing, with female art, on a cause for her annoyance which would not wound her Welshman's *amour propre*, "for I rather think he is dependent on his aunts. They have the living of Skelmersdale, I know; and I remember now that their nephew was to have had it. I hope this won't turn them against him, dear," said Mrs Morgan, who did not care the least in the world about Skelmersdale, looking anxiously in her husband's face.

This was the climax of the Rector's trouble. "Why did not you tell me that before?" he said, with conjugal injustice, and went off to his study with a disturbed mind, thinking that perhaps he had injured his own chances of getting rid of the Perpetual Curate. If Mrs Morgan had permitted herself to soliloquise after he was gone, the matter of her thoughts might have been interesting; but as neither ladies nor gentlemen in the nineteenth century are given to that useful medium of disclosing their sentiments, the veil of privacy must remain over the mind of the Rector's wife. She got her gardening gloves and scissors, and went out immediately after, and had an animated discussion with the gardener about the best means of clothing that bit of wall, over which every railway train was visible which left or entered Carlingford. That functionary was of opinion that when the lime-trees "grewed a bit" all would be right: but Mrs Morgan was reluctant to await the slow processes of nature. She forgot

her vexations about Mr Wentworth in consideration of the still more palpable inconvenience of the passing train.

## CHAPTER VI

Miss Dora Wentworth relapsed into suppressed sobbing when the three ladies were once more on their way. Between each little access a few broken words fell from the poor lady's lips. "I am sure dear Frank did not mean it," she said; it was all the plea his champion could find for him.

"He did not mean what? to do his duty and save souls?" said Miss Leonora – "is that what he didn't mean? It looks very much as if he did, though – as well as he knew how."

"Quite so, Leonora," said Miss Wentworth.

"But he could not mean to vex the Rector," said Miss Dora – "my poor dear Frank: of course he meant it for the very best. I wonder you don't think so, Leonora – you who are so fond of missions. I told you what I heard him saying to the young lady – all about the sick people he was going to visit, and the children. He is a faithful shepherd, though you won't think so; and I am sure he means nothing but –"

"His duty, I think," said the iron-grey sister, resolutely indifferent to Miss Dora's little sniffs, and turning her gaze out of the window, unluckily just at the moment when the carriage was passing Masters's shop, where some engravings were hanging of a suspiciously devotional character. The name over the door, and the aspect of the shop-window, were terribly suggestive, and the fine profile of the Perpetual Curate was just visible within to the keen eyes of his aunt. Miss Dora, for her part, dried hers, and, beginning to see some daylight, addressed herself anxiously to the task of obscuring it, and damaging once more her favourite's chance.

"Ah, Leonora, if he had but a sphere of his own," cried Miss Dora, "where he would have other things to think of than the rubric, and decorations, and sisterhoods! I don't wish any harm to poor dear old Mr Shirley, I am sure; but when Frank is in the Rectory –"

"I thought you understood that Frank would not do for the Rectory," said Miss Leonora. "Sisterhoods! – look here, there's a young lady in a grey cloak, and I think she's going into *that* shop: if Frank carries on that sort of thing, I shall think him a greater fool than ever. Who is that girl?"

"I'm sure I don't know, dear," said Miss Dora, with unexpected wisdom. And she comforted her conscience that she did not know, for she had forgotten Lucy's name. So there was no tangible evidence to confirm Miss Leonora's doubts, and the carriage from the Blue Boar rattled down Prickett's Lane to the much amazement of that locality. When they got to the grimy canal-banks, Miss Leonora stopped the vehicle and got out. She declined the attendance of her trembling sister, and marched along the black pavement, dispersing with the great waves of her drapery the wondering children about, who swarmed as children will swarm in such localities. Arrived at the schoolroom, Miss Leonora found sundry written notices hung up in a little wooden frame inside the open door. All sorts of charitable businesses were carried on about the basement of the house; and a curt little notice about the Provident Society diversified the list of services which was hung up for the advantage of the ignorant. Clearly the Curate of St Roque's meant it. "As well as he knows how," his aunt allowed to herself, with a softening sentiment; but, pushing her inquiries further, was shown up to the schoolroom, and stood pondering by the side of the reading-desk, looking at the table which was contrived to be so like an altar. The Curate, who could not have dreamed of such a visit, and whose mind had been much occupied and indifferent to externals on the day before, had left various things lying about, which were carefully collected for him upon a bench. Among them was a little pocket copy of Thomas à Kempis, from which, when the jealous aunt opened it, certain little German prints, such as were to be had by the score at Masters's, dropped out, some of them unobjectionable enough. But if the Good Shepherd could not be found fault with, the feelings of Miss Leonora may be imagined when the meek face of a monkish saint, inscribed with some villanous Latin inscription, a legend which began with the terrible words *Ora pro nobis*, became suddenly visible to her troubled eyes. She put away the book as if it had stung her, and made a precipitate retreat. She shook her

head as she descended the stair – she re-entered the carriage in gloomy silence. When it returned up Prickett's Lane, the three ladies again saw their nephew, this time entering the door of No. 10. He had his prayer-book under his arm, and Miss Leonora seized upon this professional symbol to wreak her wrath upon it. "I wonder if he can't pray by a sick woman without his prayer-book?" she cried. "I never was so provoked in my life. How is it he doesn't know better? His father is not pious, but he isn't a Puseyite, and old uncle Wentworth was very sound – he was brought up under the pure Gospel. How is that the boys are so foolish, Dora?" said Miss Leonora, sharply; "it must be your doing. You have told them tales and things, and put true piety out of their head."

"My doing!" said Miss Dora, faintly; but she was too much startled by the suddenness of the attack to make any coherent remonstrance. Miss Leonora tossed back her angry head, and pursued that inspiration, finding it a relief in her perplexity.

"It must be *all* your doing," she said. "How can I tell that you are not a Jesuit in disguise? one has read of such a thing. The boys were as good, nice, pious boys as one could wish to see; and there's Gerald on the point of perversion, and Frank – I tell you, Dora, it must be your fault."

"That was always my opinion," said Miss Cecilia; and the accused, after a feeble attempt at speech, could find nothing better to do than to drop her veil once more and cry under it. It was very hard, but she was not quite unaccustomed to it. However, the discoveries of the day were important enough to prevent the immediate departure which Miss Leonora had intended. She wrote a note with her own hands to her nephew, asking him to dinner. "We meant to have gone away to-day, but should like to see you first," she said in her note. "Come and dine – we mayn't have anything pleasant to say, but I don't suppose you expect that. It's a pity we don't see eye to eye." Such was the intimation received by Mr Wentworth when he got home, very tired, in the afternoon. He had been asking himself whether, under the circumstances, it would not be proper of him to return some books of Mr Wodehouse's which he had in his possession, of course by way of breaking off his too familiar, too frequent intercourse. He had been representing to himself that he would make this call after their dinner would be over, at the hour when Mr Wodehouse reposed in his easy-chair, and the two sisters were generally to be found alone in the drawing-room. Perhaps he might have an opportunity of intimating the partial farewell he meant to take of them. When he got Miss Leonora's note, the Curate's countenance clouded over. He said, "Another night lost," with indignant candour. It was hard enough to give up his worldly prospects, but he thought he had made up his mind to that. However, refusal was impossible. It was still daylight when he went up Grange Lane to the Blue Boar. He was early, and went languidly along the well-known road. Nobody was about at that hour. In those closed, embowered houses, people were preparing for dinner, the great event of the day, and Mr Wentworth was aware of that. Perhaps he had expected to see somebody – Mr Wodehouse going home, most likely, in order that he might mention his own engagement, and account for his failure in the chance evening call which had become so much a part of his life. But no one appeared to bear his message. He went lingering past the green door, and up the silent deserted road. At the end of Grange Lane, just in the little unsettled transition interval which interposed between its aristocratic calm and the bustle of George Street, on the side next Prickett's Lane, was a quaint little shop, into which Mr Wentworth strayed to occupy the time. This was Elsworthy's, who, as is well known, was then clerk at St Roque's. Elsworthy himself was in his shop that Easter Monday, and so was his wife and little Rosa, who was a little beauty. Rosa and her aunt had just returned from an excursion, and a prettier little apparition could not be seen than that dimpled rosy creature, with her radiant half-childish looks, her bright eyes, and soft curls of dark-brown hair. Even Mr Wentworth gave a second glance at her as he dropped languidly into a chair, and asked Elsworthy if there was any news. Mrs Elsworthy, who had been telling the adventures of the holiday to her goodman, gathered up her basket of eggs and her nosegay, and made the clergyman a little curtsy as she hurried away; for the clerk's wife was a highly respectable woman, and knew her own place. But Rosa, who was only a kind of kitten, and had privileges, stayed. Mr Wentworth was by far the most magnificent figure she had ever

seen in her little life. She looked at him with awe out of her bright eyes, and thought he looked like the prince in the fairy tales.

"Any news, sir? There aint much to call news, sir – not in a place like this," said Mr Elsworthy. "Your respected aunts, sir, 'as been down at the schoolroom. I haven't heard anything else as I could suppose you didn't know."

"My aunts!" cried the Curate; "how do you know anything about my aunts?" Mr Elsworthy smiled a complacent and familiar smile.

"There's so many a-coming and a-going here that I know most persons as comes into Carlingford," said he; "and them three respected ladies is as good as a pictur. I saw them a-driving past and down Prickett's Lane. They was as anxious to know all about it as – as was to be expected in the circumstances," said Mr Elsworthy, failing of a metaphor; "and I wish you your 'ealth and 'appiness, sir, if all as I hear is true."

"It's a good wish," said the Curate; "thank you, Elsworthy; but what you heard might not be true."

"Well, sir, it looks more than likely," said the clerk; "as far as I've seen in my experience, ladies don't go inquiring into a young gentleman's ways, not without some reason. If they was young ladies, and noways related, we know what we'd think, sir; but being old ladies, and aunts, it's equally as clear. For my part, Mr Wentworth, my worst wish is, that when you come into your fortune, it mayn't lead you away from St Roque's – not after everything is settled so beautiful, and not a thing wanted but some stained glass, as I hear a deal of people say, to make it as perfect a little church – "

"Yes, it is very true; a painted window is very much wanted," said Mr Wentworth, thoughtfully.

"Perhaps there's one o' the ladies, sir, as has some friend she'd like to put up a memorial to," said Mr Elsworthy, in insinuating tones. "A window is a deal cheerfuller a memorial than a tombstone, and it couldn't be described the improvement it would be to the church. I'm sorry to hear Mr Wodehouse aint quite so well as his usual to-night; a useful man like he is, would be a terrible loss to Carlingford; not as it's anything alarming, as far as I can hear, but being a stout man, it aint a safe thing his being took so sudden. I've heard the old doctor say, sir, as a man of a full 'abit might be took off at once, when a spare man would fight through. It would be a sad thing for his family, sir," said Mr Elsworthy, tying up a bundle of newspapers with a very serious face.

"Good heavens, Elsworthy, how you talk!" said the alarmed Curate. "What do you mean? – is Mr Wodehouse ill? – seriously ill?"

"Not serious, as I knows of," said the clerk, with solemnity; "but being a man of a full 'abit of body – I daresay as the town would enter into it by subscription if it was proposed as a memorial to *him*, for he's much respected in Carlingford is Mr Wodehouse. I see him a-going past, sir, at five o'clock, which is an hour earlier than common, and he was looking flabby, that's how he was looking. I don't know a man as would be a greater loss to his family; and they aint been without their troubles either, poor souls."

"I should be sorry to think that it was necessary to sacrifice Mr Wodehouse for the sake of our painted window," said the Curate, "as that seems what you mean. Send over this note for me please, as I have not time to call. No, certainly, don't send Rosa; that child is too young and too – too pretty to be out by herself at night. Send a boy. Haven't you got a boy? – there is a very nice little fellow that I could recommend to you," said Mr Wentworth, as he hastily scribbled his note with a pencil, "whose mother lives in Prickett's Lane."

"Thank *you*, sir, all the same; but I hope I don't need to go into that neighbourhood for good service," said Mr Elsworthy: "as for Rosa, I could trust her anywhere; and I have a boy, sir, as is the best boy that ever lived – a real English boy, that is. Sam, take this to Mr Wodehouse's directly, and wait for an answer. No answer? – very well, sir. You needn't wait for no answer, Sam. That's a boy, sir, I could trust with untold gold. His mother's a Dissenter, it is true, but the principles of that boy is beautiful. I hope you haven't mentioned, sir, as I said Mr Wodehouse was took bad? It was between

ourselves, Mr Wentworth. Persons don't like, especially when they've got to that age, and are of a full 'abit of body, to have every little attack made a talk about. You'll excuse me mentioning it, sir, but it was as between ourselves."

"Perhaps you'd like me to show you my note," said the Curate, with a smile; which, indeed, Elsworthy would have very much liked, could he have ventured to say so. Mr Wentworth was but too glad of an excuse to write and explain his absence. The note was not to Lucy, however, though various little epistles full of the business of the district had passed between the two: —

"Dear Miss W., – I hear your father is not quite well. I can't call just now, as I am going to dine with my aunts, who are at the Blue Boar; but, if you will pardon the lateness of the hour, I will call as I return to ask for him. – Ever yours,

*"F. C. WENTWORTH."*

Such was the Curate's note. While he scribbled it, little Rosa stood apart watching him with admiring eyes. He had said she was too pretty to be sent across Grange Lane by herself at this hour, though it was still no more than twilight; and he looked up at her for an instant as he said the words, – quite enough to set Rosa's poor little heart beating with childish romantical excitement. If she could but have peeped into the note to see what he said! – for perhaps, after all, there might not be anything "between" him and Miss Lucy – and perhaps – The poor little thing stood watching, deaf to her aunt's call, looking at the strange ease with which that small epistle was written, and thinking it half divine to have such mastery of words and pen. Mr Wentworth threw it to Sam as if it were a trifle; but Rosa's lively imagination could already conceive the possibility of living upon such trifles and making existence out of them; so the child stood with her pretty curls about her ears, and her bright eyes gleaming dewy over the fair, flushed, rosebud cheeks, in a flutter of roused and innocent imagination anticipating her fate. As for Mr Wentworth, it is doubtful whether he saw Rosa, as he swung himself round upon the stool he was seated on, and turned his face towards the door. Somehow he was comforted in his mind by the conviction that it was his duty to call at Mr Wodehouse's as he came back. The evening brightened up and looked less dismal. The illness of the respected father of the house did not oppress the young man. He thought not of the sick-room, but of the low chair in one corner, beside the work-table where Lucy had always basketfuls of sewing in hand. He could fancy he saw the work drop on her knee, and the blue eyes raised. It was a pretty picture that he framed for himself as he looked out with a half smile into the blue twilight through the open door of Elsworthy's shop. And it was clearly his duty to call. He grew almost jocular in the exhilaration of his spirits.

"The Miss Wentworths don't approve of memorial windows, Elsworthy," he said; "and, indeed, if you think it necessary to cut off one of the chief people in Carlingford by way of supplying St Roque's with a little painted glass – "

"No, sir – no, no, sir; you're too hard upon me – there wasn't no such meaning in my mind; but I don't make no question the ladies were pleased with the church," said Elsworthy, with the satisfaction of a man who had helped to produce an entirely triumphant effect. "I don't pretend to be a judge myself of what you call 'igh art, Mr Wentworth; but if I might venture an opinion, the altar was beautiful; and we won't say nothing about the service, considering, sir – if you won't be offended at putting them together, as one is so far inferior – that both you and me – "

Mr Wentworth laughed and moved off his chair. "We were not appreciated in this instance," he said, with an odd comic look, and then went off into a burst of laughter, which Mr Elsworthy saw no particular occasion for. Then he took up his glove, which he had taken off to write the note, and, nodding a kindly good-night to little Rosa, who stood gazing after him with all her eyes, went away to the Blue Boar. The idea, however, of his own joint performance with Mr Elsworthy not only tickled the Curate, but gave him a half-ashamed sense of the aspect in which he might himself appear to the eyes of matter-of-fact people who differed with him. The joke had a slight sting, which brought his laughter to an end. He went up through the lighted street to the inn, wishing the dinner over, and

himself on his way back again to call at Mr Wodehouse's. For, to tell the truth, by this time he had almost exhausted Skelmersdale, and, feeling in himself not much different now from what he was when his hopes were still green, had begun to look upon life itself with a less troubled eye, and to believe in other chances which might make Lucy's society practicable once more. It was in this altered state of mind that he presented himself before his aunts. He was less self-conscious, less watchful, more ready to amuse them, if that might happen to be possible, and in reality much more able to cope with Miss Leonora than when he had been more anxious about her opinion. He had not been two minutes in the room before all the three ladies perceived this revolution, and each in her own mind attempted to account for it. They were experienced women in their way, and found a variety of reasons; but as none of them were young, and as people *will* forget how youth feels, not one of them divined the fact that there was no reason, but that this improvement of spirits arose solely from the fact that the Perpetual Curate had been for two whole days miserable about Skelmersdale, and had exhausted all his powers of misery – and that now youth had turned the tables, and he was still to see Lucy tonight.

## CHAPTER VII

"Your Rector is angry at some of your proceedings," said Miss Leonora. "I did not think a man of your views would have cared for missionary work. I should have supposed that you would think that vulgar, and Low-Church, and Evangelical. Indeed, I thought I heard you say you didn't believe in preaching, Frank? – neither do I, when a man preaches the Tracts for the Times. I was surprised to hear what you were doing at the place they call Wharfside."

"First let me correct you in two little inaccuracies," said Mr Wentworth, blandly, as he peeled his orange. "The Rector of Carlingford is not *my* rector, and I don't preach the Tracts for the Times. Let us always be particular, my dear aunt, as to points of fact."

"Exactly so," said Miss Leonora, grimly; "but, at the same time, as there seems no great likelihood of your leaving Carlingford, don't you think it would be wise to cultivate friendly relations with the Rector?" said the iron-grey inexorable aunt, looking full in his eyes as she spoke. So significant and plain a statement took for an instant the colour out of the Curate's cheeks – he pared his orange very carefully while he regained his composure, and it was at least half a minute before he found himself at leisure to reply. Miss Dora of course seized upon the opportunity, and, by way of softening matters, interposed in her unlucky person to make peace.

"But, my dear boy, I said I was sure you did not mean it," said Miss Dora; "I told Mr Morgan I felt convinced it could be explained. Nobody knows you so well as I do. You were always high-spirited from a child, and never would give in; but I know very well you never could mean it, Frank."

"Mean it?" said the Curate, with sparkling eyes: "what do you take me for, aunt Dora? Do you know what it is we are talking of? The question is, whether a whole lot of people, fathers and children, shall be left to live like beasts, without reverence for God or man, or shall be brought within the pale of the Church, and taught their duty? And you think I don't mean it? I mean it as much as my brother Charley meant it at the Redan," said young Wentworth, with a glow of suppressed enthusiasm, and that natural pride in Charley (who got the Cross for valour) which was common to all the Wentworths. But when he saw his aunt Leonora looking at him, the Perpetual Curate stood to his arms again. "I have still to learn that the Rector has anything to do with it," said the young Evangelist of Wharfside.

"It is in his parish, and he thinks he has," said Miss Leonora. "I wish you could see your duty more clearly, Frank. You seem to me, you know, to have a kind of zeal, but not according to knowledge. If you were carrying the real Gospel to the poor people, I shouldn't be disposed to blame you; for the limits of a parish are but poor things to pause for when souls are perishing; but to break the law for the sake of diffusing the rubric and propagating Tractarianism – "

"Oh, Leonora, how can you be so harsh and cruel?" cried Miss Dora; "only think what you are doing. I don't say anything about disappointing Frank, and perhaps injuring his prospects for life; for, to be sure, he is a true Wentworth, and won't acknowledge that; but think of my poor dear brother, with so many sons as he has to provide for, and so much on his mind; and think of ourselves and all that we have planned so often. Only think what you have talked of over and over; how nice it would be when he was old enough to take the Rectory, and marry Julia Trench – "

"Aunt Dora," said the Curate, rising from the table. "I shall have to go away if you make such appeals on my behalf. And besides, it is only right to tell you that, whatever my circumstances were, I never could nor would marry Julia Trench. It is cruel and unjust to bring in her name. Don't let us hear any more of this, if you have any regard for me."

"Quite so, Frank," said Miss Wentworth; "that is exactly what I was thinking." Miss Cecilia was not in the habit of making demonstrations, but she put out her delicate old hand to point her nephew to his seat again, and gave a soft slight pressure to his as she touched it. Old Miss Wentworth was a kind of dumb lovely idol to her nephews; she rarely said anything to them, but they worshipped her all the same for her beauty and those languid tenderesses which she showed them once in ten years or

so. The Perpetual Curate was much touched by this manifestation. He kissed his old aunt's beautiful hand as reverently as if it had been a saint's. "I knew you would understand me," he said, looking gratefully at her lovely old face; which exclamation, however, was a simple utterance of gratitude, and would not have borne investigation. When he had resumed his seat and his orange, Miss Leonora cleared her throat for a grand address.

"Frank might as well tell us he would not have Skelmersdale," she said. "Julia Trench has quite other prospects, I am glad to say, though Dora talks like a fool on this subject as well as on many others. Mr Shirley is not dead yet, and I don't think he means to die, for my part; and Julia would never leave her uncle. Besides, I don't think any inducement in the world would make her disguise herself like a Sister of Mercy. I hope she knows better. And it is a pity that Frank should learn to think of Skelmersdale as if it were a family living," continued Miss Leonora. "For my part, I think people detached from immediate ties as we are, are under all the greater responsibility. But as you are likely to stay in Carlingford, Frank, perhaps we could help you with the Rector," she concluded blandly, as she ate her biscuit. The Curate, who was also a Wentworth, had quite recovered himself ere this speech was over, and proved himself equal to the occasion.

"If the Rector objects to what I am doing, I daresay he will tell me of it," said Mr Wentworth, with indescribable suavity. "I had the consent of the two former rectors to my mission in their parish, and I don't mean to give up such a work without a cause. But I am equally obliged to you, my dear aunt, and I hope Mr Shirley will live for ever. How long are you going to stay in Carlingford? Some of the people would like to call on you, if you remain longer. There are some great friends of mine here; and as I have every prospect of being perpetually the Curate, as you kindly observe, perhaps it might be good for me if I was seen to have such unexceptionable relationships – "

"Satire is lost upon me," said Miss Leonora, "and we are going to-morrow. Here comes the coffee. I did not think it had been so late. We shall leave by an early train, and you can come and see us off, if you have time."

"I shall certainly find time," said the nephew, with equal politeness; "and now you will permit me to say good-night, for I have a – one of my sick people to visit. I heard he was ill only as I came here, and had not time to call," added the Curate, with unnecessary explanatoriness, and took leave of his aunt Cecilia, who softly put something into his hand as she bade him good-night. Miss Dora, for her part, went with him to the door, and lingered leaning on his arm, down the long passage, all unaware, poor lady, that his heart was beating with impatience to get away, and that the disappointment for which she wanted to console him had at the present moment not the slightest real hold upon his perverse heart. "Oh, my dear boy, I hope you don't think it's my fault," said Miss Dora, with tears. "It must have come to this, dear, sooner or later: you see, poor Leonora has such a sense of responsibility; but it is very hard upon us, Frank, who love you so much, that she should always take her own way."

"Then why don't you rebel?" said the Curate, who, in the thought of seeing Lucy, was exhilarated, and dared to jest even upon the awful power of his aunt. "You are two against one; why don't you take it into your own hands and rebel?"

Miss Dora repeated the words with an alarmed quiver. "Rebel! oh, Frank, dear, do you think we could? To be sure, we are co-heiresses, and have just as good a right as she has; and for your sake, my dear boy," said the troubled woman, "oh, Frank, I wish you would tell me what to do! I never should dare to contradict Leonora with no one to stand by me; and then, if anything happened, you would all think I had been to blame," said poor aunt Dora, clinging to his arm. She made him walk back and back again through the long passage, which was sacred to the chief suite of apartments at the Blue Boar. "We have it all to ourselves, and nobody can see us here; and oh, my dear boy, if you would only tell me what I ought to do?" she repeated, with wistful looks of appeal. Mr Wentworth was too good-hearted to show the impatience with which he was struggling. He satisfied her as well as he could, and said good-night half-a-dozen times. When he made his escape at last, and emerged into the clear blue air of the spring night, the Perpetual Curate had no such sense of disappointment and

failure in his mind as the three ladies supposed. Miss Leonora's distinct intimation that Skelmersdale had passed out of the region of probabilities, had indeed tingled through him at the moment it was uttered; but just now he was going to see Lucy, anticipating with impatience the moment of coming into her presence, and nothing in the world could have dismayed him utterly. He went down the road very rapidly, glad to find that it was still so early, that the shopkeepers in George Street were but just putting up their shutters, and that there was still time for an hour's talk in that bright drawing-room. Little Rosa was standing at the door of Elsworthy's shop, looking out into the dark street as he passed; and he said, "A lovely night, Rosa," as he went by. But the night was nothing particular in itself, only lovely to Mr Wentworth, as embellished with Lucy shining over it, like a distant star. Perhaps he had never in his life felt so glad that he was going to see her, so eager for her presence, as that night which was the beginning of the time when it would be no longer lawful for him to indulge in her society. He heaved a big sigh as that thought occurred to him, but it did not diminish the flush of conscious happiness; and in this mood he went down Grange Lane, with light resounding steps, to Mr Wodehouse's door.

But Mr Wentworth started with a very strange sensation when the door was stealthily, noiselessly opened to him before he could ring. He could not see who it was that called him in the darkness; but he felt that he had been watched for, and that the door was thrown open very hurriedly to prevent him from making his usual summons at the bell. Such an incident was incomprehensible. He went into the dark garden like a man in a dream, with a horrible vision of Archimage and the false Una somehow stealing upon his mind, he could not tell how. It was quite dark inside, for the moon was late of rising that night, and the faint stars threw no effectual lustre down upon the trees. He had to grope before him to know where he was going, asking in a troubled voice, "Who is there? What is the matter?" and falling into more and more profound bewilderment and uneasiness.

"Hush, hush, oh hush! – Oh, Mr Wentworth, it is I – I want to speak to you," said an agitated voice beside him. "Come this way – this way; I don't want any one to hear us." It was Miss Wodehouse who thus pitifully addressed the amazed Curate. She laid a tremulous hand on his arm, and drew him deeper into the shadows – into that walk where the limes and tall lilac-bushes grew so thickly. Here she came to a pause, and the sound of the terrified panting breath in the silence alarmed him more and more.

"Is Mr Wodehouse ill? What has happened?" said the astonished young man. The windows of the house were gleaming hospitably over the dark garden, without any appearance of gloom – the drawing-room windows especially, which he knew so well, brightly lighted, one of them open, and the sound of the piano and Lucy's voice stealing out like a celestial reality into the darkness. By the time he had become fully sensible of all these particulars his agitated companion had found her breath.

"Mr Wentworth, don't think me mad," said Miss Wodehouse; "I have come out to speak to you, for I am in great distress. I don't know what to do unless you will help me. Oh no, don't look at the house – nobody knows in the house; I would die rather than have them know. Hush, hush! don't make any noise. Is that some one looking out at the door?"

And just then the door was opened, and Mr Wodehouse's sole male servant looked out, and round the garden, as if he had heard something to excite his curiosity or surprise. Miss Wodehouse grasped the arm of the Perpetual Curate, and held him with an energy which was almost violence. "Hush, hush, hush," she said, with her voice almost at his ear. The excitement of this mild woman, the perfectly inexplicable mystery of the meeting, overwhelmed young Wentworth. He could think of nothing less than that she had lost her senses, and in his turn he took her hands and held her fast.

"What is the matter? I cannot tell you how anxious, how distressed I am. What has happened?" said the young man, under his breath.

"My father has some suspicion," she answered, after a pause – "he came home early to-day looking ill. You heard of it, Mr Wentworth – it was your note that decided me. Oh, heaven help us! it is so hard to know what to do. I have never been used to act for myself, and I feel as helpless as a

baby. The only comfort I have was that it happened on Easter Sunday," said the poor gentlewoman, incoherently; "and oh! if it should prove a rising from the dead! If you saw me, Mr Wentworth, you would see I look ten years older; and I can't tell you how it is, but I think my father has suspicions; – he looked so ill – oh, so ill – when he came home to-night. Hush! hush! did you hear anything? I daren't tell Lucy; not that I couldn't trust her, but it is cruel when a young creature is happy, to let her know such miseries. Oh, Mr Wentworth, I daresay I am not telling you what it is, after all. I don't know what I am saying – wait till I can think. It was on Easter Sunday, after we came home from Wharfside; you remember we all came home together, and both Lucy and you were so quiet. I could not understand how it was you were so quiet, but I was not thinking of any trouble – and then all at once there he was."

"Who?" said the Curate, forgetting caution in his bewilderment.

Once more the door opened, and John appeared on the steps, this time with a lantern and the watch-dog, a great brown mastiff, by his side, evidently with the intention of searching the garden for the owners of those furtive voices. Mr Wentworth drew the arm of his trembling companion within his own. "I don't know what you want of me, but whatever it is, trust to me like – like a brother," he said, with a sigh. "But now compose yourself; we must go into the house: it will not do for you to be found here." He led her up the gravel-walk into the light of the lantern, which the vigilant guardian of the house was flashing among the bushes as he set out upon his rounds. John fell back amazed but respectful when he saw his mistress and the familiar visitor. "Beg your pardon, ma'am, but I knew there was voices, and I didn't know as any of the family was in the garden," said the man, discomfited. It was all Mr Wentworth could do to hold up the trembling figure by his side. As John retreated, she gathered a little fortitude. Perhaps it was easier for her to tell her hurried tremulous story, as he guided *her* back to the house, than it would have been in uninterrupted leisure and quiet. The family tragedy fell in broken sentences from her lips, as the Curate bent down his astonished ear to listen. He was totally unprepared for the secret which only her helplessness and weakness and anxiety to serve her father could have drawn from Miss Wodehouse's lips; and it had to be told so hurriedly that Mr Wentworth scarcely knew what it was, except a terrible unsuspected shadow overhanging the powerful house, until he had time to think it all over. There was no such time at this moment. His trembling companion left him as soon as they reached the house, to "compose herself," as she said. When he saw her face in the light of the hall lamp it was ghastly, and quivering with agitation, looking not ten years, as she said, but a hundred years older than when, in the sweet precision of her Sunday dress and looks, old Miss Wodehouse had bidden him good-bye at the green door. He went up to the drawing-room, notwithstanding, with as calm a countenance as he himself could collect, to pay the visit which, in this few minutes, had so entirely changed in character. Mr Wentworth felt as if he saw everything exactly as he had pictured it to himself half an hour ago. Lucy, who had left the piano, was seated in her low chair again, not working, but talking to Mr Wodehouse, who lay on the sofa, looking a trifle less rosy than usual, like a man who had had a fright, or been startled by some possible shadow of a ghost. To walk into the room, into the bright household glow, and smile and shake hands with them, feeling all the time that he knew more about them than they themselves did, was the strangest sensation to the young man. He asked how Mr Wodehouse did, with a voice which, to himself, sounded hollow and unnatural, and sat down beside the invalid, almost turning his back upon Lucy in his bewilderment. It was indeed with a great effort that Mr Wentworth mastered himself, and was able to listen to what his companion said.

"We are all right," said Mr Wodehouse – "a trifle of a headache or so – nothing to make a talk about; but Molly has forsaken us, and we were just about getting bored with each other, Lucy and I; a third person was all we wanted to make us happy – eh? Well I thought you looked at the door very often – perhaps I was mistaken – but I could have sworn you were listening and looking for somebody. No wonder either – I don't think so. I should have done just the same at your age."

"Indeed, papa, you are quite mistaken," said Lucy. "I suppose that means that I cannot amuse you by myself, though I have been trying all the evening. Perhaps Mr Wentworth will be more fortunate." And, either for shame of being supposed to look for him, or in a little innocent pique, she moved away from where she was sitting, and rang for tea, and left the two gentlemen to talk to each other. That is to say, Mr Wodehouse talked, and the Perpetual Curate sat looking vaguely at the fair figure which flitted about the room, and wondering if he were awake, or the world still in its usual place. After a while Miss Wodehouse came in, very tremulous and pale, and dropped into the first chair she could find, and pretended to occupy herself over her knitting. She had a headache, Lucy said; and Mr Wentworth sat watching while the younger sister tended the elder, bringing her tea, kissing her, persuading her to go and lie down, taking all kinds of affectionate trouble to cheer the pale woman, who looked over Lucy's fair head with eyes full of meaning to the bewildered visitor, who was the only one there who understood what her trouble meant. When he got up to go away, she wrung his hand with a pitiful gaze which went to his heart. "Let me know!" she said in a whisper; and, not satisfied still, went to the door with him, and lingered upon the stair, following slowly. "Oh, Mr Wentworth! be sure you let me know," she repeated, again looking wistfully after him as he disappeared into the dark garden, going out. The stars were still shining, the spring dews lying sweet upon the plants and turf. It was a lovelier night now than when Mr Wentworth had said so to little Rosa Elsworthy an hour ago; but mists were rising from the earth, and clouds creeping over the sky, to the startled imagination of the Perpetual Curate. He had found out by practical experiments, almost for the first time, that there were more things in earth and heaven than are dreamt of in the philosophy of youth.

## CHAPTER VIII

It was the next morning after this when Mrs Hadwin's strange lodger first appeared in the astonished house. He was the strangest lodger to be taken into a house of such perfect respectability, a house in Grange Lane; and it came to be currently reported in Carlingford after a time, when people knew more about it, that even the servants could not tell when or how he arrived, but had woke up one morning to find a pair of boots standing outside the closed door of the green room, which the good old lady kept for company, with sensations which it would be impossible to describe. Such a pair of boots they were too – muddy beyond expression, with old mud which had not been brushed off for days – worn shapeless, and patched at the sides; the strangest contrast to a handsome pair of Mr Wentworth's, which he, contrary to his usual neat habits, had kicked off in his sitting-room, and which Sarah, the housemaid, had brought and set down on the landing, close by these mysterious and unaccountable articles. When the bell of the green room rang an hour or two later, Sarah and the cook, who happened to be standing together, jumped three yards apart and stared at each other; the sound gave them both "a turn." But they soon got perfectly well used to that bell from the green room. It rung very often in the day, for "the gentleman" chose to sit there more than half his time; and if other people were private about him, it was a great deal more than he was about himself. He even sent the boots to be mended, to Sarah's shame and confusion. For the credit of the house, the girl invented a story about them to calm the cobbler's suspicions. "They was the easiest boots the gentleman had, being troubled with tender feet; and he wasn't a-going to give them up because they was shabby," said Sarah. He sent down his shabby clothes to be brushed, and wore Mr Wentworth's linen, to the indignation of the household. But he was not a man to be concealed in a corner. From where he sat in the green room, he whistled so beautifully that Mrs Hadwin's own pet canary paused astonished to listen, and the butcher's boy stole into the kitchen surreptitiously to try if he could learn the art; and while he whistled, he filled the tidy room with parings and cuttings of wood, and carved out all kinds of pretty articles with his knife. But though he rang his bell so often, and was so tiresome with his litter, and gave so much trouble, Sarah's heart, after a while, melted to "the gentleman." He made her a present of a needlecase, and was very civil-spoken – more so a great deal than the Curate of St Roque's; and such a subject of talk and curiosity had certainly not been in Carlingford for a hundred years.

As for Mrs Hadwin, she never gave any explanation at all on the subject, but accepted the fact of a new inmate cheerfully, as if she knew all about it. Of course she could not ask any of her nieces to visit her while the green room was occupied; and as they were all rather large, interfering, managing women, perhaps the old lady was not very sorry. Mr Wentworth himself was still less explanatory. When Mr Wodehouse said to him, "What is this I hear about a brother of yours? – they tell me you've got a brother staying with you. Well, that's what I hear. Why don't you bring him up to dinner? Come to-morrow;" the Perpetual Curate calmly answered, "Thank you; but there's no brother of mine in Carlingford," and took no further notice. Naturally, however, this strange apparition was much discussed in Grange Lane; the servants first, and then the ladies, became curious about him. Sometimes, in the evenings, he might be seen coming out of Mrs Hadwin's garden-door – a shabby figure, walking softly in his patched boots. There never was light enough for any one to see him; but he had a great beard, and smoked a short little pipe, and had evidently no regard for appearances. It was a kind of thing which few people approved of. Mrs Hadwin ought not to permit it, some ladies said; and a still greater number were of the opinion that, rather than endure so strange a fellow-lodger, the Curate ought to withdraw, and find fresh lodgings. This was before the time when the public began to associate the stranger in a disagreeable way with Mr Wentworth. Before they came to that, the people in Grange Lane bethought themselves of all Mrs Hadwin's connections, to find out if there might not be some of them under hiding; and, of course, that excellent woman had a nephew or two

whose conduct was not perfect; and then it came to be reported that it was Mr Wentworth's brother – that it was an unfortunate college chum of his – that it was somebody who had speculated, and whom the Curate had gone shares with: but, in the mean time, no real information could be obtained about this mysterious stranger. The butcher's boy, whose senses were quickened by mingled admiration and envy, heard him whistling all day long, sometimes hidden among the trees in the garden, sometimes from the open window of the green room, where, indeed, Lady Western's page was ready to take his oath he had once seen the audacious unknown leaning out in the twilight, smoking a pipe. But no trap of conversation, however ingenious – and many traps were laid for Mr Wentworth – ever elicited from the Perpetual Curate any acknowledgment of the other lodger's existence. The young Anglican opened his fine eyes a little wider than usual when he was asked sympathetically whether so many people in the house did not interfere with his quiet. "Mrs Hadwin's talk is very gentle," said the Curate; "she never disturbs me." And the mistress of the house was equally obtuse, and would not comprehend any allusion. The little household came to be very much talked of in Carlingford in consequence; and to meet that shabby figure in the evening, when one chanced to be out for a walk, made one's company sought after in the best circles of society: though the fact is, that people began to be remiss in calling upon Mrs Hadwin, and a great many only left their cards as soon as it became evident that she did not mean to give any explanation. To have the Curate to stay with her was possible, without infringing upon her position; but matters became very different when she showed herself willing to take "any one," even when in equivocal apparel and patched boots.

Probably the Curate had his own troubles during this period of his history. He was noticed to be a little quick and short in his temper for some time after Easter. For one thing, his aunts did not go away; they stayed in the Blue Boar, and sent for him to dinner, till the Curate's impatience grew almost beyond bearing. It was a discipline upon which he had not calculated, and which exceeded the bounds of endurance, especially as Miss Leonora questioned him incessantly about his "work," and still dangled before him, like an unattainable sweet-meat before a child, the comforts and advantages of Skelmersdale, where poor old Mr Shirley had rallied for the fiftieth time. The situation altogether was very tempting to Miss Leonora; she could not make up her mind to go away and leave such a very pretty quarrel in progress; and there can be no doubt that it would have been highly gratifying to her vanity as an Evangelical woman to have had her nephew brought to task for missionary work carried on in another man's parish, even though that work was not conducted entirely on her own principles. She lingered, accordingly, with a great hankering after Wharfside, to which Mr Wentworth steadily declined to afford her any access. She went to the afternoon service sometimes, it is true, but only to be afflicted in her soul by the sight of Miss Wodehouse and Lucy in their grey cloaks, not to speak of the rubric to which the Curate was so faithful. It was a trying experience to his Evangelical aunt; but at the same time it was a "great work;" and she could not give up the hope of being able one time or other to appropriate the credit of it, and win him over to her own "views." If that consummation could but be attained, everything would become simple; and Miss Leonora was a true Wentworth, and wanted to see her nephew in Skelmersdale: so it may easily be understood that, under present circumstances, there were great attractions for her in Carlingford.

It was, accordingly, with a beating heart that Miss Dora, feeling a little as she might have been supposed to feel thirty years before, had she ever stolen forth from the well-protected enclosure of Skelmersdale Park to see a lover, put on her bonnet in the early twilight, and, escaping with difficulty the lively observations of her maid, went tremulously down Grange Lane to her nephew's house. She had never yet visited Frank, and this visit was unquestionably clandestine. But then the news with which her heart was beating important enough to justify the step she was taking – at least so she whispered to herself; though whether dear Frank would be pleased, or whether he would still think it "my fault," poor Miss Dora could not make up her mind. Nothing happened in the quiet road, where there were scarcely any passengers, and the poor lady arrived with a trembling sense of escape from unknown perils at Mrs Hadwin's garden-door. For Miss Dora was of opinion, like some few other

ladies, that to walk alone down the quietest of streets was to lay herself open to unheard-of dangers. She put out her trembling hand to ring the bell, thinking her perils over – for of course Frank would walk home with her – when the door suddenly opened, and a terrible apparition, quite unconscious of anybody standing there, marched straight out upon Miss Dora, who gave a little scream, and staggered backwards, thinking the worst horrors she had dreamed of were about to be realised. They were so close together that the terrified lady took in every detail of his appearance. She saw the patched boots and that shabby coat which Sarah the housemaid felt that she rather demeaned herself by brushing. It looked too small for him, as coats will do when they get shabby; and, to complete the alarming appearance of the man, he had no hat, but only a little travelling-cap surmounting the redundancy of hair, mustache, and beard, which were enough of themselves to strike any nervous woman with terror. "Oh, I beg your pardon," cried poor Miss Dora, hysterically; "I wanted to see Mr Wentworth;" and she stood trembling and panting for breath, holding by the wall, not quite sure that this apparition could be appeased by any amount of apologies. It was a great comfort to her when the monster took off its cap, and when she perceived, by the undulations of the beard, something like a smile upon its hidden lips. "I believe Mr Wentworth is at church," said the new lodger: "may I have the pleasure of seeing you safely across to St Roque's?" At which speech Miss Dora trembled more and more, and said, faintly, "No, thank you," – for who could tell what the man's intentions might be? The result was, however, that he only put on his cap again, and went off like any other human creature in the other direction, and that slowly; with tremulous steps Miss Dora pursued her way to her nephew's pretty church. She could not have described, as she herself said, what a relief it was after all this, to take Frank's arm, as she met him at the door of St Roque's. He was coming out, and the young lady with the grey cloak had been one of the congregation; and, to tell the truth, Miss Dora was an unwelcome addition just then to the party. Lucy's coming had been accidental, and it was very sweet to Mr Wentworth to be able to conclude that he was obliged to walk home with her. They were both coming out from their evening devotions into the tranquil spring twilight, very glad of the charmed quiet, and happy somehow to find themselves alone together. That had happened but seldom of late; and a certain expectation of something that might happen hovered over the heads of Lucy and the Curate. It did not matter that he dared not say to her what was in his heart. Mr Wentworth was only a young man after all, and the thrill of a possible revelation was upon him in that half-hour upon which he was entering with so profound a sense of happiness. And then it was an accidental meeting, and if anything did happen, they could not blame themselves as if they had sought this opportunity of being together. The circumstances were such that they might call it providential, if anything came of it. But just as the two had made their first step out of the church, where the organ was still murmuring low in the darkness, and where the music of the last Amen, in which he had recognised Lucy's voice, had not quite died from the Curate's ears, to meet Miss Dora, pale and fluttered, full of news and distress, with no other thought in her mind but to appropriate her dear Frank, and take his arm and gain his ear! It was very hard upon the Perpetual Curate. As for Lucy, she, of course, did not say anything, but merely arranged her veil and greeted Miss Wentworth sweetly. Lucy walked on the other side of the Curate, saying little as Miss Dora's eager shower of questions and remarks ran on. Perhaps she had a little insight into Mr Wentworth's feelings, and no doubt it was rather tantalising. When they came to Mrs Hadwin's door, the young Anglican made a spasmodic effort, which in his heart he felt to be unprincipled, and which, had it been successful, would have totally taken away the accidental and unpremeditated character of this walk with Lucy, which he could not find it in his heart to relinquish. He proposed that his aunt should go in and rest while he saw Miss Wodehouse safely home – he was sure she was tired, he said, eagerly. "No, my dear, not at all," said Miss Dora; "it is such a pleasant evening, and I know Miss Wodehouse's is not very far off. I should like the walk, and, besides, it is too late, you know, to see Mrs Hadwin, and I should not like to go in without calling on her; and besides – "

Mr Wentworth in his aggravation gave a momentary sudden glance at Lucy when she had no expectation of it. That glance of disappointment – of disgust – of love and longing, was no more intentional than their meeting; could he help it, if it revealed that heart which was in such a state of commotion and impatience? Anyhow, the look gave Lucy sufficient occupation to keep her very quiet on the other side while Miss Dora maundered on.

"I met the strangest man coming out when I was going to ring your bell. You will think it very foolish, Frank, but he frightened me," she said. "A man with a terrible beard, and a – a shabby man, my dear. Who could it be? Not a person to be seen coming out of a house where a clergyman lives. He could not be any friend of yours?"

"The other lodger, I suppose," said the Curate, briefly. "When are you going away?"

"Oh, my dear boy, we are not going away; I came to tell you. But, Frank, you don't mean to say that such a man as that lodges in Mrs Hadwin's house? I don't think it is safe for you – I don't think it is respectable. People might think he was a friend of yours. I wonder if Miss Wodehouse has ever seen him – a great man with a beard? To be sure, a man might have a beard and yet be respectable; but I am sure, if Miss Wodehouse saw him, she would agree with me in thinking – Frank, my dear boy, what is the matter? Have I said anything wrong?"

"Nothing that I know of," said the Curate, who had given her arm a little angry pressure to stop the stream of utterance – "only that I am not interested in the other lodger. Tell me about your going away."

"But I must appeal to Miss Wodehouse: it is for your own sake, my dear Frank," said aunt Dora – "a clergyman should be so careful. I don't know what your aunt Leonora would say. Don't you think to see a man like that coming out of Mr Wentworth's house is not as it should be? I assure you he frightened me."

"I don't think I have seen him," said Lucy. "But shouldn't a clergyman's house be like the church, open to good and bad? – for it is to the wicked and the miserable you are sent," said the Sister of Mercy, lowering her voice and glancing up at the Perpetual Curate. They could have clasped each other's hands at that moment, almost without being aware that it was any personal feeling which made their agreement so sweet. As for Miss Dora, she went on leaning on her nephew's arm, totally unconscious of the suppressed rapture and elevation in which the two were moving at the other side.

"That is very true. I am sure your aunt Leonora would approve of that, dear," said Miss Dora, with a little answering pressure on her nephew's arm – "but still I have a feeling that a clergyman should always take care to be respectable. Not that he should neglect the wicked," continued the poor aunt, apologetically, "for a poor sinner turning from the evil of his ways is the – the most interesting – sight in the world, even to the angels, you know; but to *live* with them in the same house, my dear – I am sure that is what I never could advise, nor Leonora either; and Mrs Hadwin ought to know better, and have him away. Don't you know who he is, Frank? I could not be content without finding out, if it was me."

"I have nothing to do with him," said the Curate, hurriedly: "it is a subject I don't want to discuss. Never mind him. What do you mean by saying you are not going away?"

"My dear, Leonora has been thinking it all over," said Miss Dora, "and we are so anxious about you. Leonora is very fond of you, though she does not show it; and you know the Meritons have just come home from India, and have not a house to go to. So you see we thought, as you are not quite so comfortable as we could wish to see you, Frank – and perhaps we might be of some use – and Mr Shirley is better again, and no immediate settlement has to be made about Skelmersdale; – that on the whole, if Leonora and you were to see more of each other – oh, my dear boy, don't be so hasty; it was all her own doing – it was not my fault."

"Fault! I am sorry to be the occasion of so many arrangements," said Mr Wentworth, with his stiff manner; "but, of course, if you like to stay in Carlingford I shall be very happy – though there is not much preaching here that will suit my aunt Leonora: as for Mr Shirley, I hope he'll live for ever. I

was at No. 10 today," continued the Curate, turning his head to the other side, and changing his tone in a manner marvellous to Miss Dora. "I don't think she can live much longer. You have done a great deal to smooth her way in this last stage. Poor soul! she thinks she has been a great sinner," said the young man, with a kind of wondering pity. He had a great deal to vex him in his own person, and he knew of some skeletons very near at hand, but somehow at that moment it was hard to think of the extremities of mortal trouble, of death and anguish – those dark deeps of life by which Lucy and he sometimes stood together in their youth and happiness. A marvellous remorseful pity came to his heart. He could not believe in misery, with Lucy walking softly in the spring twilight by his side.

"But, Frank, you are not taking any notice of what I say," said Miss Dora, with something like a suppressed sob. "I don't doubt your sick people are very important, but I thought you would take *some* interest. I came down to tell you, all the way by myself."

"My sister would like to call on you, Miss Wentworth," said Lucy, interposing. "Gentlemen never understand what one says. Perhaps we could be of some use to you if you are going to settle in Carlingford. I think she has been a great deal better since she confessed," continued the charitable Sister, looking up to the Curate, and, like him, dropping her voice. "The absolution was such a comfort. Now she seems to feel as if she could die. And she has so little to live for!" said Lucy, with a sigh of sympathetic feeling, remorseful too. Somehow it seemed cruel to feel so young, so hopeful, so capable of happiness, with such desolation close at hand.

"Not even duty," said the Curate; "and to think that the Church should hesitate to remove the last barriers out of the way! I would not be a priest if I were debarred from the power of delivering such a poor soul."

"Oh, Frank," said Miss Dora, with a long breath of fright and horror, "*what* are you saying? Oh, my dear, don't say it over again, I don't want to hear it! I hope when we are dying we shall all feel what great great sinners we are," said the poor lady, who, between vexation and mortification, was ready to cry, "and not think that one is better than another. Oh, my dear, there is that man again! Do you think it is safe to meet him in such a lonely road? If he comes across and speaks to me any more I shall faint," cried poor Miss Dora, whose opinions were not quite in accordance with her feelings. Mr Wentworth did not say anything to soothe her, but with his unoccupied hand he made an involuntary movement towards Lucy's cloak, and plucked at it to bring her nearer, as the bearded stranger loomed dimly past, looking at the group. Lucy felt the touch, and wondered and looked up at him in the darkness. She could not comprehend the Curate's face.

"Are *you* afraid of him?" she said, with a slight smile; "if it is only his beard I am not alarmed; and here is papa coming to meet me. I thought you would have come for me sooner, papa. Has anything happened?" said Lucy, taking Mr Wodehouse's arm, who had suddenly appeared from underneath the lamp, still unlighted, at Dr Marjoribanks's door. She clung to her father with unusual eagerness, willing enough to escape from the darkness and the Curate's side, and all the tremulous sensations of the hour.

"What could happen?" said Mr Wodehouse, who still looked "limp" from his recent illness, "though I hear there are doubtful people about; so they tell me – but you ought to know best, Wentworth. Who is that fellow in the beard that went by on the other side? Not little Lake the drawing-master? Fancied I had seen the build of the man before – eh? – a stranger? Well, it's a mistake, perhaps. Can't be sure of anything nowadays; – memory failing. Well, that's what the doctor says. Come in and rest and see Molly; as for me, I'm not good for much, but you won't get better company than the girls, or else that's what folks tell me. Who did you say that fellow was?" said the churchwarden, leaning across his daughter to see Mr Wentworth's face.

"I don't know anything about him," said the Curate of St Roque's.

And curiously enough silence fell upon the little party, nobody could tell how; – for two minutes, which looked like twenty, no one spoke. Then Lucy roused herself, apparently with a little effort. "We seem to talk of nothing but the man with the beard to-night," she said. "Mary knows everything

that goes on in Carlingford – she will tell us about him; and if Miss Wentworth thinks it too late to come in, we will say good-night," she continued, with a little decision of tone, which was not incomprehensible to the Perpetual Curate. Perhaps she was a little provoked and troubled in her own person. To say so much in looks and so little in words, was a mode of procedure which puzzled Lucy. It fretted her, because it looked unworthy of her hero. She withdrew within the green door, holding her father's arm fast, and talking to him, while Mr Wentworth strained his ears after the voice, which he thought he could have singled out from a thousand voices. Perhaps Lucy talked to drown her thoughts; and the Curate went away dumb and abstracted, with his aunt leaning on his arm on the other side of the wall. He could not be interested, as Miss Dora expected him to be, in the Miss Wentworths' plans. He conducted her to the Blue Boar languidly, with an evident indifference to the fact that his aunt Leonora was about to become a permanent resident in Carlingford. He said "Good-night" kindly to little Rosa Elsworthy, looking out with bright eyes into the darkness at the door of her uncle's shop; but he said little to Miss Dora, who could not tell what to make of him, and swallowed her tears as quietly as possible under her veil. When he had deposited his aunt safely at the inn, the Perpetual Curate hastened down Grange Lane at a great pace. The first sound he heard on entering Mrs Hadwin's garden was the clear notes of the stranger's whistle among the trees; and with an impatient exclamation Mr Wentworth sought his fellow-lodger, who was smoking as usual, pacing up and down a shaded walk, where, even in daylight, he was pretty well concealed from observation. The Curate looked as if he had a little discontent and repugnance to get over before he could address the anonymous individual who whistled so cheerily under the trees. When he did speak it was an embarrassed and not very intelligible call.

"I say – are you there? I want to speak to you," said Mr Wentworth.

"Yes," said the stranger, turning sharply round. "I am here, a dog without a name. What have you got to say?"

"Only that you must be more careful," said Mr Wentworth again, with a little stiffness. "You will be recognised if you don't mind. I have just been asked who you were by – somebody who thought he had seen you before."

"By whom?"

"Well, by Mr Wodehouse," said the Curate. "I may as well tell you; if you mean to keep up this concealment you must take care."

"By Jove!" said the stranger, and then he whistled a few bars of the air which Mr Wentworth's arrival had interrupted. "What is a fellow to do?" he said, after an interjection. "I sometimes think I had better risk it all – eh! don't you think so? I can't shut myself up for ever here."

"That must be as you think best," said the Perpetual Curate, in whom there appeared no movement of sympathy; and he said no more, though the doubtful individual by his side lifted an undecided look to his face, and once more murmured in perplexed tones a troubled exclamation: "A man must have a little amusement somehow," the stranger said, with an aggrieved voice; and then abruptly left his unsociable companion, and went off to his room, where he summoned Sarah to bring lights, and tried to talk to her a little in utter dearth of society. Mr Wentworth stayed behind, pacing up and down the darkening walk. The Curate's thoughts were far from satisfactory. There was not much comfort anywhere, let him look where he pleased. When a man has no spot in all his horizon on which his eye can rest with comfort, there is something more discouraging in the prospect than a positive calamity. He could not take refuge even in the imaginations of his love, for it was clear enough that already a sentiment of surprise had risen in Lucy's mind, and her tranquillity was shaken. And perhaps he had done rashly to plunge into other people's troubles – he upon whom a curious committee of aunts were now to sit *en permanence*. He went in to write his sermon, far from being so assured of things in general as that discourse was when it was written, though it was a little relief to his mind to fall back upon an authority somewhere, and to refer, in terms which were perhaps too absolute to be altogether free of doubt, to the Church, which had arranged everything for her

children in one department of their concerns at least. If it were only as easy to know what ought to be done in one's personal affairs as to decide what was the due state of mind expected by the Church on the second Sunday after Easter! But being under that guidance, at least he could not go wrong in his sermon, which was one point of ease amid the many tribulations of the Curate of St Roque's.

## CHAPTER IX

"If they are going to stay in Carlingford, perhaps we could be of use to them? Yes, Lucy; and I am sure anything we could do for Mr Wentworth – " said Miss Wodehouse. "I wonder what house they will get. I am going to Elsworthy's about some paper, and we can ask him if he knows where they are going. That poor little Rosa should have some one to take care of her. I often wonder whether it would be kind to speak to Mrs Elsworthy about it, Lucy; she is a sensible woman. The little thing stands at the door in the evening, and talks to people who are passing, and I am afraid there are some people who are unprincipled, and tell her she is pretty, and say things to her," said Miss Wodehouse, shaking her head; "it is a great pity. Even Mr Wentworth is a great deal more civil to that little thing than he would be if she had not such a pretty face."

"I said you knew everything that went on in Carlingford," said Lucy, as they went out together from the green door, not in their grey cloaks this time; "but I forgot to ask you about one thing that puzzled us last night – who is the man in the beard who lives at Mrs Hadwin's? Mr Wentworth will not tell anybody about him, and I think he knows."

"Who is the man in the beard?" said Miss Wodehouse, with a gasp. She grew very pale, and turned away her head and shivered visibly. "How very cold it is!" she said, with her teeth chattering; "did you think it was so cold? I – I don't know any men with beards; and it is so strange of you to say I know everything that goes on in Carlingford. Don't stop to speak to that little girl just now. Did you say she came from Prickett's Lane? No. 10? It is very right to go to see the sick, but, indeed, I don't approve of your attendance upon that poor woman, Lucy. When I was a girl I dared not have gone away by myself as you do, and she might not be a proper person. There is a carriage that I don't know standing before Elsworthy's shop."

"But you have not told me yet about the man with the beard," said Lucy, whose curiosity was excited. She looked at her sister keenly with an investigating look, and poor Miss Wodehouse was fain to draw her shawl close round her, and complain again of the cold.

"I told you I did not know," she said, with a complaining tone in her voice. "It is strange you should think I knew; it looks as if you thought me a gossip, Lucy. I wonder who those people can be coming out of the carriage? My dear," said the elder sister, feeling within herself that an attack upon the enemy's country was the best means of meeting any sally – "I don't think you should go down to Prickett's Lane just now. I saw Mr Wentworth pass a little while ago, and people might say you went to meet each other. I can't keep people from talking, Lucy, and you are both so young; and you know I spoke to you before about your meeting so often. It will be a great deal better for you to come with me to call on his aunts."

"Only that my poor patient wants me," said Lucy. "Must I not do my duty to a poor woman who is dying, because Mr Wentworth is in Prickett's Lane? There is no reason why I should be afraid of meeting Mr Wentworth," said the young district-visitor, severely; and the elder sister saw that Lucy spoke in a different tone from that in which she had answered her before. She did not extinguish Miss Wodehouse by a reference to the great work. She treated the matter more as a personal one to-day; and a shadow – a very ghost of irritation – was in Lucy's voice. The two crossed the street silently after that to Elsworthy's, where a group of ladies were visible, who had come out of the strange carriage. One of them was seated in a chair by the counter, another was reading a list which Mr Elsworthy had just presented to her, and the third, who was not so tall as her sister, was pressing up to it on tiptoe, trying to read it too. "That is Miss Dora Wentworth," said Lucy, "and the other, I suppose, is Miss Leonora, who is so very Low-Church. I think I can see the Miss Hemmings coming down George Street. If I were to go in I should be in a dreadful minority; but you are Low-Church in your heart too."

"No, dear; only reasonable," said Miss Wodehouse, apologetically. "I don't go as far as you and Mr Wentworth do, but I like the service to be nicely done, and the – the authority of the Church

respected too. As I have never met Miss Wentworth, you had better come in and introduce me. There is Rosa looking out of the front window, Lucy. I really must speak to Mrs Elsworthy about that child. What a lovely old lady that is sitting by the counter! Say I am your sister, and then if you are resolved upon Prickett's Lane, you can go away."

"They are the two who wear the grey cloaks," said Miss Leonora Wentworth to herself, as the introduction was effected. "I am glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Wodehouse. We are going to stay in Carlingford for a time, and to know a few pious families will be a great advantage. We don't go much into society, in the usual sense of the word – but, I am sure, to make the acquaintance of ladies who help my nephew so much in his work, is sure to be an advantage. I should like so much to hear from you how he gets on, for he does not say a great deal about it himself."

"He is so good and so nice," said kind Miss Wodehouse, "he never makes a fuss about anything he does. I am sure, to see such young creatures so pious and so devoted, always goes to my heart. When we were young it used to be so different – we took our own pleasure, and never thought of our fellow-creatures. And the young people are so good nowadays," said the gentle woman, falling instinctively into her favourite sentiment. Miss Leonora looked at her with critical eyes.

"We are none of us good," said that iron-grey woman, whose neutral tints were so different from the soft dove-colour of her new acquaintance; "it does not become such sinful creatures to talk of anybody being good. Good works may only be beautiful sins, if they are not done in a true spirit," said Miss Leonora, turning to her list of furnished houses with a little contempt. But the Miss Hemmings had come in while she was speaking, and it was seldom that such edifying talk was heard in Carlingford.

"That is such a beautiful sentiment – oh, if we only bore it always in mind!" murmured the eldest Miss Hemmings. "Mr Elsworthy, I hope you have got the tracts I ordered. They are so much wanted here. Poor dear Mr Bury would not believe his eyes if he could see Carlingford now, given up to Puseyism and Ritualism – but good men are taken away from the evil to come. I will pay for them now, please."

"If you wish it, ma'am," said Mr Elsworthy. "The town *is* changed; I don't say nothing different; but being in the ritual line as you say, you won't find no church as it's better done than in St Roque's. Mr Wentworth never spares no pains, ma'am, on anything as he takes up. I've heard a deal of clergymen in my day, but *his* reading is beautiful; I can't say as I ever heard reading as could equal it; – and them choristers, though they're hawful to manage, is trained as I never see boys trained in *my* life afore. There's one of them houses, ma'am," continued the optimist, turning to Miss Wentworth, "as is a beauty. Miss Wodehouse can tell you what it is; no lady in the land could desire a handsomer drawing-room; and as for the kitchings, – I don't pretend to be a judge up-stairs, but being brought up a blacksmith, I know what's what in a kitching-range. If you had all Grange Lane to dinner, there's a range as is equal to it," said Mr Elsworthy with enthusiasm – "and my wife will show you the 'ouse."

"I knew Mr Bury," said Miss Leonora; "he was a precious man. Perhaps you have heard him mention the Miss Wentworths? I am very sorry to hear that there is no real work going on in the town. It is very sad that there should be nobody able to enter into the labours of such a saint."

"Indeed," said Miss Wodehouse, who was excited, in spite of herself, by this conversation, "I think the Carlingford people go quite as much to church as in Mr Bury's days. I don't think there is less religion than there used to be: there are not so many prayer meetings, perhaps; but –"

"There is nothing the carnal mind dislikes so much as prayer meetings," said Miss Hemmings. "There is a house in Grove Street, if Miss Wentworth is looking for a house. I don't know much about the kitchen-range, but I know it belongs to a very pious family, and they wish so much to let it. My sister and I would be so glad to take you there. It is not in the gay world, like Grange Lane."

"But you might want to ask people to dinner; and then we should be so near Frank," said Miss Dora, whispering at her sister's elbow. As for the second Miss Hemmings, she was dull of comprehension, and did not quite make out who the strangers were.

"It is so sad to a feeling mind to see the mummeries that go on at St Roque's," said this obtuse sister; "and I am afraid poor Mr Wentworth must be in a bad way. They say there is the strangest man in his house – some relation of his – and he daren't be seen in the daylight; and people begin to think there must be something wrong, and that Mr Wentworth himself is involved; but what can you expect when there is no true Christian principle?" asked Miss Hemmings, triumphantly. It was a dreadful moment for the bystanders; for Miss Leonora turned round upon this new intelligence with keen eyes and attention; and Miss Dora interposed, weeping; and Miss Wodehouse grew so pale, that Mr Elsworthy rushed for cold water, and thought she was going to faint. "Tell me all about this," said Miss Leonora, with peremptory and commanding tones. "Oh, Leonora, I am sure my dear Frank has nothing to do with it, if there is anything wrong," cried Miss Dora. Even Miss Wentworth herself was moved out of her habitual smile. She said, "He is my nephew" – an observation which she had never been heard to make before, and which covered the second Miss Hemmings with confusion. As for Miss Wodehouse, she retreated very fast to a seat behind Miss Cecilia, and said nothing. The two who had arrived last slunk back upon each other with fiery glances of mutual reproach. The former three stood together in this emergency, full of curiosity, and perhaps a little anxiety. In this position of affairs, Mr Elsworthy, being the only impartial person present, took the management of matters into his own hands.

"Miss Hemmings and ladies, if you'll allow *me*," said Mr Elsworthy, "it aint no more than a mistake. The new gentleman as is staying at Mrs Hadwin's may be an unfortunate gentleman for anything I can tell; but he aint no relation of our clergyman. There aint nobody belonging to Mr Wentworth," said the clerk of St Roque's, "but is a credit both to him and to Carlingford. There's his brother, the Rev. Mr Wentworth, as is the finest-spoken man, to be a clergyman, as I ever set eyes on; and there's respected ladies as needn't be named more particular. But the gentleman as is the subject of conversation is no more like Mr Wentworth than – asking pardon for the liberty – I am. I may say as I have opportunities for knowing more than most," said Mr Elsworthy, modestly, "me and Rosa; for if there's a thing Mr Wentworth is particular about, it's having his papers the first moment; and ladies as knows me knows I am one that never says more nor the truth. Not saying a word against the gentleman – as is a most respectable gentleman, for anything I know against him – he aint no connection of Mr Wentworth. He's Mrs Hadwin's lodger; and I wouldn't say as he isn't a relation there; but our clergyman has got no more to do with him than the babe unborn."

Mr Elsworthy wiped his forehead after he had made this speech, and looked round for the approbation which he was aware he had deserved; and Miss Leonora Wentworth threw a glance of disdainful observation upon the unhappy lady who had caused this disturbance. "If your wife will come with us, we will go and look at the house," she said, graciously. "I daresay if it is in Grange Lane it will suit us very well. My nephew is a very young man, Miss Wodehouse," said Miss Leonora, who had not passed over the agitation of that gentle woman without some secret comments; "he does not take advice in his work, though it might be of great assistance to him; but I hope he'll grow older and wiser, as indeed he cannot help doing if he lives. I hope you and your pretty sister will come to see us when we're settled; – I don't see any sense, you know, in your grey cloaks – I'm old, and you won't mind me saying so; but I know what Frank Wentworth is," said the indignant aunt, making a severe curtsy, accompanied by lightning glances at the shrinking background of female figures, as she went out of the shop.

"Oh, Leonora! I always said you were fond of him, though you never would show it," cried poor Miss Dora. "She is a great deal more affectionate than she will let anybody believe; and my dear Frank means nothing but good," cried the too zealous champion. Miss Leonora turned back upon the threshold of the shop.

"You will please to let me know what Dissenting chapels there are in the town, and what are the hours of the services," she said. "There must surely be a Bethesda, or Zion, or something – Salem? yes, to be sure; – perhaps there's somebody there that preaches the gospel. Send me word," said the

peremptory woman; and poor Miss Dora relapsed into her usual melancholy condition, and stole into the carriage in a broken-hearted manner, weeping under her veil.

After which Miss Wodehouse went home, not having much heart for further visits. That is to say, she went all the way down Grange Lane, somewhat tremulous and uncertain in her steps, and went as far as Mrs Hadwin's, and hesitated at the door as if she meant to call there; but, thinking better of it, went on a little farther with very lingering steps, as if she did not know what she wanted. When she came back again, the door of Mrs Hadwin's garden was open, and the butcher's boy stood blocking up the way, listening with all his ears to the notes of the whistle, soft and high and clear like the notes of a bird which come audibly from among the trees. Miss Wodehouse gave a little start when she heard it: again she hesitated, and looked in with such a wistful face that Sarah, the housemaid, who had been about to slam the door hastily upon the too tender butcher, involuntarily held it wide open for the expected visitor. "No, not to-day thank you," said Miss Wodehouse. "I hope your mistress is quite well; give her my love, and say I meant to come in, but I have a bad headache. No, thank you; not to-day." She went away after that with a wonderful expression of face, and reached home long before Lucy had come back from Prickett's Lane. Miss Wodehouse was not good for much in the house. She went to the little boudoir up-stairs, and lay down on the sofa, and had some tea brought her by an anxious maid. She was very nervous, trembling she could not say why, and took up a novel which was lying on the sofa, and read the most affecting scene, and cried over it; and then her sweet old face cleared, and she felt better. When Lucy came in she kissed her sister, and drew down the blinds, and brought her the third volume, and then went away herself to arrange the dessert, and see that everything was in order for one of Mr Wodehouse's little parties. These were their respective parts in the house; and surely a more peaceful, and orderly, and affectionate house, was not to be found that spring evening, either in England or Grange Lane.

## CHAPTER X

It may be easily supposed after this that Mr Wentworth and his proceedings were sufficiently overlooked and commented upon in Carlingford. The Miss Wentworths took old Major Brown's house for six months, which, as everybody knows, is next door to Dr Marjoribanks. It was just after Letty Brown's marriage, and the poor old Major was very glad to go away and pay a round of visits, and try to forget that his last daughter had gone the way of all the rest. There was a summer-house built in the corner of the garden, with a window in the outer wall looking on to Grange Lane, from which everything that happened could be inspected; and there was always somebody at that window when the Perpetual Curate passed by. Then he began to have a strange painful feeling that Lucy watched too, and was observing all his looks and ways, and what he did and said in these changed times. It was a strange difference from the sweet half-conscious bond between them which existed of old, when they walked home together from Wharfside, talking of the district and the people, in the tender union of unspoken love and fellowship. Not that they were altogether parted now; but Lucy contrived to leave the schoolroom most days before the young priest could manage to disrobe himself, and was seldom to be seen on the road lingering on her errands of kindness as she used to do. But still she knew all he was about, and watched, standing in doubt and wonder of him, which was at least a great deal better than indifference. On the whole, however, it was a cloudy world through which the Perpetual Curate passed as he went from his lodgings, where the whistle of the new lodger had become a great nuisance to him, past the long range of garden-walls, the sentinel window where Miss Dora looked out watching for him, and Mr Wodehouse's green door which he no longer entered every day. Over the young man's mind, as he went out to his labours, there used to come that sensation of having nobody to fall back upon, which is of all feelings the most desolate. Amid all those people who were watching him, there was no one upon whom he could rest, secure of understanding and sympathy. They were all critical – examining, with more or less comprehension, what he did; and he could not think of anybody in the world just then who would be content with knowing that *he* did it, and take that as warranty for the act, unless, perhaps, his poor aunt Dora, whose opinion was not important to the young man. It was not a pleasant state of mind into which these feelings threw him; and the natural result was, that he grew more and more careful about the rubric, and confined his sermons, with increasing precision, to the beautiful arrangements of the Church. They were very clever little sermons, even within these limitations, and an indifferent spectator would probably have been surprised to find how much he could make out of them; but still it is undeniable that a man has less scope, not only for oratory, but for all that is worthy of regard in human speech, when, instead of the ever-lasting reciprocations between heaven and earth, he occupies himself only with a set of ecclesiastical arrangements, however perfect. The people who went to St Roque's found this out, and so did Mr Wentworth; but it did not alter the system pursued by the troubled Curate. Perhaps he gave himself some half-conscious credit for it, as being against his own interests; for there was no mistaking the countenance of Miss Leonora, when now and then, on rare occasions, she came to hear her nephew preach.

All this, however, was confined to St Roque's, where there was a somewhat select audience, people who agreed in Mr Wentworth's views; but things were entirely different at Wharfside, where the Perpetual Curate was not thinking about himself, but simply about his work, and how to do it best. The bargemen and their wives did not know much about the Christian year; but they understood the greater matters which lay beneath: and the women said to each other, sometimes with tears in their eyes, that there was nothing that the clergyman didn't make plain; and that if the men didn't do what was right, it was none o' Mr Wentworth's fault. The young priest indemnified himself in "the district" for much that vexed him elsewhere. There was no question of Skelmersdale, or of any moot point there, but only a quantity of primitive people under the original conditions of humanity, whose lives

might be amended, and consoled, and elevated. That was a matter about which Mr Wentworth had no doubt. He put on his surplice with the conviction that in that white ephod the truest embodiment of Christian purity was brought within sight of the darkened world. He was not himself, but a Christian priest, with power to deliver and to bless, when he went to Wharfside.

Easter had been early that year, and Ascension Day was in the beginning of May, one of those sweet days of early summer which still occur now and then to prove that the poets were right in all they say of the tenderest month of the year. Mr Wentworth had done duty at St Roque's, and afterwards at Wharfside. The sweet day and the sweet season had moved his heart. He was young, and it was hard to live shut up within himself without any sympathy either from man or woman. He had watched the grey cloak gliding out as his rude congregation dispersed, and went away quicker than was his wont, with a stronger longing than usual to overtake Lucy, and recover his place beside her. But she was not to be seen when he got into Prickett's Lane. He looked up the weary length of the street, and saw nothing but the children playing on the pavement, and some slovenly mothers at the doors. It was a very disenchanting prospect. He went on again in a kind of gloomy discontent, displeased with everything. What was the good of it all? he said to himself – weariness, and toil, and trouble, and nothing ever to come of it. As for the little good he was doing in Wharfside, God did not need his poor exertions; and, to tell the truth, going on at St Roque's, however perfect the rubric and pretty the church, was, without any personal stimulant of happiness, no great prospect for the Perpetual Curate. Such was the tenor of his thoughts, when he saw a black figure suddenly emerge out of one of the houses, and stand at the door, throwing a long shadow over the pavement. It was the Rector who was standing there in Mr Wentworth's favourite district, talking to a shopkeeper who had always been on the opposition side. The young Anglican raised his drooping head instantly, and recovered his interest in the general world.

"Glad to see you, Mr Wentworth," said the Rector. "I have been speaking to this worthy man about the necessities of the district. The statistics are far from being satisfactory. Five thousand souls, and no provision for their spiritual wants; it is a very sad state of affairs. I mean to take steps immediately to remedy all that."

"A bit of a Methody chapel, that's all," said the opposition shopkeeper; "and the schoolroom, as Mr Wentworth –"

"Yes, I have heard of that," said the Rector, blandly; – somebody had advised Mr Morgan to change his tactics, and this was the first evidence of the new policy – "I hear you have been doing what little you could to mend matters. It is very laudable zeal in so young a man. But, of course, as you were without authority, and had so little in your power, it could only be a very temporary expedient. I am very much obliged to you for your good intentions."

"I beg your pardon," said the Perpetual Curate, rousing up as at the sound of the trumpet, "I don't care in the least about my good intentions; but you have been much deceived if you have not understood that there is a great work going on in Wharfside. I hope, Saunders, you have had no hand in deceiving Mr Morgan. I shall be glad to show you my statistics, which are more satisfactory than the town list," said Mr Wentworth. "The schoolroom is consecrated; and but that I thought we had better work slowly and steadily, there is many a district in worse condition which has its church and its incumbent. I shall be very happy to give you all possible information; it is best to go to the fountainhead."

"The fountainhead!" said the Rector, who began not unnaturally to lose his temper. "Are you aware, sir, that Wharfside is in my parish?"

"And so is St Roque's, I suppose," said the Curate, affably. "I have no district, but I have my cure of souls all the same. As for Wharfside, the Rector of Carlingford never had had anything to do with it. Mr Bury and Mr Proctor made it over to me. I act upon their authority; but I should like to prove to you it is something more than a temporary expedient," said the young Anglican, with a

smile. Mr Morgan was gradually getting very hot and flushed. His temper got the better of him; he could not tolerate to be thus bearded on his own ground.

"It appears to me the most extraordinary assumption," said the Rector. "I can't fancy that you are ignorant of the law. I repeat, Wharfside is in my parish; and on what ground you can possibly justify such an incredible intrusion – "

"Perhaps we might find a fitter place to discuss the matter," said the Curate, with great suavity. "If you care to go to the schoolroom, we could be quiet there."

"No, sir. I don't care to go to the schoolroom. I decline to have anything to do with such an unwarrantable attempt to interfere with my rights," said Mr Morgan. "I don't want to know what plausible arguments you may have to justify yourself. The fact remains, sir, that Wharfside is in my parish. If you have anything to say against that, I will listen to you," said the irascible Rector. His Welsh blood was up; he even raised his voice a little, with a kind of half-feminine excitement, common to the Celtic race; and the consequence was that Mr Wentworth, who stood perfectly calm to receive the storm, had all the advantage in the world over Mr Morgan. The Perpetual Curate bowed with immovable composure, and felt himself master of the field.

"In that case, it will perhaps be better not to say anything," he said; "but I think you will find difficulties in the way. Wharfside has some curious privileges, and pays no rates; but I have never taken up that ground. The two previous rectors made it over to me, and the work is too important to be ignored. I have had thoughts of applying to have it made into an ecclesiastical district," said the Curate, with candour, "not thinking that the Rector of Carlingford, with so much to occupy him, would care to interfere with my labours; but at all events, to begin another mission here would be folly – it would be copying the tactics of the Dissenters, if you will forgive me for saying so," said Mr Wentworth, looking calmly in the Rector's face.

It was all Mr Morgan could do to restrain himself. "I am not in the habit of being schooled by my – juniors," said the Rector, with suppressed fury. He meant to say inferiors, but the aspect of the Perpetual Curate checked him. Then the two stood gazing at each other for a minute in silence. "Anything further you may have to say, you will perhaps communicate to my solicitor," said the elder priest. "It is well known that some gentlemen of your views, Mr Wentworth, think it safe to do evil that good may come; – that is not my opinion; and I don't mean to permit any invasion of my rights. I have the pleasure of wishing you good morning."

Mr Morgan took off his hat, and gave it a little angry flourish in the air before he put it on again. He had challenged his young brother to the only duel permitted by their cloth, and he turned to the opposition tradesman with vehemence, and went in again to the dusty little shop, where a humble assortment of groceries were displayed for the consumption of Prickett's Lane. Mr Wentworth remained standing outside in much amazement, not to say amusement, and a general sense of awakening and recovery. Next to happiness, perhaps enmity is the most healthful stimulant of the human mind. The Perpetual Curate woke up and realised his position with a sense of exhilaration, if the truth must be told. He muttered something to himself, uncomplimentary to Mr Morgan's good sense, as he turned away; but it was astonishing to find how much more lively and interesting Prickett's Lane had become since that encounter. He went along cheerily, saying a word now and then to the people at the doors, every one of whom knew and recognised him, and acknowledged, in a lesser or greater degree, the sway of his bishopric. The groups he addressed made remarks after he had passed, which showed their sense of the improvement in his looks. "He's more like himsel' than he's bin sin' Easter," said one woman, "and none o' that crossed look, as if things had gone contrary; – Lord bless you, not cross – he's a deal too good a man for that – but crossed-looking; it might be crossed in love for what I can tell." "Them as is handsome like that seldom gets crossed in love," said another experienced observer; "but if it was fortin, or whatever it was, there's ne'er a one in Wharfside but wishes luck to the parson. It aint much matter for us women. Them as won't strive to keep their children decent out o' their own heads, they won't do much for a clergyman; but, bless you,

he can do a deal with the men, and it's them as wants looking after." "I'd like to go to his wedding," said another. "I'd give a deal to hear it was all settled;" and amid these affectionate comments, Mr Wentworth issued out of Prickett's Lane. He went direct to Mr Wodehouse's green door, without making any excuses to himself. For the first time for some weeks he went in upon the sisters and told them all that had happened as of old. Lucy was still in her grey cloak as she had returned from the district, and it was with a feeling more distinct than sympathy that she heard of this threatened attack. "It is terrible to think that he could interfere with such a work out of jealousy of *us*," said the Sister of Charity, with a wonderful light in her blue eyes; and she drew her low chair nearer, and listened with eloquent looks, which were balm to the soul of the Perpetual Curate. "But we are not to give up?" she said, giving him her hand, when he rose to go away. "Never!" said Mr Wentworth; and if he held it more closely and longer than there was any particular occasion for, Lucy did not make any objection at that special moment. Then it turned out that he had business at the other end of the town, at the north end, where some trustee lived who had to do with the Orphan Schools, and whom the curate was obliged to see; and Miss Wodehouse gave him a timid invitation to come back to dinner. "But you are not to go home to dress; we shall be quite alone – and you must be so tired," said the elder sister, who for some reason or other was shy of Mr Wentworth, and kept away from him whenever he called. So he went in on his way back, and dined in happiness and his morning coat, with a sweet conscious return to the familiar intercourse which these few disturbed weeks had interrupted. He was a different man when he went back again down Grange Lane. Once more the darkness was fragrant and musical about him. When he was tired thinking of his affairs, he fell back upon the memories of the evening, and Lucy's looks and the "us" and "we," which were so sweet to his ears. To have somebody behind whom one can fall back upon to fill up the interstices of thought —*that* makes all the difference, as Mr Wentworth found out, between a bright and a heavy life.

When he opened the garden-door with his key, and went softly in in the darkness, the Perpetual Curate was much surprised to hear voices among the trees. He waited a little, wondering, to see who it was; and profound was his amazement when a minute after little Rosa Elsworthy, hastily tying her hat over her curls, came rapidly along the walk from under the big walnut-tree, and essayed, with rather a tremulous hand, to open the door. Mr Wentworth stepped forward suddenly and laid his hand on her arm. He was very angry and indignant, and no longer the benign superior being to whom Rosa was accustomed. "Whom have you been talking to?" said the Curate. "Why are you here alone so late? What does this mean?" He held the door close, and looked down upon her severely while he spoke. She made a frightened attempt to defend herself.

"Oh, please, I only came with the papers. I was talking to – Sarah," said the little girl, with a sob of shame and terror. "I will never do it again. Oh, please, *please*, let me go! Please, Mr Wentworth, let me go!"

"How long have you been talking to – Sarah?" said the Curate. "Did you ever do it before? No, Rosa; I am going to take you home. This must not happen any more."

"I will run all the way. Oh, don't tell my aunt, Mr Wentworth. I didn't mean any harm," said the frightened creature. "You are not really coming? Oh, Mr Wentworth, if you tell my aunt I shall die!" cried poor little Rosa. But she was hushed into awe and silence when the curate stalked forth, a grand, half-distinguished figure by her side, keeping pace with her hasty, tremulous steps. She even stopped crying, in the whirlwind of her feelings. What did he mean? Was he going to say anything to her? Was it possible that he could like her, and be jealous of her talk with – Sarah? Poor little foolish Rosa did not know what to think. She had read a great many novels, and knew that it was quite usual for gentlemen to fall in love with pretty little girls who were not of their own station; – why not with her? So she went on, half running, keeping up with Mr Wentworth, and sometimes stealing sly glances at him to see what intention was in his looks. But his looks were beyond Rosa's reading. He walked by her side without speaking, and gave a glance up at the window of the summer-house as they passed. And strange enough, that evening of all others, Miss Dora, who had been the victim of

some of Miss Leonora's caustic criticisms, had strayed forth, in melancholy mood, to repose herself at her favourite window, and look out at the faint stars, and comfort herself with a feeble repetition of her favourite plea, that it was not "my fault." The poor lady was startled out of her own troubles by the sight of her nephew's tall unmistakable figure; and, as bad luck would have it, Rosa's hat, tied insecurely by her agitated fingers, blew off at that moment, so that Mr Wentworth's aunt became aware, to her inexpressible horror and astonishment, who his companion was. The unhappy Curate divined all the thoughts that would arise in her perturbed bosom, when he saw the indistinct figure at the window, and said something to himself about *espionage*, which was barely civil to Miss Dora, as he hurried along on his charitable errand. He was out of one trouble into another, this unlucky young man. He knocked sharply at Elsworthy's closed door, and gave up his charge without speaking to Rosa. "I brought her home because I thought it wrong to let her go up Grange Lane by herself," said the Curate. "Don't thank me; but if you have any regard for the child, don't send her out at night again." He did not even bid Rosa good-night, or look back at her, as she stood blushing and sparkling in confused childish beauty, in the doorway; but turned his back like any savage, and hastened home again. Before he entered his own apartments, he knocked at the door of the green room, and said something to the inmate there which produced from that personage a growl of restrained defiance. And after all these fatigues, it was with a sense of relief that the Curate threw himself upon his sofa, to think over the events of the afternoon, and to take a little rest. He was very tired, and the consolation he had experienced during the evening made him more disposed to yield to his fatigue. He threw himself upon the sofa, and stretched out his hand lazily for his letters, which evidently did not excite any special expectations in his mind. There was one from his sister, and one from an old university friend, full of the news of the season. Last of all, there was a neat little note, directed in a neat little hand, which anybody who received it would naturally have left to the last, as Mr Wentworth did. He opened it quite deliberately, without any appearance of interest. But as he read the first lines, the Curate gradually gathered himself up off the sofa, and stretched out his hand for his boots, which he had just taken off; and before he had finished it, had walked across the room and laid hold of the railway book in use at Carlingford, all the time reading and re-reading the important little epistle. It was not so neat inside as out, and blurred and blotted, and slightly illegible; and this is what the letter said: —

"Oh, Frank, dear, I am so anxious and unhappy about Gerald. I can't tell what is the matter with him. Come directly, for heaven's sake, and tell me what you think, and try what you can do. Don't lose a train after you get this, but come directly – oh, come if you ever loved any of us. I don't know what he means, but he says the most awful things; and if he is not *mad*, as I sometimes hope, he has forgotten his duty to his family and to me, which is far worse. I can't explain more; but if there is any chance of anybody doing him good, it is you. I beg you, on my knees, come directly, dear Frank. I never was in such a state in my life. I shall be left so that nobody will be able to tell what I am; and my heart is bursting. Never mind business or anything; but come, come directly, whether it is night or day, to your broken-hearted sister,

"LOUISA."

"P.S.— In great haste, and *so* anxious to see you."

Half an hour after, Mr Wentworth, with a travelling-bag in his hand, was once more hastening up Grange Lane towards the railway station. His face was somewhat grey, as the lamps shone on it. He did not exactly know what he was anxious about, nor what might have happened at Wentworth Rectory before he could get there; but the express train felt slow to his anxious thoughts as it flashed out of the station. Mr Morgan and his wife were in their garden, talking about the encounter in Prickett's Lane, when the train plunged past, waking all the echoes; and Mrs Morgan, by way of making a diversion, appealed to the Rector about those creepers, with which she hoped in a year or two to shut out the sight of the railway. "The Virginian creeper would be the best," said the Rector's wife; and they went

in to calculate the expenses of bringing Mr Wentworth before Dr Lushington. Miss Dora, at very nearly the same moment, was confiding to her sister Cecilia, under vows of secrecy, the terrible sight she had seen from the summer-house window. They went to bed with very sad hearts in consequence, both these good women. In the mean time, leaving all these gathering clouds behind him, leaving his reputation and his work to be discussed and quarrelled over as they might, the Perpetual Curate rushed through the night, his heart aching with trouble and anxiety, to help, if he could – and if not, at least to stand by – Gerald, in this unknown crisis of his brother's life.

## CHAPTER XI

Miss Dora Wentworth rose very unrefreshed next morning from her disturbed slumbers. It was hard to sit at breakfast with Leonora, and not betray to her the new anxiety; and the troubled sister ran into a countless number of digressions, which would have inevitably betrayed her had not Miss Leonora been at the moment otherwise occupied. She had her little budget of letters as usual, and some of them were more than ordinarily interesting. She too had a favourite district, which was in London, and where also a great work was going on; and her missionary, and her Scripture-readers, and her colporteur were all in a wonderful state of excitement about a new gin-palace which was being fitted out and decorated in the highest style of art on the borders of their especial domain. They were moving heaven and earth to prevent this temple of Satan from being licensed; and some of them were so very certain of the Divine acquiescence in their measures, that they announced the success of their exertions to be a test of the faithfulness of God; which Miss Leonora read out to her sisters as an instance of very touching and beautiful faith. Miss Wentworth, perhaps, was not so clear on that subject. During the course of her silent life, she had prayed for various things which it had not been God's pleasure to grant; and just now she, too, was very anxious about Frank, who seemed to be in a bad way; so she rather shook her head gently, though she did not contravene the statement, and concluded with sadness that the government of the earth might still go on as usual, and God's goodness remain as certain as ever, even though the public-house was licensed, or Frank did fall away. This was the teaching of experience; but aunt Cecilia did not utter it, for that was not her way. As for Miss Dora, she agreed in all the colporteur's sentiments, and thought them beautiful, as Leonora said, and was not much disturbed by any opinion of her own, expressed or unexpressed, but interspersed her breakfast with little sighing ejaculations of the temptations of the world, and how little one knew what was passing around one, and "let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall," which could not have failed to attract Miss Leonora's attention, and draw forth the whole story of her sister's suspicions, had not that quick-witted iron-grey woman been, as we have already mentioned, too deeply engaged. Perhaps her nephew's imaginary backsliding might have excited even Miss Leonora to an interest deeper than that which was awakened by the new gin-palace; but as it happened, it was the humbler intelligence alone which occupied itself with the supposed domestic calamity. Miss Dora's breakfast was affected by it in a way which did not appear in the morning meal of her sister; for somehow the most fervent love of souls seldom takes away the appetite, as the love of some unlucky individual occasionally does.

When breakfast was over, Miss Dora made a very elaborate excuse for going out by herself. She wanted to match some wool for a blanket she was making, "For Louisa's baby," the devoted aunt said, with a little tremor. "Poor Louisa! if Gerald were to go any further, you know, it would be so sad for her; and one would like to help to keep up her heart, poor dear, as much as one could."

"By means of a blanket for the bassinet in scarlet and white," said Miss Leonora; "but it's quite the kind of comfort for Louisa. I wonder if she ever had the smallest inkling what kind of a husband she has got. I don't think Frank is far wrong about Gerald, though I don't pin my faith to my nephew's judgment. I daresay he'll go mad or do worse with all those crotchets of his – but what he married Louisa for has always been a mystery to me."

"I suppose because he was very fond of her," suggested Miss Dora, with humility.

"But why was he fond of her? – a goose!" said the strong-minded sister, and so went about her letter-writing without further comment, leaving aunt Dora to pursue her independent career. It was with a feeling of relief, and yet of guilt, that this timid inquirer set forth on her mission, exchanging a sympathetic significant look with Miss Wentworth before she went out. If she should meet Frank at the door, looking dignified and virtuous, what could she possibly say to him? and yet, perhaps, he had only been imprudent, and did not mean anything. Miss Dora looked round her on both sides, up and

down Grange Lane, as she went out into the lovely summer morning. Neither Frank nor any other soul, except some nurse-maids, was to be seen along the whole line of sunny road. She was relieved, yet she was disappointed at the same time, and went slowly up towards Elsworthy's shop, saying to herself that she was sure Frank could not mean anything. It must have been that forward little thing herself who had come up to him when he was out for his walk, or it must have been an accident. But then she remembered that she had heard the Curate call Rosa pretty; and Miss Dora wondered within herself what it mattered whether she was pretty or not, and what he had to do with it, and shook her head over the strange way men had of finding out such things. For her own part, she was sure she never looked whether the girl was pretty or not; and the anxious aunt had just come round again, by a very circuitous and perplexing course, to her original sentiment, and strengthened herself in the thought that her dear Frank could not mean anything, when she reached Elsworthy's door.

That worthy trader was himself behind the counter, managing matters with his usual exactness. Berlin wool was one of the articles Mr Elsworthy dealt in, besides newspapers, and books when they were ordered. Miss Dora, who wore no crinoline, stumbled over her dress in her agitation as she went in, and saw, at the first glance, little Rosa, looking very blooming and pretty, tying up a parcel at the other end of the shop. The poor lady did not know how to enter upon so difficult a question. She offered her wool humbly to be matched, and listened to Mr Elsworthy's sentiments on the subject. He told her how he always had his wools from the best houses in London, and could match anything as was ever made in that line, and was proud to say as he always gave satisfaction. Miss Dora could not see any opening for the inquiries she hoped to make; for how was it possible to intimate the possibility of disapproval to an establishment so perfect in all its arrangements? The probabilities are, that she would have gone away without saying anything, had not Mr Elsworthy himself given her a chance.

"Miss Wodehouse has been my great help," said the shopkeeper; "she is the nicest lady, is Miss Wodehouse, in all Carlingford. I do respect them people; they've had their troubles, like most families, but there aint many as can lay their finger on the skeleton as is in their cupboard: they've kept things close, and there aint a many as knows; but Miss Wodehouse has spoke up for me, ma'am, right and left, and most persons as count for anything in Carlingford gets their fancy articles out o' my shop. Mr Wentworth, ma'am, our respected clergyman, gets all his papers of me – and partickler he is to a degree – and likes to have 'em first thing afore they're opened out o' the parcel. It's the way with gentlemen when they're young. Mostly people aint so partickler later in life – not as I could tell the reason why, unless it may be that folks gets used to most things, and stop looking for anything new. But there aint a many young gentlemen like our clergyman, though I say it as shouldn't," continued Mr Elsworthy, with a little effusion, as he succeeded in finding an exact match for the scarlet wool.

"And why shouldn't you say it, Mr Elsworthy?" said Miss Dora, a little tartly; "you are not in any way particularly connected with my nephew." Here she gave an angry glance at Rosa, who had drawn near to listen, having always in her vain little heart a certain palpitation at Mr Wentworth's name.

"I ask your pardon, ma'am; I'm clerk at St Roque's. It aint often as we have the pleasure of seeing you there – more's the pity," said the church official, "though I may say there aint a church as perfect, or where the duty is performed more beautiful, in all the country; and there never was a clergyman as had the people's good at heart like Mr Wentworth – not in my time. It aint no matter whether you're rich or poor, young or old, if there's a service as can be done to ever a one in his way, our clergyman is the man to do it. Why, no further gone than last night, ma'am, if you'll believe me, that little girl there – "

"Yes," said Miss Dora, eagerly, looking with what was intended to be a very stern and forbidding aspect in the little girl's face.

"She was a-coming up Grange Lane in the dark," said Mr Elsworthy – "not as there was any need, and me keeping two boys, but she likes a run out of an evening – when Mr Wentworth see her, and come up to her. It aint what many men would have done," said the admiring but unlucky adherent of the suspected Curate: "he come up, seeing as she was by herself, and walked by her, and

gave her a deal of good advice, and brought her home. Her aunt and me was struck all of a heap to see the clergyman a-standing at our door. 'I've brought Rosa home,' he said, making believe a bit sharp. 'Don't send her out no more so late at night,' and was off like a shot, not waiting for no thanks. It's my opinion as there aint many such gentlemen. I can't call to mind as I ever met with his fellow before."

"But a young creature like that ought not to have been out so late," said Miss Dora, trying to harden herself into severity. "I wonder very much that you like to walk up Grange Lane in the dark. I should think it very unpleasant, for my part; and I am sure I would not allow it, Mr Elsworthy," she said firmly, "if such a girl belonged to me."

"But, please, I wasn't walking up Grange Lane," said Rosa, with some haste. "I was at Mrs Hadwin's, where Mr Wentworth lives. I am sure I did not want to trouble him," said the little beauty, recovering her natural spirit as she went on, "but he insisted on walking with me; it was all his own doing. I am sure I didn't want him;" and here Rosa broke off abruptly, with a consciousness in her heart that she was being lectured. She rushed to her defensive weapons by natural instinct, and grew crimson all over her pretty little face, and flashed lightning out of her eyes, which at the same time were not disinclined to tears. All this Miss Dora made note of with a sinking heart.

"Do you mean to say that you went to Mrs Hadwin's to see Mr Wentworth?" asked that unlucky inquisitor, with a world of horror in her face.

"I went with the papers," said Rosa, "and I – I met him in the garden. I am sure it wasn't my fault," said the girl, bursting into petulant tears. "Nobody has any occasion to scold me. It was Mr Wentworth as would come;" and Rosa sobbed, and lighted up gleams of defiance behind her tears. Miss Dora sat looking at her with a very troubled, pale face. She thought all her fears were true, and matters worse than she imagined; and being quite unused to private inquisitions, of course she took all possible steps to create the scandal for which she had come to look.

"Did you ever meet him in the garden before?" asked Miss Dora, painfully, in a low voice. During this conversation Mr Elsworthy had been looking on, perplexed, not perceiving the drift of the examination. He roused himself up to answer now – a little alarmed, to tell the truth, by the new lights thrown on the subject, and vexed to see how unconsciously far both the women had gone.

"It aint easy to go into a house in Grange Lane without meeting of some one in the garden," said Mr Elsworthy; "not as I mean to say it was the right thing for Rosa to be going them errands after dark. My orders is against that, as she knows; and what's the good of keeping two boys if things isn't to be done at the right time? Mr Wentworth himself was a-reproving of me for sending out Rosa, as it might be the last time he was here; for she's one of them as sits in the chancel and helps in the singing, and he feels an interest in her, natural," said the apologetic clerk. Miss Dora gave him a troubled look, but took no further notice of his speech. She thought, with an instinctive contempt for the masculine spectator, that it was impossible he could know anything about it, and pursued her own wiser way.

"It is very wrong of you – a girl in your position," said Miss Dora, as severely as she could in her soft old voice, "to be seen walking about with a gentleman, even when he is your clergyman, and, of course, has nothing else in his head. Young men don't think anything of it," said the rash but timid preacher; "of course it was only to take care of you, and keep you out of harm's way. But then you ought to think what a trouble it was to Mr Wentworth, taking him away from his studies – and it is not nice for a young girl like you." Miss Dora paused to take breath, not feeling quite sure in her own mind whether this was the right thing to say. Perhaps it would have been better to have disbelieved the fact altogether, and declared it impossible. She was much troubled about it, as she stood looking into the flushed tearful face, with all that light of defiance behind the tears, and felt instinctively that little Rosa, still only a pretty, obstinate, vain, uneducated little girl, was more than a match for herself, with all her dearly-won experiences. The little thing was bristling with a hundred natural weapons and defences, against which Miss Dora's weak assault had no chance.

"If it was a trouble, he need not have come," said Rosa, more and more convinced that Mr Wentworth must certainly have meant something. "I am sure *I* did not want him. He insisted on

coming, though I begged him not. I don't know why I should be spoke to like this," cried the little coquette, with tears, "for I never was one as looked at a gentleman; it's them," with a sob, "as comes after me."

"Rosa," said Mr Elsworthy, much alarmed, "your aunt is sure to be looking out for you, and I don't want you here, not now; nor I don't want you again for errands, and don't you forget. If it hadn't been that Mr Wentworth thought you a silly little thing, and had a kind feeling for my missis and me, you don't think he'd have took that charge of you? – and I won't have my clergyman, as has always been good to me and mine, made a talk of. You'll excuse me, ma'am," he said, in an under tone, as Rosa reluctantly went away – not to her aunt, however, but again to her parcel at the other end of the shop – "she aint used to being talked to. She's but a child, and don't know no better: and after all," said Rosa's uncle, with a little pride, "she is a tender-hearted little thing – she don't know no better, ma'am; she's led away by a kind word – for nobody can say but she's wonderful pretty, as is very plain to see."

"Is she?" said Miss Dora, following the little culprit to the back-counter with disenchanted eyes. "Then you had better take all the better care of her, Mr Elsworthy," she said, with again a little asperity. The fact was, that Miss Dora had behaved very injudiciously, and was partly aware of it; and then this prettiness of little Rosa's, even though it shone at the present moment before her, was not so plain to her old-maidenly eyes. She did not make out why everybody was so sure of it, nor what it mattered; and very probably, if she could have had her own way, would have liked to give the little insignificant thing a good shake, and asked her how she dared to attract the eye of the Perpetual Curate. As she could not do this, however, Miss Dora gathered up her wool, and refused to permit Mr Elsworthy to send it home for her. "I can carry it quite well myself," said the indignant little woman. "I am sure you must have a great deal too much for your boys to do, or you would not send your niece about with the things. But if you will take my advice, Mr Elsworthy," said Miss Dora, "you will take care of that poor little thing: she will be getting ridiculous notions into her head;" and aunt Dora went out of the shop with great solemnity, quite unaware that she had done more to put ridiculous notions into Rosa's head than could have got there by means of a dozen darkling walks by the side of the majestic Curate, who never paid her any compliments. Miss Dora went away more than ever convinced in her mind that Frank had forgotten himself and his position, and everything that was fit and seemly. She jumped to a hundred horrible conclusions as she went sadly across Grange Lane with her scarlet wool in her hand. What Leonora would say to such an irremediable folly? – and how the Squire would receive his son after such a *mésalliance*? "He might change his views," said poor Miss Dora to herself, "but he could not change his wife;" and it was poor comfort to call Rosa a designing little wretch, and to reflect that Frank at first could not have meant anything. The poor lady had a bad headache, and was in a terribly depressed condition all day. When she saw from the window of her summer-house the pretty figure of Lucy Wodehouse in her grey cloak pass by, she sank into tears and melancholy reflections. But then Lucy Wodehouse's views were highly objectionable, and she bethought herself of Julia Trench, who had long ago been selected by the sisters as the clergyman's wife of Skelmersdale. Miss Dora shook her head over the blanket she was knitting for Louisa's baby, thinking of clergymen's wives in general, and the way in which marriages came about. Who had the ordering of these inexplicable accidents? It was surely not Providence, but some tricky imp or other who loved confusion; and then Miss Dora paused with compunction, and hoped she would be forgiven for entertaining, even for one passing moment, such a wicked, wicked thought.

## CHAPTER XII

On the afternoon of the same day Mr Morgan went home late, and frightened his wife out of her propriety by the excitement and trouble in his face. He could do nothing but groan as he sat down in the drawing-room, where she had just been gathering her work together, and putting stray matters in order, before she went up-stairs to make herself tidy for dinner. The Rector paid no attention to the fact that the dinner-hour was approaching, and only shook his head and repeated his groan when she asked him anxiously what was the matter. The good man was too much flushed and heated and put out, to be able at first to answer her questions.

"Very bad, very bad," he said, when he had recovered sufficient composure – "far worse than I feared. My dear, I am afraid the beginning of my work in Carlingford will be for ever associated with pain to us both. I am discouraged and distressed beyond measure by what I have heard to-day."

"Dear William, tell me what it is," said the Rector's wife.

"I feared it was a bad business from the first," said the disturbed Rector. "I confess I feared, when I saw a young man so regardless of lawful authority, that his moral principles must be defective, but I was not prepared for what I have heard to-day. My dear, I am sorry to grieve you with such a story; but as you are sure to hear it, perhaps it is better that you should have the facts from me."

"It must be about Mr Wentworth," said Mrs Morgan. She was sorry; for though she had given in to her husband's vehemence, she herself in her own person had always been prepossessed in favour of the Perpetual Curate; but she was also sensible of a feeling of relief to know that the misfortune concerned Mr Wentworth, and was not specially connected with themselves.

"Yes, it's about Mr Wentworth," said the Rector. He wiped his face, which was red with haste and exhaustion, and shook his head. He was sincerely shocked and grieved, to do him justice; but underneath there was also a certain satisfaction in the thought that he had foreseen it, and that his suspicions were verified. "My dear, I am very glad he had not become intimate in our house," said Mr Morgan; "that would have complicated matters sadly. I rejoice that your womanly instincts prevented that inconvenience;" and as the Rector began to recover himself, he looked more severe than ever.

"Yes," said Mrs Morgan, with hesitation; for the truth was, that her womanly instincts had pronounced rather distinctly in favour of the Curate of St Roque's. "I hope he has not done anything very wrong, William. I should be very sorry; for I think he has very good qualities," said the Rector's wife. "We must not let our personal objections prejudice us in respect to his conduct otherwise. I am sure you are the last to do that."

"I have never known an insubordinate man who was a perfect moral character," said the Rector. "It is very discouraging altogether; and you thought he was engaged to Wodehouse's pretty daughter, didn't you? I hope not – I sincerely hope not. That would make things doubly bad; but, to be sure, when a man is faithless to his most sacred engagements, there is very little dependence to be placed on him in other respects."

"But you have not told me what it is," said the Rector's wife, with some anxiety; and she spoke the more hastily as she saw the shadow of a curate – Mr Morgan's own curate, who must inevitably be invited to stop to dinner – crossing the lawn as she spoke. She got up and went a little nearer the window to make sure. "There is Mr Leeson," she said, with some vexation. "I must run up-stairs and get ready for dinner. Tell me what it is!"

Upon which the Rector, with some circumlocution, described the appalling occurrence of the previous night, – how Mr Wentworth had walked home with little Rosa Elsworthy from his own house to hers, as had, of course, been seen by various people. The tale had been told with variations, which did credit to the ingenuity of Carlingford; and Mr Morgan's version was that they had walked arm in arm, in the closest conversation, and at an hour which was quite unseemly for such a little person as Rosa to be abroad. The excellent Rector gave the story with strong expressions of disapproval; for

he was aware of having raised his wife's expectations, and had a feeling, as he related them, that the circumstances, after all, were scarcely sufficiently horrifying to justify his preamble. Mrs Morgan listened with one ear towards the door, on the watch for Mr Leeson's knock.

"Was that all?" said the sensible woman. "I think it very likely it might be explained. I suppose Mr Leeson must have stopped to look at my ferns; he is very tiresome with his botany. That was all! Dear, I think it might be explained. I can't fancy Mr Wentworth is a man to commit himself in that way – if that is all!" said Mrs Morgan; "but I must run up-stairs to change my dress."

"That was not all," said the Rector, following her to the door. "It is said that this sort of thing has been habitual, my dear. He takes the 'Evening Mail,' you know, all to himself, instead of having the 'Times' like other people, and she carries it down to his house, and I hear of meetings in the garden, and a great deal that is very objectionable," said Mr Morgan, speaking very fast in order to deliver himself before the advent of Mr Leeson. "I'm afraid it is a very bad business. I don't know what to do about it. I suppose I must ask Leeson to stay to dinner? It is absurd of him to come at six o'clock."

"Meetings in the garden?" said Mrs Morgan, aghast. "I don't feel as if I could believe it. There is that tiresome man at last. Do as you like, dear, about asking him to stay; but I must make my escape," and the Rector's wife hastened up-stairs, divided between vexation about Mr Leeson and regret at the news she had just heard. She put on her dress rather hastily, and was conscious of a little ill-temper, for which she was angry with herself; and the haste of her toilette, and the excitement under which she laboured, aggravated unbecomingly that redness of which Mrs Morgan was painfully sensible. She was not at all pleased with her own appearance as she looked in the glass. Perhaps that sense of looking not so well as usual brought back to her mind a troublesome and painful idea, which recurred to her not unfrequently when she was in any trouble. The real Rector to whom she was married was so different from the ideal one who courted her; could it be possible, if they had married in their youth instead of now, that her husband would have been less open to the ill-natured suggestions of the gossips in Carlingford, and less jealous of the interferences of his young neighbour? It was hard to think that all the self-denial and patience of the past had done more harm than good; but though she was conscious of his defects, she was very loyal to him, and resolute to stand by him whatever he might do or say; though Mrs Morgan's "womanly instincts," which the Rector had quoted, were all on Mr Wentworth's side, and convinced her of his innocence to start with. On the whole, she was annoyed and uncomfortable; what with Mr Leeson's intrusion (which had occurred three or four times before, and which Mrs Morgan felt it her duty to check) and the Rector's uncharitableness, and her own insufficient time to dress, and the disagreeable heightening of her complexion, the Rector's wife felt in rather an unchristian frame of mind. She did not look well, and she did not feel better. She was terribly civil to the Curate when she went down-stairs, and snubbed him in the most unqualified way when he too began to speak about Mr Wentworth. "It does not seem to me to be at all a likely story," she said, courageously, and took away Mr Leeson's breath.

"But I hear a very unfavourable general account," said the Rector, who was almost equally surprised. "I hear he has been playing fast and loose with that very pretty person, Miss Wodehouse, and that her friends begin to be indignant. It is said that he has not been nearly so much there lately, but, on the contrary, always going to Elsworthy's, and has partly educated this little thing. My dear, one false step leads to another. I am not so incredulous as you are. Perhaps I have studied human nature a little more closely, and I know that error is always fruitful; – that is my experience," said Mr Morgan. His wife did not say anything in answer to this deliverance, but she lay in wait for the Curate, as was natural, and had her revenge upon him as soon as his ill fate prompted him to back the Rector out.

"I am afraid Mr Wentworth had always too much confidence in himself," said the unlucky individual who was destined to be scapegoat on this occasion; "and as you very justly observe, one wrong act leads to another. He has thrown himself among the bargemen on such an equal footing that

I daresay he has got to like that kind of society. I shouldn't be surprised to find that Rosa Elsworthy suited him better than a lady with refined tastes."

"Mr Wentworth is a gentleman," said the Rector's wife, with emphasis, coming down upon the unhappy Leeson in full battle array. "I don't think he would go into the poorest house, if it were even a bargeman's, without the same respect of the privacy of the family as is customary among – persons of our own class, Mr Leeson. I can't tell how wrong or how foolish he may have been, of course – but that he couldn't behave to anybody in a disrespectful manner, or show himself intrusive, or forget the usages of good society," said Mrs Morgan, who was looking all the time at the unfortunate Curate, "I am perfectly convinced."

It was this speech which made Mr Morgan "speak seriously," as he called it, later the same night, to his wife, about her manner to poor Leeson, who was totally extinguished, as was to be expected. Mrs Morgan busied herself among her flowers all the evening, and could not be caught to be admonished until it was time for prayers: so that it was in the sacred retirement of her own chamber that the remonstrance was delivered at last. The Rector said he was very sorry to find that she still gave way to temper in a manner that was unbecoming in a clergyman's wife; he was surprised, after all her experience, and the way in which they had both been schooled in patience, to find she had still to learn that lesson: upon which Mrs Morgan, who had been thinking much on the subject, broke forth upon her husband in a manner totally unprecedented, and which took the amazed Rector altogether by surprise.

"Oh, William, if we had only forestalled the lesson, and been *less* prudent!" she cried in a womanish way, which struck the Rector dumb with astonishment; "if we hadn't been afraid to marry ten years ago, but gone into life when we were young, and fought through it like so many people, don't you think it would have been better for us? Neither you nor I would have minded what gossips said, or listened to a pack of stories when we were five-and-twenty. I think I was better then than I am now," said the Rector's wife. Though she filled that elevated position, she was only a woman, subject to outbreaks of sudden passion, and liable to tears like the rest. Mr Morgan looked very blank at her as she sat there crying, sobbing with the force of a sentiment which was probably untranslatable to the surprised, middle-aged man. He thought it must be her nerves which were in fault somehow, and though much startled, did not inquire farther into it, having a secret feeling in his heart that the less that was said the better on that subject. So he did what his good angel suggested to him, kissed his wife, and said he was well aware what heavy calls he had made upon her patience, and soothed her the best way that occurred to him. "But you were very hard upon poor Leeson, my dear," said the Rector, with his puzzled look, when she had regained her composure. Perhaps she was disappointed that she had not been able to convey her real meaning to her husband's matter-of-fact bosom; at all events, Mrs Morgan recovered herself immediately, and flashed forth with all the lively freshness of a temper in its first youth.

"He deserved a great deal more than I said to him," said the Rector's wife. "It might be an advantage to take the furniture, as it was all new, though it is a perpetual vexation to me, and worries me out of my life; but there was no need to take the curate, that I can see. What right has he to come day after day at your dinner-hour? he knows we dine at six as well as we do ourselves; and I do believe he knows what we have for dinner," exclaimed the incensed mistress of the house; "for he always makes his appearance when we have anything he likes. I hope I know my duty, and can put up with what cannot be mended," continued Mrs Morgan, with a sigh, and a mental reference to the carpet in the drawing-room; "but there are some things really that would disturb the temper of an angel. I don't know anybody that could endure the sight of a man always coming unasked to dinner; – and he to speak of Mr Wentworth, who, if he were the greatest sinner in the world, is *always* a gentleman!" Mrs Morgan broke off with a sparkle in her eye, which showed that she had neither exhausted the subject, nor was ashamed of herself; and the Rector wisely retired from the controversy. He went to bed, and slept, good man, and dreamt that Sir Charles Grandison had come to be his curate in place of Mr

Leeson; and when he woke, concluded quietly that Mrs Morgan had "experienced a little attack on the nerves," as he explained afterwards to Dr Marjoribanks. Her compunctions, her longings after the lost life they might have lived together, her wistful womanish sense of the impoverished existence, deprived of so many experiences, on which they had entered in the dry maturity of their middle age, remained for ever a mystery to her faithful husband. He was very fond of her, and had a high respect for her character; but if she had spoken Sanscrit, he could not have had less understanding of the meaning her words were intended to convey.

Notwithstanding, a vague idea that his wife was disposed to side with Mr Wentworth had penetrated the brain of the Rector, and was not without its results. He told her next morning, in his curt way, that he thought it would be best to wait a little before taking any steps in the Wharfside business. "If all I hear is true, we may have to proceed in a different way against the unhappy young man," said Mr Morgan, solemnly; and he took care to ascertain that Mr Leeson had an invitation somewhere else to dinner, which was doing the duty of a tender husband, as everybody will allow.

## CHAPTER XIII

"I want to know what all this means about young Wentworth," said Mr Wodehouse. "He's gone off, it appears, in a hurry, nobody knows where. Well, so they say. To his brother's, is it? *I* couldn't know that; but look here – that's not all, nor nearly all – they say he meets that little Rosa at Elsworthy's every night, and walks home with her, and all that sort of thing. I tell you I don't know – that's what people say. You ought to understand all the rights of it, you two girls. I confess I thought it was Lucy he was after, for my part – and a very bad match, too, and one I should never have given my consent to. And then there is another fine talk about some fellow he's got at his house. What's the matter, Molly? – she looks as if she was going to faint."

"Oh no," said Miss Wodehouse, faintly; "and I don't believe a word about Rosa Elsworthy," she said, with sudden impetuosity, a minute after. "I am sure Mr Wentworth could vindicate himself whenever he likes. I daresay the one story is just as true as the other; but then," said the gentle elder sister, turning with anxious looks towards Lucy, "he is proud, as is natural; and I shouldn't think he would enter into explanations if he thought people did not trust him without them."

"That is all stuff," said Mr Wodehouse; "why should people trust him? I don't understand trusting a man in all sorts of equivocal circumstances, because he's got dark eyes, &c., and a handsome face – which seems *your* code of morality; but I thought he was after Lucy – that was my belief – and I want to know if it's all off."

"It never was on, papa," said Lucy, in her clearest voice. "I have been a great deal in the district, you know, and Mr Wentworth and I could not help meeting each other; that is all about it: but people must always have something to talk about in Carlingford. I hope you don't think I and Rosa Elsworthy could go together," she went on, turning round to him with a smile. "I don't think that would be much of a compliment;" and, saying this, Lucy went to get her work out of its usual corner, and sat down opposite to her father, with a wonderfully composed face. She was so composed, indeed, that any interested beholder might have been justified in thinking that the work suffered in consequence, for it seemed to take nearly all Lucy's strength and leisure to keep up that look.

"Oh!" said Mr Wodehouse, "that's how it was? Then I wonder why that confounded puppy came here so constantly? I don't like that sort of behaviour. Don't you go into the district any more and meet him – that's all I've got to say."

"Because of Rosa Elsworthy?" said Lucy, with a little smile, which did not flicker naturally, but was apt to get fixed at the corners of her pretty mouth. "That would never do, papa. Mr Wentworth's private concerns are nothing to us; but, you know, there is a great work going on in the district, and *that* can't be interfered with," said the young Sister of Mercy, looking up at him with a decision which Mr Wodehouse was aware he could make no stand against. And when she stopped speaking, Lucy did a little work, which was for the district too. All this time she was admitting to herself that she had been much startled by this news about Rosa Elsworthy, – much startled. To be sure, it was not like Mr Wentworth, and very likely it would impair his influence; and it was natural that any friend taking an interest in him and the district, should be taken a little aback by such news. Accordingly, Lucy sat a little more upright than usual, and was conscious that when she smiled, as she had just done, the smile did not glide off again in a natural way, but settled down into the lines of her face with a kind of spasmodic tenacity. She could do a great deal in the way of self-control, but she could not quite command these refractory muscles. Mr Wodehouse, who was not particularly penetrating, could not quite make her out; he saw there was something a little different from her ordinary look about his favourite child, but he had not insight enough to enable him to comprehend what it was.

"And about his man who is staying at Mrs Hadwin's?" said the perplexed churchwarden; "does any one know who the fellow is? I don't understand how Wentworth has got into all this hot water

in a moment. Here's the Rector in a state of fury, – and his aunts, – and now here's this little bit of scandal to crown all; – and who is this fellow in his house?"

"It must be somebody he has taken in out of charity," said Miss Wodehouse, with tears in her eyes; "I am sure it is somebody whom he has opened his doors to out of Christian charity and the goodness of his heart. I don't understand how you can all desert him at the first word. All the years he has been here, you know there never was a whisper against him; and is it in reason to think he would go so far wrong all in a moment?" cried the faithful advocate of the Perpetual Curate. Her words were addressed to Mr Wodehouse, but her eyes sought Lucy, who was sitting very upright doing her work, without any leisure to look round. Lucy had quite enough to occupy her within herself at that emergency, and the tearful appeal of her elder sister had no effect upon her. As for Mr Wodehouse, he was more and more puzzled how to interpret these tears in his daughter's eyes.

"I don't make it out at all," said the perplexed father, getting up to leave the room. "I hope *you* weren't in love with him, Molly? you ought to have too much sense for that. A pretty mess he'll find when he comes home; but he must get out of it the best way he can, for *I* can't help him, at least. I don't mean to have him asked here any more – you understand, Lucy," he said, turning round at the door, with an emphatic creak of his boots. But Lucy had no mind to be seduced into any such confession of weakness.

"You are always having everybody in Carlingford to dinner," said the young housekeeper, "and all the clergymen, even *that* Mr Leeson; and I don't see why you should except Mr Wentworth, papa; he has done nothing wicked, so far as we know. I daresay he won't want to bring Rosa Elsworthy with him; and why shouldn't he be asked here?" said Lucy, looking full in his face with her bright eyes. Mr Wodehouse was entirely discomfited, and did not know what to say. "I wonder if you know what you mean yourselves, you women," he muttered; and then, with a shrug of his shoulders, and a hasty "settle it as you please," the churchwarden's boots creaked hastily out of the room, and out of the house.

After this a dead silence fell upon the drawing-room and its two occupants. They did not burst forth into mutual comment upon this last piece of Carlingford news, as they would have done under any other circumstances; on the contrary, they bent over their several occupations with quite an unusual devotion, not exchanging so much as a look. Lucy, over her needlework, was the steadiest of the two; she was still at the same point in her thoughts, owing to herself that she was startled, and indeed shocked, by what she had heard – that it was a great pity for Mr Wentworth; perhaps that it was not quite what might have been expected of him, – and then she checked herself, and went back again to her original acknowledgment. To tell the truth, though she assured herself that she had nothing to do with it, a strange sense of having just passed through an unexpected illness, lay underneath Lucy's composure. It was none of her business, to be sure, but she could not help feeling as if she had just had a fever, or some other sudden unlooked-for attack, and that nobody knew of it, and that she must get well as best she could, without any help from without.

It was quite half an hour before Miss Wodehouse got up from the knitting which she had spoiled utterly, trying to take up the dropped stitches with her trembling fingers, and dropping others by every effort she made. The poor lady went wistfully about the room, wandering from corner to corner, as if in search of something; at last she took courage to speak, when she found herself behind her young sister. "Dear, I am sure it is not true," said Miss Wodehouse, suddenly, with a little sob; and then she came close to Lucy's chair, and put her hand timidly upon her sister's shoulder. "Think how many good things you two have done together, dear; and is it likely you are to be parted like this?" said the injudicious comforter. It felt rather like another attack of fever to Lucy, as unexpected as the last.

"Don't speak so, please," said the poor girl, with a momentary shiver. "It is about Mr Wentworth you mean?" she went on, after a little, without turning her head. "I – am sorry, of course. I am afraid it will do him – harm," and then she made a pause, and stumbled over her sewing with fingers which felt feeble and powerless to the very tips – all on account of this fever she had had. "But I don't know any reason why you and I should discuss it, Mary," she said, getting up in her turn, not quite sure

whether she could stand at this early period of her convalescence, but resolved to try. "We are both Mr Wentworth's friends – and we need not say any harm of him. I have to get something out of the storeroom for to-night."

"But, Lucy," said the tender, trembling sister, who did not know how to be wise and silent, "I trust him, and *you* don't. Oh, my dear, it will break my heart. I know some part of it is not true. I know one thing in which he is quite – quite innocent. Oh, Lucy, my darling, if you distrust him it will be returning evil for good!" cried poor Miss Wodehouse, with tears. As for Lucy, she did not quite know what her sister said. She only felt that it was cruel to stop her, and look at her, and talk to her; and there woke up in her mind a fierce sudden spark of resistance to the intolerable.

"Why do you hold me? I may have been ill, but I can stand well enough by myself," cried Lucy, to her sister's utter bewilderment. "That is, I – I mean, I have other things to attend to," she cried, breaking into a few hot tears of mortification over this self-betrayal; and so went away in a strange glow and tremble of sudden passion, such as had never been seen before in that quiet house. She went direct to the storeroom, as she had said, and got out what was wanted; and only after that was done permitted herself to go up to her own room, and turn the key in her door. Though she was a Sister of Mercy, and much beloved in Prickett's Lane, she was still but one of Eve's poor petulant women-children, and had it in her to fly at an intruder on her suffering, like any other wounded creature. But she did not make any wild demonstration of her pain, even when shut up thus in her fortress. She sat down on the sofa, in a kind of dull heaviness, looking into vacancy. She was not positively thinking of Mr Wentworth, or of any one thing in particular. She was only conscious of a terrible difference somehow in everything about her – in the air which choked her breathing, and the light which blinded her eyes. When she came to herself a little, she said over and over, half-aloud, that everything was just the same as it had always been, and that to her at least nothing had happened; but that declaration, though made with vehemence, did not alter matters. The world altogether had sustained a change. The light that was in it was darkened, and the heart stilled. All at once, instead of a sweet spontaneous career, providing for its own wants day by day, life came to look like something which required such an amount of courage and patience and endurance as Lucy had not at hand to support her in the way; and her heart failed her at the moment when she found this out.

Notwithstanding, the people who dined at Mr Wodehouse's that night thought it a very agreeable little party, and more than once repeated the remark, so familiar to most persons in society in Carlingford – that Wodehouse's parties were the pleasantest going, though he himself was humdrum enough. Two or three of the people present had heard the gossip about Mr Wentworth, and discussed it, as was natural, taking different views of the subject; and poor Miss Wodehouse took up his defence so warmly, and with such tearful vehemence, that there were smiles to be seen on several faces. As for Lucy, she made only a very simple remark on the subject. She said: "Mr Wentworth is a great friend of ours, and I think I would rather not hear any gossip about him." Of course there were one or two keen observers who put a subtle meaning to this, and knew what was signified by her looks and her ways all the evening; but, most likely, they were altogether mistaken in their suppositions, for nobody could possibly watch her so closely as did Miss Wodehouse, who know no more than the man in the moon, at the close of the evening, whether her young sister was very wretched or totally indifferent. The truth was certainly not to be discovered, for that night at least, in Lucy's looks.

## CHAPTER XIV

The next afternoon there were signs of a considerable commotion in Mr Elsworthy's shop. Rosa had disappeared altogether, and Mrs Elsworthy, with an ominous redness on her cheeks, had taken the place generally held by that more agreeable little figure. All the symptoms of having been engaged in an affray from which she had retired not altogether victorious were in Mrs Elsworthy's face, and the errand-boys vanished from her neighbourhood with inconceivable rapidity, and found out little parcels to deliver which would have eluded their most anxious search in other circumstances. Mr Elsworthy himself occupied his usual place in the foreground, without the usual marks of universal content and satisfaction with all his surroundings which generally distinguished him. An indescribable appearance of having been recently snubbed hung about the excellent man, and his glances towards the back-shop, and the glances directed from the back-shop to him, told with sufficient significance the quarter from which his humiliation had proceeded. It had done him good, as such painful discipline generally does; for he was clearing out some drawers in which sundry quires of paper had broken loose and run into confusion, with the air of a man who ought to have done it weeks ago. As for the partner of his bosom, she was standing in the obscure distance behind the counter knitting a blue stocking, which was evidently intended for no foot but his. There was a chair close by, but Mrs Elsworthy disdained to sit down. She stood with her knitting in conscious power, now and then suffering a confession of her faith to escape her. "There's nothing as don't go contrary in this world," said the discontented wife, "when a man's a fool." It was hard upon Mr Elsworthy that his ears were sharp, and that he knew exactly what this agreeable murmur was. But he was wise in his generation, and made no reply.

Things were in this condition when, of all persons in Carlingford, it occurred to Miss Leonora Wentworth to enter Mr Elsworthy's shop. Not that she was alone, or bent upon any errand of inquiry; for Miss Leonora seldom moved about unattended by her sisters, whom she felt it her duty to take out for exercise; and wonderfully enough, she had not found out yet what was the source of Miss Dora's mysteries and depression, having been still occupied meantime by her own "great work" in her London district, and the affair of the gin-palace, which was still undecided. She had been talking a great deal about this gin-palace for the last twenty-four hours; and to hear Miss Leonora, you might have supposed that all the powers of heaven must fail and be discomfited before this potent instrument of evil, and that, after all, Bibles and missionaries were much less effective than the stoppage of the licence, upon which all her agents were bent. At all events, such an object of interest had swept out from her thoughts the vague figure of her nephew Frank, and aunt Dora's mysterious anxieties on his account. When the three ladies approached Elsworthy's, the first thing that attracted their attention was Rosa, the little Rosa who had been banished from the shop, and whom Mrs Elsworthy believed to be expiating her sins in a back room, in tears and darkness; instead of which the little girl was looking out of her favourite window, and amusing herself much with all that was going on in Grange Lane. Though she was fluttered by the scolding she had received, Rosa only looked prettier than usual with her flushed cheeks; and so many things had been put into her nonsensical little head during the last two days, especially by her aunt's denunciations, that her sense of self-importance was very much heightened in consequence. She looked at the Miss Wentworths with a throb of mingled pride and alarm, wondering whether perhaps she might know more of them some day, if Mr Wentworth was really fond of her, as people said – which thought gave Rosa a wonderful sensation of awe and delighted vanity. Meanwhile the three Miss Wentworths looked at her with very diverse feelings. "I must speak to these people about that little girl, if nobody else has sense enough to do it," said Miss Leonora; "she is evidently going wrong as fast as she can, the little fool;" and the iron-grey sister went into Mr Elsworthy's in this perfectly composed and ordinary frame of mind, with her head full of the application which was to be made to the licensing magistrates today, in the parish of St Michael, and totally unaware that anybody belonging to herself could ever be connected with the incautious little

coquette at the window. Miss Dora's feelings were very different. It was much against her will that she was going at all into this obnoxious shop, and the eyes which she hastily uplifted to the window and withdrew again with lively disgust and dislike, were both angry and tearful; "Little forward shameless thing," Miss Dora said to herself, with a little toss of her head. As for Miss Wentworth, it was not her custom to say anything – but she, too, looked up, and saw the pretty face at the window, and secretly concluded that it might all be quite true, and that she had known a young man make a fool of himself before now for such another. So they all went in, unwitting that they came at the end of a domestic hurricane, and that the waters were still in a state of disturbance. Miss Wentworth took the only chair, as was natural, and sat down sweetly to wait for Leonora, and Miss Dora lingered behind while her sister made her purchases. Miss Leonora wanted some books —

"And I came here," she said, with engaging candour, "because I see no other shop in this part of the town except Masters's, which, of course, I would not enter. It is easy enough to do without books, but I can't afford to compromise my principles, Mr Elsworthy;" to which Mr Elsworthy had replied, "No, ma'am, of course not – such a thing aint to be expected;" with one eye upon his customer, and one upon his belligerent wife.

"And, by the by, if you will permit me to speak about what does not concern me," said Miss Leonora cheerfully, "I think you should look after that little girl of yours more carefully; – recollect I don't mean any offence; but she's very pretty, you know, and very young, and vain, as a matter of course. I saw her the other evening going down Grange Lane, a great deal too late for such a creature to be out; and though I don't doubt, you are very particular where she goes – "

It was at this conjuncture that Mrs Elsworthy, who could not keep silence any longer, broke in ardently, with all her knitting-needles in front of her, disposed like a kind of porcupine mail —

"I'm well known in Carlingford – better known than most," said Mrs Elsworthy, with a sob; "such a thing as not being particular was never named to me. I strive and I toil from morning to night, as all things should be respectable and kep' in good order; but what's the good? Here's my heart broken, that's all; and Elsworthy standing gaping like a gaby as he is. There aint nothing as don't go contrary, when folks is tied to a set of fools!" cried the indignant matron. "As for pretty, I don't know nothing about it; I've got too much to do minding my own business. Them as has nothing to think of but stand in the shop and twiddle their thumbs, ought to look to that; but, ma'am, if you'll believe me, it aint no fault of mine. It aint my will to throw her in any young gentleman's way; not to say a clergyman as we're bound to respect. Whatever you does, ladies, – and I shouldn't wonder at your taking away your custom, nor nothing else as was a punishment – don't blame me!"

"But you forget, Mrs Elsworthy, that we have nothing to do with it, – nothing at all; my nephew knows very well what he is about," said Miss Dora, in injudicious haste. "Mr Wentworth is not at all likely to forget himself," continued that poor lady, getting confused as her sister turned round and stared at her. "Of course it was all out of kindness; – I – I know Frank did not mean anything," cried the unfortunate aunt. Leonora's look, as she turned round and fixed her eyes upon her, took away what little breath Miss Dora had.

"Mr Wentworth?" asked Miss Leonora; "I should be glad to know, if anybody would inform me, what Mr Wentworth can possibly have to do with it? I daresay you misunderstood me; I said you were to look after that little girl – your niece, or whatever she is; I did not say anything about Mr Wentworth," said the strong-minded sister, looking round upon them all. For the moment she forgot all about the licence, and turned upon Mr Elsworthy with an emphasis which almost drove that troubled citizen to his knees.

"That was how I understood it," said the clerk of St Roque's, humbly; "there wasn't nothing said about Mr Wentworth – nor there couldn't be as I know of, but what was in his favour, for there aint many young men like our clergyman left in the Church. It aint because I'm speaking to respected ladies as is his relations; folks may talk," said Mr Elsworthy, with a slight faltering, "but I never see his equal; and as for an act of kindness to an orphan child – "

"The orphan child is neither here there," said his angry wife, who had taken up her post by his side; "a dozen fathers and mothers couldn't have done better by her than we've done; and to go and lay out her snares for them as is so far above her, if you'll believe me, ma'am, it's nigh broken my heart. She's neither flesh nor blood o' mine," cried the aggrieved woman; "there would have been a different tale to tell if she had belonged to me. I'd have – murdered her, ma'am, though it aint proper to say so, afore we'd have gone and raised a talk like this; it aint my blame, if it was my dying word," cried Mrs Elsworthy, relapsing into angry tears: "I'm one as has always shown her a good example, and never gone flirting about, nor cast my eyes to one side or another for the best man as ever walked; and to think as a respectable family should be brought to shame through her doings, and a gentleman as is a clergyman got himself talked about – it's gone nigh to kill me, that's what it's done," sobbed the virtuous matron; "and I don't see as nobody cares."

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