Hornung Ernest William

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Содержание

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I
DUST TO DUST

Long Stow church lay hidden for the summer amid a million leaves. It had neither tower nor steeple to show above the trees; nor was the scaffolding between nave and chancel an earnest of one or the other to come. It was a simple little church, of no antiquity and few exterior pretensions, and the alterations it was undergoing were of a very practical character. A sandstone upstart in a countryside of flint, it stood aloof from the road, on a green knoll now yellow with buttercups, and shaded all day long by horse-chestnuts and elms. The church formed the eastern extremity of the village of Long Stow.

It was Midsummer Day, and a Saturday, and the middle of the Saturday afternoon. So all the village was there, though from the road one saw only the idle group about the gate, and on the old flint wall a row of children commanded by the schoolmaster to "keep outside." Pinafores pressed against the coping, stockinged

legs dangling, fidgety hob-nails kicking stray sparks from the flint; anticipation at the gate, fascination on the wall, law and order on the path in the schoolmaster's person; and in the cool green shade hard by, a couple of planks, a crumbling hillock, an open grave.

Near his handiwork hovered the sexton, a wizened being, twisted with rheumatism, leaning on his spade, and grinning as usual over the stupendous hallucination of his latter years. He had swallowed a rudimentary frog with some impure water. This frog had reached maturity in the sexton's body. Many believed it. The man himself could hear it croaking in his breast, where it commanded the pass to his stomach, and intercepted every morsel that he swallowed. Certainly the sexton was very lean, if not starving to death quite as fast as he declared; for he had become a tiresome egotist on the point, who, even now, must hobble to the schoolmaster with the last report of his unique ailment.

"That croap wuss than ever. Would 'ee like to listen, Mr. Jones?"

And the bent man almost straightened for the nonce, protruding his chest with a toothless grin of huge enjoyment.

"Thank you," said the schoolmaster. "I've something else to do."

"Croap, croap, croap!" chuckled the sexton. "That take every mortal thing I eat. An' doctor can't do nothun for me – not he!"

"I should think he couldn't."

"Why, I do declare he be croapun now! That fare to bring me to my own grave afore long. Do you listen, Mr. Jones; that croap like billy-oh this very minute!"

It took a rough word to get rid of him.

"You be off, Busby. Can't you see I'm trying to listen to something else?"

In the church the rector was reciting the first of the appointed psalms. Every syllable could be heard upon the path. His reading was Mr. Carlton's least disputed gift, thanks to a fine voice, an unerring sense of the values of words, and a delivery without let or blemish. Yet there was no evidence that the reader felt a word of what he read, for one and all were pitched in the deliberate monotone rarely to be heard outside a church. And just where some voices would have failed, that of the Rector of Long Stow rang clearest and most precise:

"When thou with rebukes dost chasten man for sin, thou makest his beauty to consume away, like as it were a moth fretting a garment: every man therefore is but vanity.

"Hear my prayer, O Lord, and with thine ears consider my calling: hold not thy peace at my tears.

"For I am a stranger with thee: and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.

"O spare me a little, that I may recover my strength: before I go hence, and be no more seen."

The sexton was regaling the children on the wall with the ever-popular details of his notorious malady. The schoolmaster still

strutted on the path, now peeping in at the porch, now reporting particulars to the curious at the gate: a quaint incarnation of conscious melancholy and unconscious enjoyment.

"Hardly a dry eye in the church!" he announced after the psalm. "Mr. Carlton and Musk himself are about the only two that fare to hide what they feel."

"And what does Mr. Carlton feel?" asked a lout with a rose in his coat. "About as much as my little finger!"

"Ay," said another, "he cares for nothing but his Roman candles, and his transcripts and gargles."[1]

"Come," said the schoolmaster, "you wouldn't have the parson break down in church, would you? I'm sorry I mentioned him. I was thinking of Jasper Musk. He just stands as though Mr. Carlton had carved him out of stone."

"The wonder is that he can stand there at all," retorted the fellow with the flower, "to hear what he don't believe read by a man he don't believe in. A funeral, is it? It's as well we know – he'd take a weddun in the same voice."

The schoolmaster turned away with an ambiguous shrug. It was not his business to defend Mr. Carlton against the disaffected and the undevout. He considered his duty done when he informed the rector who his enemies were, and (if permitted to proceed) what they were saying behind his back. The schoolmaster made a mental mark against the name of one Cubitt, ex-choirman, and, forthwith transferring his attention to the audience on the wall,

[1] Transepts and gargoyles.

put a stop to their untimely entertainment before returning softly to the porch.

In Long Stow churchyard there was shade all day, but in the church it was dusk from that moment in the forenoon when the east window lost the sun. This peculiarity was partly temporary. The church was in a transition stage; it was putting forth transepts north and south; meanwhile there was much boarding within, and a window in eclipse on either side. The surrounding foliage added its own shade; and each time the schoolmaster stole out of the sunlight into the porch, to peer up the nave, it was several moments before he could see anything at all. And then it was but a few high lights in a sea of gloom: first the east window, as yet unstained, its three quatrefoils filled with summer sky, the rest with waving branches; next, the brass lectern, the surplice behind it, the high white forehead above. Then in the chancel something gleamed: that was the coffin, resting on trestles. Then in the choir seats, otherwise deserted, a figure grew out of the shadows, a solitary and a massive figure, that stood even now when everybody else was seated, finely regardless of the fact. It was a man, elderly, but very powerfully built. The hair stood white and thick upon the large strong head, less white and shorter on the broad deep jowl. The head was carried with a certain dignity, rude, savage, indomitable. The eyes gazed fixedly at the opposite wall; not once did they condescend to the thing that gleamed upon the trestles. One great hand was knotted over the knob of a mighty stick, on which the old man leant stiffly. He

was dressed in black, not quite as a gentleman, yet as befitted the most substantial man but one in the parish. And that was Jasper Musk.

The parson finished the lesson, and his white brow bent over the closed book; the face beneath was bearded and much tanned, and in it there burnt an eye that came as a surprise after that formal voice; and the hand that closed the book was sensitive but strong. Stepping from the lectern, the clergyman declared his calibre in an obeisance towards the altar, then led the way slowly down the aisle. Bearers rose from the shades and followed with the coffin; they were almost at the porch before Jasper Musk took notice enough to limp after them with much noise from his stick. The congregation waited for him, swarming into the aisle in the big man's wake. So they came to the grave.

And there broad daylight revealed a circumstance that came as a shock to most of those who had followed the body from the church, but as an outrage to the officiating clergyman: the coffin bore no plate. Mr. Carlton coloured to the hair, and his deep eye flashed upon the chief mourner; the latter leant upon his stick and replied with a grim glare across the open grave. For a moment the wind washed through the trees, and every sparrow made itself heard; then the rector's eyes dropped to his book, but his voice rang colder than before. And presently the earth received its own.

Mr. Carlton had pronounced the benediction, and a solemn hush still held all assembled, when a bicycle bell jarred staccato

in the road; a moment later, with a sharp word for some children who had tired of the funeral and strayed across his path, the rider dismounted outside the saddler's workshop, a tiny cabin next his house and opposite the church. The cyclist was a lad in his teens, dark, handsome, dapper, but small for his age, which was that of high collars and fancy ties; and he rode a fancy bicycle, the high machine of the day, but extravagantly nickelled in all its parts.

"Well, Fuller," said he, "who are they burying?"

Fuller, the saddler, who enjoyed a local monopoly in the exercise of his craft, but whose trade was the mere relaxation of a life spent in reading and disseminating the news of the day, was spelling through the *Standard* at his bench behind the open window. He dropped his paper and whipped the spectacles from a big dogmatic nose.

"Gord love yer, Mr. Sidney, do you stand there and tell me you haven't heard?"

"How could I hear when I'm only home from Saturdays to Mondays? I'm on my way home now. Old Sally Webb – is it – or one of the old Wilsons?"

"No, sir," said the saddler; "that's no old person. Gord love yer," he cried again, "I wish that was!"

"Who is it, Mr. Fuller?"

"That's Molly Musk," said Fuller, slowly; "that's who that is, Mr. Sidney."

The boy had not the average capacity for astonishment; he was not, in fact, the average boy; but at the name his eyebrows shot

up and his mouth grew round.

"Molly Musk! I thought nobody knew where she was? When did she turn up?"

"Tuesday night, and died the next."

"But I say, Fuller, this is interesting!" Perhaps the average boy would have been no more shocked; he might not even have found it interesting. This one leant his bicycle against the wall, and his elbows on the bench within the open window. "Where's she been all this time?" he queried, confidentially. "What did she die of? What's it all mean?" And there was a knowing curl about the corners of his mouth.

"Mean?" said the saddler; "there's more than you want to know that, Mr. Sidney, but want must be their master. That old Jasper, *he* know, so they say; but I'm not so sure. It was he fetched her home, poor old feller; got the letter Monday morning, had her home by Tuesday night. That's a man I never liked, Mr. Sidney. I've said it to his face, and I'll say it as long as I live; but, Gord love yer, I'm sorry for him now! That's given *him* a rare doing and no mistake, and less wonder. A trim little thing like poor Molly Musk! Not that I'm so surprised as some; a man of my experience don't make no mistake, and I never did care for the breed. But there, even my heart bleed when that don't boil; as for the reverend here, he feel it as much as anybody else, and that *I* know. That young Jim Cubitt, he come by just now, and says he, 'He's taking the service as if it was a wedding.' 'You've been kicked out of the choir,' I says; 'that's what's the matter with you

still, or you wouldn't want a man to be a woman. Thank goodness there's one live man in the parish,' I says, 'though I don't fare to hold with him.' And no more I do, Mr. Sidney; but, Gord love yer, that make no difference to men of our experience. I like the reverend's Popery as little as the squire like it, and I tell him so, yet he go on bringing me the *Standard* every day when he've done with it. Is there another clergyman that'd do the like to a man that went against him in the parish? Would the Reverend Preston at Linkworth? Would the Reverend Scrope at Burton Mills? Or Canon Wilders, or any other man Jack of 'em? No, sir, not one!"

"But if he doesn't read them himself," said the boy, "it doesn't amount to so very much." And he laid his hand on three more *Standards*, unopened, with the parson's name in print upon the wrapper.

"What I was coming to," cried the saddler; "only when I get on the reverend my tongue will wag. They say he don't feel. I say he do, and I know: all this week I've had no *Standard*, so this morning I was so bold as to up and mention it, and there was all six unopened. 'Reverend,' I says, 'you must be ill – with that there Egyptian Question to argue about' – for we're rare 'uns to argue, the reverend and me – 'and no trace yet o' them Phœnix Park varmin!' But he shake his head. 'Not ill, Fuller,' he says; 'but there's tragedy enough in this parish without going to the papers for more. And I haven't the heart to argue even with you,' he says. So that's my answer to them as says our reverend don't feel."

The boy had been patiently pricking the bench with a saddler's

punch; now he raised his deliberate dark eyes and looked at the other point-blank.

"You talk about a tragedy," he said, "but you won't say where the tragedy comes in. What has killed the girl?"

"I hardly like to tell a young gentleman like you," said the saddler; "though, to be sure, you'll hear of nothing else in the village."

"Perhaps," said the boy, with a rather sinister smile, "I'm not quite so innocent as I ought to be. Come on, out with it!"

"Well, then, the poor young thing was brought home in trouble," sighed the saddler. "And in her trouble she died next night."

The boy looked at the man through narrow eyes with a knowing light in them, and the curves cut deep at the corners of his mouth.

"In trouble, eh? So that's why she disappeared?" he said at length. "Molly – Musk!"

II
THE CHIEF MOURNER

Jasper Musk remained some minutes at the grave, alone, and more than ever a mark for curious eyes; his own were raised, and his lips moved with a significance difficult to mistake, but in him yet more difficult to accept. The infidelity of the man was notorious, and, indeed, the raised face was not the face of prayer. It was flint bathed in gall, too bitter for faith, too savage for sorrow; it was a frozen sea of wrinkles without a single ripple of agitation. Yet the lips moved, and were still moving when Jasper Musk passed through the crowd now assembled about the gate, erect though halt, a glitter in his eyes, but that was all.

As the folk had waited and made way for him in the church, so they waited and made way outside. Thus, as he limped down into the road, Musk had the village almost to himself. He turned to the right, and the west wind blew in his face, strong and warm, with cloud upon cloud of yellow dust; overhead the other clouds flew high and white and broken, a flotilla of small sail upon the blue. But Musk was done gazing at the sky, neither did he look right or left as he trudged in the middle of the road. So the saddler's place, and then the woody opening of the road to Linkworth, with the white bridge gleaming through the trees, and the ripe leaves purling in the wind like summer surf, all fell behind on the

left; as, on the right, did the rectory gate, terminating that same flint wall which had been the children's grand stand. Rectory, church, and glebe stood all together, an indivisible trinity, with open uplands east and north. Westward began the cottages, buff-coloured, thatched; and it was cottages for half a mile, but healthy cottages, with plenty of space between, here a wheatfield, there a meadow; for every householder of Long Stow has also his holding of land, and there is no more independent parish in East Anglia. Of private houses that are not cottages, however, the village has only three: the rectory at one end, the hall near the other, and the Flint House between the two.

The Flint House now belonged to Jasper Musk. Report said that he had bought it outright for nine hundred pounds, with the meadow he was now passing on his left, and the wild garden reaching to the river. Originally part and parcel of the Long Stow estate, the place had been let for years, with a good slice of land, to London sportsmen who spent just two months of the twelve there. Musk had been the lessee's bailiff, and had feathered his nest so well that when the whole estate changed hands, and the part went with the whole, the ex-bailiff was in a position to buy a house and grounds for which the new squire had no use. None knew how he could have come honestly by so much profit; yet he was a man of tried integrity, but a hard man, and the last to get fair treatment behind his back. A more genuine marvel was the way in which he had spent his money, on a house that could scarcely fail to be a white elephant to such a man, and a hideous

house into the bargain. It abutted directly on the road, grim and rambling, with false windows like wall-eyes, and facets of flint so sharp that to brush against the wall was to rip a sleeve to ribbons. There were many rooms, musty and mice-ridden, and now only two old people to inhabit them. Musk had driven all his sons from home, thus doing his country an unwitting service, for there was the stuff that knits an empire in the blood. But only one daughter had been born to him, and now he had left her in the ground, and would wash his mind of her for ever.

The resolution was easier than its accomplishment: on his very threshold a shrill small cry assailed and insulted Jasper Musk. And in the parlour walked his wife, meek-spirited, flat-chested, leaden-eyed; too weary for much grief, as he was too bitter; in her thin arms an infant not four days old.

Musk put himself in her path.

"Stop walking!"

"That'll set him off again," sighed Mrs. Musk, though not before she had obeyed.

"I don't care," said Jasper. "That can cry till that die," he added brutally, as the fit returned; "and the sooner the better. Hold it up a bit. There, now! I want to have a look at the brat. I want to see who that's like!"

"It's like poor Molly," whimpered the grandmother, shedding tears that she could neither check nor hide.

Musk thumped his stick on the floor.

"Molly? Molly? You let me hear that name again! Haven't I

told you once and for all never to lay your tongue to that name, in my hearing or behind my back, as long as you live? Then don't you forget it; and none o' your lies. That's no more like her than that's like you. But a look of somebody it have, though I can't for the life of me think who. Wait a bit. Give me time. That'll come – that'll come!"

But the thin shrill screaming continued till the little red face grew livid and wrinkled almost beyond resemblance to its kind; then Musk relinquished his futile scrutiny, and signed to his wife to resume the walking, but himself remained in the room. And he leant on his stick as he had leant on it at the funeral; but here in his house he wore his hat; and from under its broad brim he followed them, backward and forward, to and fro, with smouldering eyes.

"Do you know what I've vowed?" he presently went on. "Do you know the oath I took, there at that open grave, when all the tomfoolery was over, and that Jesuit jerry-builder had taken his hook?"

"I'm sure I don't," sighed Mrs. Musk, as the child lay once more still against her withered bosom.

"I stood there," said Jasper, "and I swore I'd find the man. And I swore I'd tear his heart out when I've found him. And I'll do both!"

His voice rose so swiftly to so fierce a pitch that the woman started violently, and the infant wailed again. Instantly the room shook, and with one stride, paid for by a spasm of pain, the husband towered above the wife; and this time it was a heavy

hand upon her shrunk and shrinking shoulder that put a stop to the walk.

"Do *you* know who it is?" he cried. "My God, I believe you do!"

"I don't, indeed!"

"She never told you?"

"God knows she did not."

"Or anybody else?"

"I don't know."

"But you think – you think! I see it in your face. Who is it you think she may have told? I'll soon find out from him or her; trust me to wring that out!"

For answer, the woman subsided in sobs upon the horsehair sofa, rocking herself and the baby in her grief and terror. "You'll be that angry with me," she moaned; "you'll be right mad!"

"Oh, no, I sha'n't," said Musk, in a kindlier voice. "I'm not so bad as all that, though this do fare to make a man crazy. Tell away, old woman, and don't you be afraid."

"Oh, Jasper, it was when you were gone to Lakenhall for the doctor – that last time!"

"Well?"

"She knew the end was near. Poor thing! Poor thing!"

"What did she say?"

"That she'd die more happier if only she could speak – if only I would send – "

"Not for Carlton?"

The wife could only nod in her fear and desperation.

"You sent for that man the moment my back was turned?"

"Oh, I knew that'd make you right wild – I knew – I knew!"

Musk controlled himself by an effort.

"That don't. That sha'n't. I'll have it out of him, that's all; he's not the Church o' Rome yet! Go on. Go on."

"I went myself. No one knew. I left her alone time I was gone."

"And you brought him back with you?"

"Well, he got here first. He ran all the way."

"He knew better than to let me catch him. Jesuit! How long was he with her?"

"Not long, Jasper, not long indeed!"

"And you heard nothing?"

"Not a word. I stayed downstairs. I had to promise her that before I went. She had something to say to Mr. Carlton that nobody else must know."

"But somebody else shall!" said Jasper grimly. "That was it, you may depend; you should have listened at the door. But that make no matter. Somebody else is going to know before he's many minutes older!"

And an ugly smile broadened on the thick-set face; but the woman gasped. Quick as thought the child was on the sofa, the grandmother on her feet. Trembling and terrified, she stood in her husband's path.

"Jasper! You're never going up to the rectory?"

"I am, though – this minute!"

"Oh, Jasper!"

"Do you let me by."

"But I promised you should never know! You've made me break my solemn word! He'll know I've broken it!"

"Yes, I'm going to learn him a thing or two. Will you let me by?"

"*She'll* know – too – wherever she has gone to!"

"You'd better not keep me no more."

"Jasper! Jasper! On her death-bed I promised her – "

"Out of my light!"

III
A CONFESSION

The rector's study was on the ground floor, facing south. It was a long room, but narrow, and so low that the present incumbent, who stood six-feet-two, had contracted a stoop out of continual and instinctive dread of the ancient beams that scored his study ceiling, combined with a besetting habit of pacing the floor. There were two doors; one led into the garden, providing parishioners with immediate access to the rector when he was not to be found at the church; the other terminated an inner passage. Both were of immemorial oak, and, like the lattice casement over the writing table, both rattled in the least wind. Such was the room which the Reverend Robert Carlton haunted when driven or detained indoors: rickety, ill-lighted, and draughty when it was not close, it was still a habitable hole enough, and picturesque in spite of its occupant.

Optional surroundings afford a fair clue to the superficial man, but no real key to character; thus Mr. Carlton's furniture suggested a soul devoid of the æsthetic sense. He had the sense in all its fineness, but it found expression in another place. Like many ritualists, Carlton was a religious æsthete; none more fastidious in the service of the sanctuary; on the other hand, after the fashion of his peers in two Churches, the trappings

of his own life were severely simple. They had nearly all been purchased second-hand, those wire-covered shelves and the books they bore, that oak settle, and the huge arm-chair filled with miscellaneous lumber. Two baize-covered forms were there for the accommodation of various classes which the rector held; a prayer desk faced east in the one orderly corner of the room. Only three pictures hung on the walls; a Holy Family and Guido Reni's St. Sebastian, ordinary silver prints in Oxford frames, mementoes of a pilgrimage to Rome; and an ancient cricket eleven, faded from age, and fly-blown for long want of a glass. There were also a couple of tin shields, bearing the heraldic devices of Robert Carlton's public school and of his Oxford college, while a crucifix hung over the prayer desk. Among the books two volumes on *Building Construction* might have been remarked upon the settle, together with a tattered copy of Parker's *Introduction to Gothic Architecture*; among the lumber, a mason's trowel and a cold-chisel. Lastly, the study smelt, but did not reek, of common birdseye.

Jasper Musk, passing the open lattice, caught the parson hastily rising from his knees, not at the prayer desk, but beside his writing table, upon which a large book lay open. A newspaper lay on top of the book when Musk was admitted some moments after he had knocked.

He entered with his heavy, uneven steps, but took up a position barely within the threshold, and began by declining a seat with equal emphasis and stiffness.

"No, I thank you, Mr. Carlton. I've never been here before in your time, and I'm never likely to come again. I'm only here now to ask a question – and return a compliment!"

And the visitor's eye gleamed as Mr. Carlton creased the forehead that was so white in comparison with his face: at the moment this contrast was not conspicuous.

"From what I hear," explained Musk, "you've done me the kindness of coming to my house when my back was turned."

"And you have only heard of it now?"

"Within the last ten minutes; and I come here right straight. You may think I wouldn't come for nothing, me that's never darkened your door before to-day. I don't hold with you, Mr. Carlton, and I'm not the only one. That's true – I'm not a religious man, and never was; but, if I ever was to be, it wouldn't be your religion. No, sir, when I fare to want Christmas-trees in church I'll go to Rome and be done with it; and that's where you ought to be, Mr. Carlton, before you get a parcel of women to confess their sins to you as though you was God Almighty!"

Mr. Carlton sat quite still under this uncalled-for criticism; he even looked relieved, and one sensitive finger brushed the brown moustache to either side of his mouth.

"I have never advocated auricular confession," said he, "whatever I may think. I have merely said, to those in doubt, in difficulty, or in trouble, I will help them with God's help if I can."

"In trouble!" cried Musk scornfully. "I know one that never might have got herself into trouble if she'd never listened to you!

And that's what brings me here; I'll beat about the bush no more. My wife said she fetched you the other night. I don't blame you for going, I won't go so far as that. What I want to know, and what I mean to know, is this: did my – that young woman lying there – confess to you or did she not?" It was a fist that he had flung in the direction of the churchyard.

"Confess what?"

And the parson's voice was cold and constrained, as it had been beside the grave; but that white forehead glistened like a dead man's.

"The name of the father of her child!"

Carlton took an ivory paper-knife from his desk, and the thin blade snapped in two between his fingers. A pause followed. Musk stood like granite, stick and hat in hand, frowning down on the clergyman seated at his writing table. At length the latter looked up.

"I might say that is a question you have no right to ask, Mr. Musk; what is certain, had there been any question of confession, I should have no right to answer you. There was none. Your daughter sent for me, to speak to me; and speak we did; but she did not tell me that – scoundrel's – name."

"But you know!"

"How dare you say that?" cried Carlton; and a flash of anger played for an instant on his pallor.

"I see it in your face; but I'll have it out of you! I'll have it out of you," roared Musk, in a sudden frenzy, striking his stick to

the floor, "if I have to tear your smooth tongue out along with it! So smooth you could read over that murdered girl, and know all the time who'd murdered her, and think to keep that to yourself! But you sha'n't; no, that you sha'n't; not if I have to stand here till midnight. You know! You know! Deny it if you can!"

"I shall deny nothing," retorted the other. "No, I shall deny nothing!" he reiterated as if to himself. "But think for a minute, Mr. Musk – I entreat you to think calmly for one minute! Suppose I could tell you what you ask, could it serve any good end for you to know?"

"Good end!" cried Musk. "Why, you know it could. I could kill the man who's killed my daughter – and kill him I will – and swing for him if they like. That'll be a wonderful good end all round!"

"Then is it for me to throw temptation in your way? Is it for me to spoil a life, if not to end it? For all you know, Mr. Musk, it may be a life otherwise honest, useful, and of good report. Nay!" exclaimed Mr. Carlton, as if suddenly impatient of his own reticence, "I'll go so far as to say that it once was all three. And the man would do such duty – make such amends – "

A groan admitted that there were none to make, and finished a sentence to which Musk had not listened; the one before was sufficient for him; and his broad face shone with the satisfaction of a point gained.

"Come," said he, "that's fairer! So you do know him, and you say so like a man. I always took you for a man, sir, though there's

been no love lost between us; and I'll say I'm sorry I spoke so harsh just now, Mr. Carlton; for I had a hold of the wrong end o' the stick – I see that now. It was the man that confessed – it was the man. Sir, if you're the Christian gentleman that I take you for, and this here Christianity o' yours ain't all cant an' humbug, you'll tell me that man's name; for I can't call to mind a single one she so much as looked at – unless it was that young Mellis."

"No, no; poor George is innocent enough, God knows!"

"He's like to be, for all I hear. They say he carries a cross for you o' Sundays – but I won't say no more about that. If he's your right hand in the parish, as they tell me he is, at least I should hope he'd be straight."

A puff of wind came through the open window. It lifted the newspaper from the open book, but the rector's hand fell quickly upon both. And there it rested. And his wretched eyes rested upon his hand.

"So I've never thought twice about George Mellis. I'd as soon think o' you, sir. Then who can it be?"

Mr. Carlton bounded to his feet, white as his collar, and quivering to his nostrils.

"You want to know?"

"I mean to know, sir."

"And to kill him – eh?"

"I reckon I'll go pretty near it."

"Ah, don't do it by halves!" cried Carlton in a strange high voice. "Kill him now!" His hands fell open at his side; his head fell

forward on his breast; and he who had sinned grossly against God and man, yet was not born to be a hypocrite, stood defenceless, abject, self-destroyed.

Moments passed; became minutes; and all the sound in the rectory study came from the rattling of its inner door, or through the outer one from the garden. Then by degrees a hard breathing broke on Robert Carlton's ears; but he himself was the next to speak, flinging back his head in sudden misery.

"Why don't you strike?" he cried out. "You've got your stick; strike, man, strike!"

It seemed an hour before the answer came, in a voice scarcely recognizable as that of Jasper Musk, it was so low and calm; yet there was an intensity in the deep, slow tones that matched the fearful intensity of the fixed light eyes; and the massive face was still and livid from the short steel beard to the virile silver hair.

"Oh, yes, I'll strike!" hissed Musk. "I'll strike! I'll strike!" And he struck with his eyes until the other's fell once more; until the guilty man collapsed headlong in his chair, his arms upon the table, and his face upon his arms. "But I'll strike in my own way, thank you," Musk went on, "and in my own good time. You shall smart a bit first – learn what it's like to suffer – taste hell upon earth in case there's no hell for bloody murderers beyond! How I wish you could see yourself! How I wish your precious flock could see you – and they shall. Whited sepulchre.. filthy hypocrite.. living lie!"

Deliberately chosen, with long pauses between, with many a

rejection of the word that came uppermost – the worse word that was too strong to sting – these measured epithets carved round the heart that unbridled abuse would have stabbed and stunned. Carlton could hide his face, but he quivered where he sprawled, and the other nodded in savage self-esteem.

"Not that I had ought to be surprised," continued Musk; "it's what might have been expected of a Jesuit in disguise; the only wonder is I didn't suspect you from the first. I never set up for being a charitable man; but that seems I was a damned sight too charitable towards you. I thought no wrong, whatever else I may have thought of you and your ways. No; I may have jeered, I may have been vexed, but my mind wasn't nasty enough for that. God! that I can keep my stick off you, when I remember the choir practices, and the organ practices, and the Bible classes, and the Young Women's Christian Association. Sounds well, don't it? Young Women's Christian Association! Now we know what it meant; now we know what it all means, church and parsons, religion and all; a sink of iniquity and a set of snivelling, whining, licentious – "

"Stop!" cried Carlton, manned at last, and on his feet to enforce the word. "Say what you please of me, do what you will to me. Nothing is too bad for me – I deserve the very worst. But abuse my Church you shall not, in my hearing."

"His Church!" sneered Musk. "A lot you've done to make me respect it, haven't you? My God, can you stand there looking at me as if I were in the wrong instead o' you? Do you know what

you've done, and confessed to doing? You've murdered my girl, just as much as though you'd taken and cut her throat, you have: more, you've murdered her body and soul, you that snivel about the soul! And you can stand there and whine about your Church! Is that all you've got to say for yourself – to the father of the woman you've ruined to her grave?"

"That is all I have to say to you, Mr. Musk. I will not insult you by asking your forgiveness, much less by attempting to make the shadow of an excuse; there could be none; nor can there be any forgiveness for me from you or your wife; nor do I look for any mercy in this parish, or this world. Go, spread the news, and ruin me in my turn; it's what I deserve, and mean to bear."

"Not so fast," said Musk – "not so fast, if you please. So I'm to spread the news, am I? And do you think I'm so proud that's the reverend? By your leave, Mr. Carlton, I'll keep that same news to myself till I've had all I want from it."

"Any refinement you like," said Carlton. "It will not be too bad for me – or too much – please God!"

Jasper Musk put on his hat, but came close up to the clergyman before taking his leave.

"I wish I knew you better!" he ground out through his teeth. "I wish I'd made up to you like the women, instead of giving you the wide berth I have. Do you know why? Because I'd have known how to hit you hardest," said Musk, hissing like a snake; "because I'd have known where to hurt you most!"

Carlton stood a trifle more upright: his enemy's malice

ministered subtly to his remnant of self-respect.

"I wish I'd been a church-goer," continued Musk; "but it's never too late to mend! I may be there to-morrow to hear you preach; maybe I'll have a word to say myself; maybe I shall not. You'll know when the time comes, and not before."

Carlton quailed, for the first time at a threat, and his visible terror seemed to intoxicate the other. Seizing him by the shoulder as he had seized his wife, clutching him like a wild beast, and thrusting his great face to within an inch of that of the unhappy clergyman, Jasper Musk spat lewd names, and foul insult, and wanton blasphemy, until breath failed him. All the vileness he had heard in sixty years, and could recall in half as many seconds, poured from him in a very transport of insensate ribaldry; words that had never left his lips before, crowded to them now; and were still ringing in a swimming head when Robert Carlton woke to the fact that he was once more alone.

His first sensation was one of overwhelming nausea. His very vitals writhed; and he reeled heavily against an open bookcase, casting an arm along one of the upper shelves, and resting his face upon the sleeve. For a few moments all his weight was upon that arm; then he opened his eyes, and the titles of the books engaged his dazed attention. None was apt, but all were familiar, and the familiarity maddened the stricken man. He stood glaring from one low wall to another, filled with those doubts which are the cruel satellites of transcendent anguish. Had it really happened after all? The room was so unchanged, from the few things on the

walls to the many in the chair! All was so homely, so intimate, so reassuring; and no visible trace of Musk! Had he ever been there at all?

Ah, yes, for he had gone! In the distance a gate had squealed, and shut with a rattle; the sound had lain in his ear; now it sank to the brain. Now, too, another sound, intermittent all this time, but meaningless hitherto, assumed a like significance. This was the continued rustling of a newspaper, as the wind whisked in at the open door and out by the open window in invisible harlequinade. The man's mind fled back a little lifetime of minutes. And he recalled the last puff and rustle, and the quick falling of his own hand upon the paper, which lay on his desk, as the last event of a past era of his existence – the last act of Robert Carlton, hypocrite!

And what was the peril that had made the final demand upon his caution and his cunning? It was a new irony to perceive at once that it had existed chiefly in guilty imagination; to remove the paper, and to reveal nothing more incriminating than the parish register of deaths, with an unfinished entry in his own hand, a spatter of ink in place of a name, and some round white blisters lower down the leaf. Yet this it was that had brought Carlton to his knees an hour ago; and it brought him to his knees again, not at the desk of formal prayer, but here at his table as before.

"Father have mercy on me," he prayed, "for I neither deserve nor desire any mercy from man!"

IV
MIDSUMMER NIGHT

And while he knelt the situation was developing, with unforeseen and truly merciful rapidity, in an utterly unsuspected quarter; thus an aggressive knock at the inner door came in a sense as an answer to the prayer it interrupted.

The rectory servants consisted at this time of a small but entire family employed wholesale out of pure philanthropy. And this was the mother, red-hot in her cheap crape, to say that she had heard everything – could not help hearing – and that house was no longer any place for respectable women and an honest lad – no, not if they had to sleep in the fields. So the lad had got their boxes on a barrow, but he would bring it back. And they would go, all of them, to Lakenhall Union, sooner than stay another hour in that house of shame.

Mr. Carlton produced his cash-box without a word, and counted out a month's wages for each in addition to arrears. The poor woman made a gallant stand against the favour, but, submitting, returned to her kitchen of her own accord, and to her master's study in a quarter of an hour, to tell him she had laid the table, and there was a wire cover over the meat.

"And may God forgive you, sir!" cried she at parting. "I couldn't have believed it if I hadn't heard it from your own lips

with my own ears!"

There was much that Carlton himself could not believe. He sat half stupefied in his deserted rectory, like a man marooned, his one acute sensation that of his sudden solitude. What was so hard to realize was that the people knew! that the whole parish would know that night, and his own family next week, and the whole world before many days. He was well aware of the certain consequences of this scandal and its disclosure; he had faced them only too often during the nightmare of the past week, imagining some, ascertaining others. What seemed so incredible was that he had made the disclosure himself, that the very father had not suspected him to the end!

The last reflection convulsed him with self-contempt. What a hypocrite he must be! What an unconscious hypocrite, the worst kind of all!

Here he was eating his supper; he had no recollection of coming to the table; yet, now that he had caught himself, the food did not choke him, he was not sick with shame; he only despised himself – and went on.

It was dusk. He must have lit the lamp himself; as he lifted it from the table, having risen, he caught sight of its reflection and his own in the overmantel, and set the lamp upon the chimneypiece, and by its light had a better look at himself than he could remember having taken in his life before. There was no vanity in the man; he was studying his face out of sheer curiosity, from a new and quite impersonal point of view, as that of an

enormous hypocrite and voluptuary.

Human nature was very strange: he himself would never have suspected such a face. The forehead was so broad and high, the deep-set eyes so steadfast, and yet so fervid! They were the eyes of a zealot, but no visionary: wisdom and understanding were in that bulge of the brow over each. But the evil writing is lower down, unless you look for positive crime or madness; yet these nostrils were sensitive, not sensual; and the mouth, yes, the mouth showed between the short brown beard and the heavy brown moustache; but what it showed was its strength. No; neither weakness nor wickedness were there; even Robert Carlton admitted that. But to be strong, and yet to fall; to mean well, and do evil; to look one thing, and to be another: all that was to embody a type for which he himself had ever entertained an unbridled loathing and contempt.

He carried the lamp to his study, and as he entered from within there was a knock at the outer door. One was waiting to see the rector, one who had waited and knocked there oftener than any other in the parish.

Carlton drew back, and the impulse of flight was strong upon him for the first time. It needed all his will to shut the inner door behind him, and to cry with any firmness, "Is that George Mellis?"

In response there burst into the room a lad in knickerbockers, broad-shouldered, muscular, yet smooth-faced, and mild-eyed all his nineteen years; but this was the supreme moment of them all;

and his woman's eyes were on fire as he planted himself before the rector and his lamp, pale as ashes in its rays.

"Is it true?" he gasped. "Is it true?"

This lad was Carlton's chief disciple, his admirer, his imitator, his enthusiastic champion and defender; his right hand in all good works; nay more, his acolyte, his lieutenant of the sanctuary; and, before a broad chest so agitated, and innocent eyes so wild, the culprit's courage failed him at last, so that the truth clove to his tongue.

"It's all over the village," the lad continued in gasps. "You know what I mean. They're all saying it. They say you've admitted it; for God's sake say you haven't! Only deny it, and I'll go back and cram their lies down their throats!"

But by this Mr. Carlton had recovered himself, and was looking his last upon the anxious eager face of the lad who had loved and honoured him: his final pang was to see the eagerness growing, the anxiety lessening, his look misunderstood. And this time the admission was halt and hoarse.

What followed was also different; for, with scarcely a moment's interval, young Mellis burst into tears like the overgrown child that he was, and, flinging himself into the rector's chair, sobbed there unrestrainedly with his smooth face in his strong red hands. Carlton watched him by a prolonged effort of the will; he would shirk no part of his punishment; and no part to come could hurt much more than this. His fixed eyes were waiting for the boy's swimming ones when at length the

latter could look up.

"You, of all men!" whispered Mellis. "You who have kept us all straight – me for one. Why, the very thought of you has helped me to resist things! You, with your religion: no more religion for me!"

At that the other broke out; his religion he could still defend; or thought he could, until he came to try, and his own unworthiness slowly strangled the words in his throat.

"Say what you like," said Mellis; "it was you brought me to church; it's you who turn me away; and I'll go to no other after yours. Only to think – "

And he plunged into puerile reminiscences of their religious life in common, quoting extreme points in the rich ritual in which he had been privileged to assist, as though they aggravated the case, and made it more incredible than it was already.

"If our Lord Himself – "

It did not need the rector's finger to check that blasphemy; but the thing was said; the thought was there.

"Yes; better go," said Carlton, as the lad leapt up. "Go; and let no one else come near me who ever believed in me; for I can better face my bitterest enemies. Yet you – you must be one of them! After her own father, no man should hate me more!"

And there was a new pain in his voice, a new agony of remorse, as memory stabbed him in a fresh place. But the boy shook his head, and hung it with a blush.

"You think I cared for her," he said. "I thought so, too, until

she went away. I should have cared more then! It troubled me for a time; but I got over it; and then I knew I was too young for all that. Besides, she never looked at me after you came; that's another thing I see now; and I know I ran less after her. Yes, I was too young to love a woman," cried this village lad, "but I wasn't too old to love you, and look up to you, and follow you in all you did. I tell you the honest truth, Mr. Carlton," and his great eyes flashed their last reproach: "I'd have died for you, sir, I would! And I'd die now – thankfully – if it could make you the man I thought you were!"

This interview left Carlton's mind more a blank than ever. It might have been an hour later, or it might have been in ten minutes, that the thought occurred to him – if his dearest disciple felt thus, what must the enemy feel? And he was a man with enemies enough in the parish, having followed the old order of country parson, and that with more vigour than diplomacy. In eighteen months his reforms had been manifold and drastic beyond discretion. It is true that his preaching had won him more followers than his priestcraft had turned away. Yet a more acute ecclesiastic would have tapped the wedge instead of hammering it; the consummate priest would have condescended further in the direction of a more immediate and a wider popularity. Carlton had gone his own way, consulting none, attracting many, offending not a few. And he expected the speedy settlement of many a score.

Nor had he long to wait. Lamp in hand, he was locking up

the house as mechanically as he had fed his body; but one thing had pricked him in the performance, and he tingled still between gratitude and fresh grief. He had a Scotch collie, Glen by name, a noble dog, that was for ever at its master's heels. So, during any service, the chain was a necessary evil; but straight from his vestry, in cassock and biretta, the rector would march to his backyard to release the dog. To-day he had forgotten; nor was it till the master's round brought him to the back premises that the poor beast barked itself into notice. Then, indeed, the dazed man realized that his outer ear had been calmly listening to the barking for some time; and, with a small thing to be sorry for again, and one friend behind him, he continued his round, a sentient being once more.

It was upstairs that the dog barked afresh, causing Carlton to snatch his head from the basin of cold water in which he had sought to assuage its fever, and to go over to his open window, towel in hand. No sooner had he reached it than he started back, and stood very still with the water dripping from his beard. When he did dry his face it was as though he wiped all colour from it too. And it was six feet of quivering clay that returned on tip-toe to that open window.

The new moon was setting behind the trees towards Linkworth; there was no need of its meagre light. Lanterns, bright lanterns, were closing in upon the rectory: at first the unhappy man had seen lanterns only, swinging close to the ground, swilling the lawn with light. Stealthy legs, knee-deep in

this light, he remembered after his recoil. But not till he had driven himself back to the window did he see the set faces, or realize the fury of his people, kindled against him by his own confession of his own guilt.

When he saw this his nerve went, and he stood with clasped hands, the perspiration bursting from his skin. And the lanterns shook out into a chain along the edge of the lawn, and were held up to search the face of the house, all as yet without a word.

"That's his room," whispered one at last; "that – where the light is!"

It was the voice of the schoolmaster, himself a churchwarden, and withal an honest creature who was merely as many things as possible to as many men. His part had been a little difficult lately. "This has simplified it," thought the rector; and the twinge of bitterness did him good.

He was a man again for one moment; the next, "He's in his room," cried another, aloud; "that's him standing at the window!"

And there burst forth a howl of execration, that rose to a yell as the delinquent disappeared and in his panic put out the light.

"You coward!"

"Ah, you skunk!"

"Bloody Papist!"

"Hypocrite!"

They were the better names; each shot his own, and capped the last; the schoolmaster, mad with excitement, blaspheming with the best.

"Come down out of that, ye devil!"

"Do you show yourself, you cur!"

And this command Robert Carlton obeyed, his manhood rising yet again. But no sooner was he at the window than both panes crashed to powder over his head, and the surrounding bricks rang with the volley. The clergyman had a scratch from the falling glass, and a stone stung him on the hand. The blood bubbled in his veins.

"Cowards and curs yourselves!" he shouted down, shaking his fists at the crowd; and in ten seconds he was at the front door, with a couple of walking-sticks snatched from the stand. But he himself had turned the key and shot the bolt within the last few minutes, and this gave him time to think.

"Quiet, sir – quiet!" he cried to the dog at his heels. "They've right on their side," he groaned, "after all! Quiet, old doggie; come back; it's all deserved. And it's only the beginning of what we've got to bear!"

So he bore it, sitting on the stairs, where no window overlooked him, and soothing Glen with one hand, restraining him with the other; and yet, for his sin, despising his forbearance, even while he continued telling himself it was his duty to forbear.

And now breaking glass and barking dog made night a nightmare in the dark and empty house: the infuriated villagers were smashing the rectory windows one by one. Where the blind was up, the glass spread, and the stone flew far into the room; where the blind was down, stone and glass rattled against it, and

fell in one heap with one clatter. So dining-room and drawing-room were wrecked in turn, at short range, with the heaviest available metal, and much interior damage. And still the master of the house sat immovable within, nodding grimly at each crash; wincing more at the curses; and once releasing the dog to stop his ears altogether.

It was no use; curiosity compelled him to listen; he was forbidden to shirk one stripe. And that was a communicant, that cursing demon; this was the schoolmaster, yelling like one of his own boys; the other Palmer, of the Plough and Harrow, a very old enemy, hoarse as a crow with drink and triumph. Young Cubitt, again, who cheered each crash, was one of the disaffected; but till to-night most of this howling mob had been his flock. Now all the good work was undone, was stultified, the good seed poisoned in the ground; and not for the first, and not for the fiftieth time that week, the confessed rake asked himself whether more harm than good would not come of his confession.

Meanwhile, of all the voices that he heard and could distinguish, only one diverted his self-contempt for an instant. This was the soft, passionless voice of a young gentleman, evidently not himself engaged in the stone-throwing, pointing out panes still to break to those who were. This was the voice of Sidney Gleed.

The thing had gone on for ten minutes or more when the outcry altered in character: an interruption had occurred: was it the police? No, the rector of the parish was too well acquainted

with the character of its solitary constable. He would come up when all was over. Then who could this be?

The shower of stones had ceased as suddenly as it had begun. New oaths were flying in a new direction, and a voice hitherto unheard was heaping abuse on the abusers; with a strange thrill, the clergyman recognised it as the voice of Tom Ivey, the young contractor who was building the transepts; and he could remain no longer on the stairs. Stealing into the drawing-room, he stumbled across a crackling drift of glass, and, unnoticed now, stood in the wrecked bow-window, with the fresh air upon his face once more.

Lanterns were skipping right and left, their erratic rays giving momentary glimpses of a stalwart figure in pursuit, a stick whirling about his ears, and resounding on the backs and shoulders of the retreating rabble. Some stayed to stone the new foe before they ran; and one, Palmer the publican, set his lantern on the gravel and squared up in style. Robert Carlton never saw what followed; for at this moment his maddened dog, which had been tearing about the house in search of an outlet, bounded past him through the shattered window; and, when the rout was complete, the inn-keeper's lantern was a solitary star in the nether darkness. Then the gate clattered, a swinging step approached, and Tom Ivey caught up the lantern in his stride.

Carlton sprang through the window to meet him, every other emotion sunk for the moment in one of overflowing gratitude.

"Tom," he cried, "how can I thank you – "

"Keep your thanks to yourself."

"But – Tom – "

"Don't 'Tom' me! Keep your distance too. Do you think I haven't heard about it? Do you think I'd lift a finger for *you*– let alone a stick? No, sir, I'd liefer take that to your own back; but I fare to mind when the Rector of Long Stow was a good man, who didn't preach too tall, but acted up to what he did preach; and I won't see the house he lived in wrecked and ruined because a blackguard's followed him."

"I am all that," said Mr. Carlton. "Go on!"

The other stared, not so much disarmed as confounded.

"I'm sorry to open so wide, and you know I'm sorry," he at length burst out. "'Tain't for me to call you over, sir, and I won't tell you no more lies. I couldn't bear to see them snarling curs setting on you the moment you was down, and that's the truth! But it wasn't what I come back to say," continued Ivey doggedly. "I come back to say you can get another party to go on with that there building, for I won't work no more for you. The plant's yours; you found that for the job; you can find more men. I throw up the contract: take the law of me if you like."

Robert Carlton was back in his study. It was the one front room which had escaped inviolate; the open lattice had saved it; not a pebble added to the old disorder. The rector sighed relief as he held up the lamp on entering; then he shot the rubbish out of the big arm-chair, and himself lay back in it like the dead. A bloody smear, where the glass had grazed his cheek,

enhanced his pallor; his eyes were closed; no muscle moved. And yet his wits clung to him like wolves, till presently the white brow wrinkled, the heavy eyelids twitched.

"May I come in, reverend?" said the saddler's voice.

Carlton assented with a sigh, but did not raise himself to greet the visitor, who came in mopping his forehead, reversed the chair at the writing table, and seated himself with ominous deliberation. Then he mopped again, and was slow to speak; but his scornful expression prepared the clergyman for more of that which he was resolved to bear.

"Pharisees!" cried Fuller at last. "Humbugs and hypocrites!"

The words were precisely those which Robert Carlton expected and must endure, but against the plural number he felt bound to protest. "We are not all alike, Mr. Fuller," he said; "thank God, I am but one out of many thousands."

"You?" cried the saddler. "Gord love yer, reverend, did you think I meant *you*? No, sir, it's the stupid fools and canting cowards *I* mean, that take and hit a man as soon as ever he's down; not the man they hit."

Mr. Carlton sat silent, astounded, and tingling between pain and pleasure. He fancied he had run through the gamut of the emotions, but here was a new one that he feared to dissect.

"Not the man," proceeded the saddler in raised tones – "not the man who is worth the rest of the parish put together – saint or sinner – guilty or innocent!"

Yes, it was pleasure! It was pleasure, acute and lawless,

wicked, ungovernable, and yet to be governed. To have one man's sympathy, how sweet it was, but how shameful in a guilty heart that would be contrite too! It had brought a colour to his face, a light to his eyes; ere the one had faded, and the other failed, Robert Carlton's will had frozen that tiny rill of comfort at its fount.

"You mustn't say that," was his belated reply; but it came curt and cold enough to please himself.

"But I do say it," cried old Fuller, "and I will say it, and I won't say a word more than I mean. Let there be no mistake between us, reverend: I don't deny I felt what *is* felt when first I heard; but when I come to think of it, that fared to break my heart more'n to make that boil; and when I thought a bit deeper, I see how easy that is to make bad worse. Not as it ain't right bad; but that wasn't for us to make it worse. So it was me fetched Tom Ivey. And now he tells me what he ups and says himself when all was over. 'Gord love yer, Tom,' says I, 'you'll be ashamed of that when you're a man of my experience! You forget the good our reverend's been doing amongst us all this time, and you think only o' this here evil. I'll go up,' says I, 'and I'll show him there's one fair-minded, level-headed man o' the world in this here hotbed o' fools and Pharisees.'"

"But Tom was right, and you were wrong."

"Don't tell me, reverend," said the saddler, edging his chair nearer to the long limp figure under the lamp. "You can't undo the good you've once done, not if you try. Leave religion out of

it, and look at all you've done for the poor: look at the coal club, and the book club, and the dispensary, and the Young Man's – "

"Unhappily, Fuller, all this is beside the question."

And the cold tone was no longer put on; neither did it cover an emotion which called for conscientious suppression; for these officious sallies only fretted the spirit they were intended to soothe.

"Well, then," rejoined Fuller, "if you prefer it, and for the sake of argument, look at a poor old feller like me. What should *I* ha' done without you, reverend? I don't come to church, yet you take no offence when I tell you why, but you argue the point like a rare 'un, and you lend me the paper just the same. The Reverend Jackson wouldn't ha' done it, though I durs'n't stay away in his day; he'd have stopped my livelihood in a week. So don't you fare to make yourself out worse than you are, reverend; you've done wrong, I allow, but so did Solomon, and so did David; and weren't so quick to own up to it, either! Like them, you've done good, too, and plenty of it, and that sha'n't be forgotten if I can help it. As for the poor young thing that's gone – "

"Don't name her, I beg!"

"Very well, sir, I won't. I'm as sorry as the rest o' the parish; but we shouldn't be unfair because we're sorry. They may say what they like, but a man of my experience knows that nine times out of ten the woman's more to blame – "

"Out of my house!"

Carlton had leapt to his feet, was standing at his full height

for the first time that night, and pointing sternly to the door. His face was white with passion. The saddler's jaw dropped.

"What, sir?" he gasped.

"Out of my sight – this instant!"

"For sayun – "

"For daring to say one half of what you have said! It's my own fault. I've spoilt you; but out you go."

Fuller rose slowly, amazed, bewildered, and mortified to the quick. He was a kind-hearted man, but he had all the superior peasant's obstinacy and self-conceit: the one had helped to bring him to the clergyman's side, the other to wag his tongue. Yet his sympathy was genuine enough; and the theory, of which the bare hint had spilled vials of wrath upon his head, was in fact his profound conviction. Smarting vanity, however, was the absorbing sensation of the moment. And for the next hour the saddler could have returned every few minutes with some fresh retort; but in the moment of humiliation he could not rise above a grumble:

"I might as well have thrown stones with the rest!"

"Better," the clergyman cried after him. "You had a right to punish me; to pity and excuse me you had none. Least of all – "

He broke off, and stood at his door till the quick steps stopped, and the gate clattered, and the steps died away. The night was dark, and this end of the village already very still: the Plough and Harrow was nearer the other. The wind had not fallen; a murmur of very distant thunder came with it from the west. Nearer home

a peewit called, and Robert Carlton caught himself wondering whether there would be rain before morning.

V
THE MAN ALONE

At midnight he was still alone, and the slow torture of his own thoughts was still a relief. As the dining-room clock struck – he noted its preservation – and the thin strokes floated through those broken windows and in at that of the study, he gave up listening for the next step. His privacy seemed secure at last. He could abandon his spirit to its proper torments; he could enter upon another night in hell. Yet, even now, the worst was over, and there would be no more nights of secret grief, secret remorse, secret shame. He had confessed his sin, and thereby earned his right to suffer. No more to hide! No more deceit! He could not realize it yet; he only knew that his heart was lighter already. He felt ashamed of the relief.

Yet another night came back to him as he paced his floor: a last year's night when the full moon shone through ragged trees. It also had been worse than this: it was the inner life that lay in ruins then. He remembered pacing till sunrise as he was pacing now: such a still night but for that; one had but to stand and listen to hear the very fall of the leaf. He remembered thus standing, there at the door, in the moonlight, and a line that had buzzed in his head as he listened.

"And yet God has not said a word!"

God had spoken now!

And the man was glad.

Glad! He almost revelled in his disgrace; it produced in him unexpected sensations – the sensations of the debtor who begins to pay. Here was an extreme instance of the things that are worse to dream of than to endure. He felt less ignominious in the hour of his public ignominy than in all these months of secret shame. He was living a single life once more. The wind roamed at will through the damaged house as through the ribs of a wreck; and its ruined master drew himself up, and his stride quickened with his blood. He was no longer lording it in his pulpit, the popular preacher of the countryside, drawing the devout from half a dozen parishes, a revelation to the rustic mind, a conscious libertine all the while, with a tongue of gold and a heart of lead. More than all, he was no longer the one to sit secure, in loathsome immunity, in sickening esteem: he, the man! The woman had suffered; it was his turn now. Woman? The poor child.. the poor, dead, murdered child.. Well! the wages of his sin would be worse than death; they were worse already. And again the man was glad; but his momentary and strange exultation had ended in an agony.

The poor, poor girl.

No; nothing was too bad for him – not even the one thing that he would feel more than all the rest in bulk. He put his mind on that one thing. He dwelt upon it, wilfully, not in conscious self-pity, but as one eager to meet his punishment half-way, to shirk none of it. The attitude was characteristic. The sacrificial

spirit informed the man. In another age and another Church he had done barbaric violence to his own flesh in the name of mortification. Living in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a mere Anglican, he was content to play tricks with a fine constitution in Lent.

"I will look my last upon it," he said aloud: "it would be insulting God and man to attempt to take another service after this; I have held my last, and laid my last stone. Let me see what I have sown for others to reap."

And he picked his way through the darkness to the church.

The path intersected a narrow meadow with the hay newly cut, and lying in tussocks under the stars; a light fence divided this reef of glebe from the churchyard; and, just within the latter, a lean-to shed faced the scaffolding of the north transept, its back against the fence. The shed was flimsy and small, but it had come out of the rector's pocket; the transepts themselves were to be his gift, because the living was too good for a celibate priest, and it was his sermons that had made the church too small. So he had paid for everything, even to the mason's tools inside the shed, because Tom Ivey had never had a contract before and lacked capital. And the out-door interest of the building had formed a healthy complement to the engrossing affairs of the sanctuary; and, indeed, they had developed side by side. Perhaps the material changes had proved the more absorbing to one who threw himself headlong into whatsoever he undertook. Of late, especially, it had been remarked that the reverend was taking

quite an extraordinary part in these proceedings: cultivating a knack he had of carving in stone; neglecting cottages for his mason's shed; and tiring himself out by day like a man who dreads the night. How he had dreaded it none had known, but now all might guess.

Yet he had loved his work for its own sake, not merely as a distraction from gnawing thoughts; there was in him something of the elemental artist: the making of anything was his passionate delight. And now the scene of his industry inflicted a pang so keen that he forgot to appreciate it as part of his deserts; and, for the moment, priest and sinner disappeared in the grieving artist, bidding good-bye not only to his studio, but to art itself. It was very dark; the place was strewn with uncut boulders, poles, barrows, heaps of rubble; but he knew his way through the litter, and, in the double darkness of the shed, could lay his hand on anything he chose. He took something down from a shelf. It was a gargoyle of his own making, meant for the vestry door in the south transept. He stood with it in both hands, and his thumbs felt the eyes and his palms the cheeks, at first as gently as though the stone were flesh, then suddenly with all his strength, as if to crush the grotesque head to powder. It was not a useful thing: no water could spout from the sham mouth which he had wrought with loving pains. It was only his idea for finishing off the label moulding of the vestry door; it was only something he had made himself – for others to throw away, or to keep and show as the handiwork of the immoral rector of Long Stow. He restored it to

his place; and retraced his sure steps through the rubbish, artist no more. Good-bye to that!

He crossed over to the church, went round to the porch, and entered by the only door in use during the alterations. Eighteen months ago he would have found it locked. It was he who had opened the House of God to all comers at all hours, and made every sitting free. He stole up the aisle as one seeing in the dark. His feet fell softly on the matting, where in early days they had clattered on bare flags, and yet more softly when they had mounted a step without stumbling. The matting in the aisle was his addition, the rich carpet in the chancel was his gift. All his innovations had not provoked dissension. Presently he lit a lamp, a Syrian treasure, highly wrought, that hung over the lectern: he had bought it at Damascus, years before, for his church when he should have one. Yes; he had given freely to God's House, to make it also the House Beautiful, though he took no trouble to adorn his own.

And this was to be the end! For events could take but one course now: a complaint to the bishop (all the parish would sign it), a summons to the palace, a trial at the consistory court; suspension certainly; deprivation, perhaps; he had been at some pains to inform himself on the subject. The bishop would be sore. He had taken such an interest in everything at the confirmation, his sympathy had been so full and unexpected, his approval so stimulating, so hearty and frank! Carlton was ashamed of thinking of his bishop instead of praying to God upon his knees.

He longed to kneel and pray, for the last time, there at the table which he chose to call the altar, but which he had found ugly and bare, and was leaving richly laden and richly hung. In the small and distant light of the lectern lamp he stood gazing at the damask hangings, the green frontal, the silver candlesticks, the flowers from his own garden – the flowers he grew for this. He longed to kneel, but could not. He could not pray. He could not weep. His heart was a grave, and the grave filled in and the weight of the earth upon his spirit. He had been quite wrong an hour ago. *This* was the blackest hour of all. To have done and given so much, and to lose it all! To have set his whole soul for years towards the light, to have striven so to turn the souls of others; and to be thrust into outer darkness for one sin!

This wave of bitterness, of blind rebellion and human egotism, bore him out of his church, for the last time, in a passion of defiance and self-defence: a sudden and deplorable change in such a man at such an hour. Happily, it was short-lived. His angry stride brought him tripping into fresh earth, and he started back, aghast at his egotism, stunned afresh by his sin, and overwhelmed by such a flood of penitence and remorse as even he had not endured before. Under his eyes the new grave was growing clearer in the starlight, and not less cruel, and not less cold. An hour later he was still kneeling over it, and his tears had not ceased to flow.

VI
FIRE

Witnesses have differed as to the exact hour at which the inhabitants of Long Stow, sound asleep after excitement enough for one night, were frightened from their beds by a sudden and violent ringing of the church bells. The midsummer night was as dark as ever, and so it remained or seemed to remain for a considerable time. It cannot have been more than two o'clock.

A few minutes before the alarm, Robert Carlton had forced himself to his feet, to be struck with fresh shame at two apparent evidences of the mood in which he had quitted the church. He had left the door wide open and the church lit up. Every stone showed on the path, in the stream of light poured upon it from the porch, into which, however, it was impossible to see from where the rector stood. The porch projected from the south side, while the new grave was directly opposite the west window, every square of which stood out against the glare within. An instant's reflection showed Carlton that this could not be the light which he had left; he went to see what it was. A sudden heat upon his face broke the truth to him in the porch, and in a stride he knew the worst. A little fire was raging in the church: two or three pews were in flames.

Robert Carlton stood inactive for a score of seconds. It looked

the kind of fire that a vigorous man might have beaten out with his coat. Yet one in the full vigour of his manhood stood thinking a score of thoughts while the flames bit through the varnish into the wood. Nor was this the fascination of horror: the fire looked such a little fire at the first glance. It was rather the obsession of an astounding puzzle: what in the world could have caused a fire at all?

A guilty feeling came in answer: he must have dropped the match with which he lit that lamp. The feeling escaped in the simultaneous discovery that the lamp in question had been extinguished, but that it and others were slightly awry, and one or two still swaying on their chains, as though all the lamps had been rudely meddled with. And now horror came. The flames were spreading with curious facility, shooting their blue tongues over the woodwork before the yellow fangs took hold, but all so quickly that the burning area seemed to have doubled itself in these few seconds, while from the heart of it there came the crisp crackle of quicker fuel, culminating in a blaze as though a rick had caught; and, sure enough, as these flames leapt high, their source was revealed in a pile of the rector's new straw hassocks.

The puzzle was one no more: plainer work of incendiary was never seen. Through the smoke now swinging in black coils to the roof, the east window showed in holes made within the last hour, obviously to promote the draught that blew in Carlton's face as he rushed back to the open door and laid hold of all the bell-ropes at once.

The bells were small and jangling; a new peal, and a tower to hang them in, were among the things which the rector had said that he would have some day. But as the old bells clanged for the last time, in the dead of that summer night, they were heard at Linkworth, a mile and a half across the wind, but down the wind they rang up half Bedingfield, which is three good miles from Long Stow.

The first inhabitant to reach the scene was the fleet and sturdy Tom Ivey, whose mother kept the post-office in the middle of the village; as he ran the ringing stopped, and the first glass smashed with the heat, flame and smoke making a mouthpiece of the mullioned window in the north wall as Tom dashed up by the short cut through the rectory garden. He was greatly alarmed at finding no one in the churchyard, and rushed into the church with the full expectation of discovering the ringer senseless at his post. What he did find was the rector, standing within the church, to windward of the conflagration, his back to the door, absorbed, as it seemed, in a perfectly passive contemplation of the fire.

"Mr. Carlton!" shouted Tom.

Before replying, the clergyman spun something into the heart of the flames; in the thickening smoke it was impossible to see what; but the same second he was round upon his heel, coughing and choking, his face black, his eyes fires themselves, purpose and determination in every limb.

"Tom? Thank God it's you! We must get this under. Out of it before we suffocate!" And with his own rush he carried the

builder into the open air.

"What's done it, sir?"

"Done it? Wait till we've undone it! We can if we work together. Ah! here are more of you. Buckets, men – buckets!" cried Carlton, rushing to meet a half-dressed medley at the gate, and commanding them as though there had been no other meeting earlier in the night. "You who live near, run for your own; the rest into my kitchen and find what you can; buckets are the thing! One of you pump; the rest form line from my well to the church, and keep passing along. You see to it, Mr. Jones!"

And for a while the schoolmaster and churchwarden, carried away as usual by his feelings and self-importance, was as busy enforcing the rector's orders as he had made himself in breaking his windows an hour or two before.

"Let one man ride or run for the Lakenhall engine; not you, Tom!" exclaimed the clergyman, seizing Ivey by the arm. "They'll be all night coming, and I can't spare you."

"I'll stay, sir."

"Water's no use to windward of a fire; it's spreading straight up the church. We want to be on the other side to stop it."

"The aisle's not afire!"

"But they couldn't get the water to us, even if we got through alive. No; where the walls are down for the transepts – that's the place. Which side's boarded strongest?"

"Both the same, sir."

"Then we'll hack through the nearest! A saw and an axe, and

we'll be through by the time the first bucketful's ready for us."

And, friends again, but both unconscious of the change, they rushed together to the shed of which Robert Carlton had so lately taken leave: in the fever of the moment even that leave-taking was forgotten.

It was the north transept which faced the shed. Already the walls were a dozen feet high, but a doorway had been left. The greater gap between transept and nave was vertically boarded over within the church, and on these boards fell the rector with his axe, to make an opening for Tom's saw. They had light enough for their work. The interstices between the boards were as the red-hot strings of a colossal harp; quickly a couple were cut, and the boards beaten in; and it was as though the wind had come down a smoking chimney. The pair fell back on either side of the black stream that gushed out like water. Then cried Carlton in his voice of command:

"Look here! you stay where you are, Tom."

"With you, sir?"

"No, I must have a look; but one's enough."

"Not for me, Mr. Carlton. I follow you."

"Then you keep me where I am," said Carlton, sternly.

"All right, sir! You follow me!"

Next instant they were both through the breach, the builder first by the depth of his chest. And they stood up within, but were glad to crouch again out of the smoke. Already a dense reek hid the roof, and every moment added to the depth of that

inverted sea. It was a sea of ineffectual currents, setting towards the smashed windows, the new breach, the open door, but caught and diverted and sucked into the inky whirlpool that the wind made under the roof, and escaping only by chance fits and sudden starts. On the other hand, there was still air enough to breathe within a few feet of the ground, and with water it seemed as if something might yet be done. But it was no longer a very little fire: at best the nave must be gutted now; to save roof and chancel was the utmost hope. Yet here and there the worst seemed over. The blazing hassocks were now only a glowing heap, and still the roof had not caught. As the two men crouched and watched, the flames felt the front pews with their splay blue tentacles, and the woodwork which was still untouched glistened like a human body in pain.

"You see that?" said Mr. Carlton, pointing to this moisture.

"What is it?"

"Paraffin! Look at the lamps; he's simply emptied them – "

"Who, sir – who?"

"God knows, and may God forgive him! I have enemies enough this morning, though not more than I deserve. If only they will be my friends for one hour, for the sake of the church! Are they never coming with that water? Run and tell them a bucketful would make a difference now, but cartloads will make none in ten more minutes! And tell them what I said just now: bid them for God's sake think of nothing but the fire till we get it under."

He was thinking of nothing else himself, confident still of

some measure of success, only fretting for his water. In Ivey's absence he stripped to the waist, and with his long coat essayed to beat the little flames out as they spread and leapt, the blue and yellow surf of the encroaching tide; but for one he extinguished he fanned a hundred, so he retreated before he was flayed alive. And they found him stooping near the opening, half-naked, scorched, begrimed, but not disheartened; a strange figure in the place that knew him best in vestments, if any of them thought of that.

The first man had a bucket in each hand, but had spilt freely from both in his haste. Carlton would not let him in, but received the buckets through the hole, dashed their contents over the burning pews, and returned them empty without waiting to see results. When he had time to look, a little steam was rising, but the fire raged with undiminished fury. The next comer was a boy with a brimming watering-can; but it is difficult to fling water with effect from such a vessel, and pouring was impossible in the increasing heat. Then came Tom Ivey with two more buckets.

"Keep outside," cried Carlton, taking them. "There's only work for one in here. Can't they form line as I said, and pass along instead of carrying?"

"No, sir – not enough of us for the distance."

"Not enough of you who'll put the church before the parson! That's what you mean. The parson may deserve burning alive, but the poor church has done no wrong!"

And he continued his exertions in a bitter spirit not warranted

by the real circumstances, for his masterful monopoly of all danger had won some sympathy outside, and many a one who had flung a stone was running with a bucket now. More, however, stood with their hands in their pockets; for East Anglia is constitutionally phlegmatic, and not all the village had joined in the indignant excesses of the evening.

The saddler came no farther than the fence in front of his house and workshop. He was that implacable creature, the offended countryman.

George Mellis did not even see the fire; already he had shaken the dust of Long Stow from his feet for good.

Thus, of the three types, as far removed from one another as the points of an equilateral triangle, who had put in their individual word of reproach, of denunciation, and of sympathy more insufferable than either, only one was present on this lurid scene; but that one was doing the work of ten.

"That there Tom Ivey," said one of a group on the safe side of the rectory fence, "he fares all of a wash. Yet I do hear as how he come up to the rectory when he'd cleared the garden and called Carlton over somethun wonderful."

"I lay it was nothun to the calling over he had from Jasper."

"Where is Jasper?"

"Been indoors ever since: a touch of the old trouble, the missus told Jones when he called."

"That's a pity. This would've soothed his sore."

One or two observed that that fared to soothe theirs; for there

was no reaction on the safe side of the fence. But the worst said in the Suffolk tongue was invariably capped by a different order of voice, which chimed in now.

"The best thing Carlton can do is to cockle up with his church. The governor'll build you a new church and find a new man to fill it. There's nobody keener on a change as it is. I should like to be there when he hears."

The speaker was smoking a cigarette on a barrow wheeled from the shed. He might have been watching a display of fireworks, and one which was beginning to bore him. His unmoved eye sought change. It found the sexton hobbling in the glare.

"Hi, Busby! Come here, I want you. What the dickens do you mean by setting fire to the church?"

"Me set fire to it, Master Sidney? Me set a church afire? He! he! you allus fare to have yer laugh."

"It will be no laughing matter for you when you're run in for it, Busby."

"Go on, Master Sidney; you know better than that."

"I wish I did. They hang for arson, you know! But I say, Busby, how's the frog?"

The wizened face grew grave, but only as the screen darkens between the pictures; next instant it was alight with the ineffable joy of gratified monomania. The sexton hobbled nearer, clawing his vest.

"Oh, that croap away; that's at that now! Would 'ee like to

listen, Master Sidney?"

"No, thanks, Busby; don't you undo a button," said the young gentleman, hastily. "I can hear it from where I am."

The sexton went into senile raptures.

"You can hear it? You can hear it? Do you all listen to that: he can hear it, he can hear it from where he sit. The little varmin, to croap so loud! That must be the fire. That fare to make him blink! An' Master Sidney, he can hear him from where he sit!"

The sexton hurried off to spread his triumph; but he boasted to deaf ears. There was a sudden light below the sharp horizon between black roof and slaty sky, yet no flame rose above the roof. It was as though the southern eaves had caught. Ivey rushed out of the north transept. Mr. Carlton followed, axe in hand. His chest and arms were smudged and inflamed, his blinking eyelids were burnt bare, and the sweat stood all over him in the red light leaping from the shivered windows.

"It's no use, lads!" he called to those still running with the buckets; "the boards have caught on the other side. Come and help me smash them in, and we may save the chancel yet! Every man who is a man," he shouted to the group across the fence, "come – lend a hand to save God's sanctuary!"

And he led the way with his axe, stinging to the waist in the open air, but drunk with battle and the battle's joy. And there was no more talking behind the rectory fence; not a man was left there to talk; even Sidney Gleed had dropped his cigarette to follow the inspired madman with the axe.

The south transept was a stage less advanced than the north. Carlton got upon one low wall, ran along it to that of the nave, and swung his axe into the burning wood to his right. A rent was quickly made; he leapt into the transept and improved it, his axe ringing the seconds, the muscles of his back bulging and bubbling beneath the scorched skin. Men watched him open-mouthed. It seemed incredible that such nerve, such sinew, such indomitable virility, should have hidden from their vengeance that very night.

"A ladder!" he cried. "There's one behind the shed."

The wood screen was rent, but not to the top. Below, the fire was checked, but above it still crawled east. Waiting for the ladder, Carlton employed himself in widening the gap that he had made; when it came, he had it held vertically against the eaves, left intact above the boarding, and ran up to finish his own work with the axe held short in his left hand. A couple of planks were smashed in unburnt. He stayed on the ladder to see whether the flames would leap the completed chasm, stayed until the rungs smoked under his nose. When the burning boards fell in on his left, and those on his right did not even smoulder, he returned quickly to the ground.

Throats which had groaned that night were parching for a cheer. The time was not ripe. A shrill cry came instead: the boarding upon the other side had ignited in its turn.

"Round with the ladder," cried the rector; "we'll soon have it out. We know more about it now. We'll save the chancel yet! Find another axe; we'll begin top and bottom at once."

And now the scene was changing every minute. A sky of slate had become a sky of lead. The tens who had witnessed the first stages of the fire had multiplied into hundreds. Frightened birds were twittering in the trees; frightened horses neighed in the road; every kind of vehicle but a fire-engine had been driven to the scene. Among the graves stood a tall and aged gentleman, with the top-hat of his youth crammed down to his snowy eyebrows, and an equally obsolete top-coat buttoned up to his silver whiskers, in conversation with Sidney Gleed.

"The damned rascal!" said the old gentleman. "But how the devil did it come out?"

"Musk seems to have smelt a rat, and went to him after the funeral. And he owned up as bold as brass; the servants heard him. There he goes, up the ladder again on this side. Keeps the fun to himself, don't he? Who's going to win the Leger, doctor? Shotover again?"

"Damn the Leger," said Dr. Marigold, whose sporting propensities, bad language, and good heart were further constituents in the most picturesque personality within a day's ride. "To think I should have stood at her death-bed," he said, "and would have given ten pounds to know who it was; and it's your High Church parson of all men on God's earth! The infernal blackguard deserves to have his church burnt down; but he's got some pluck, confound him."

"Sucking up," said Master Sidney: "playing to the gallery while he's got the chance."

"H'm," said the doctor; "looks to me pretty badly burnt about the back and arms. If he wasn't such a damned rascal I'd order him down."

"He's doing no good," rejoined the young cynic, "and he knows it. He's only there for effect. Look! There's the roof catching, as any fool knew it must; and here's the Lakenhall engine, in time for 'God save the Queen.'"

Dr. Marigold swore again: his good heart contained no niche for the heir to the Long Stow property. He turned his back on Sidney, his face to the sexton, who had been at his elbow for some time.

"Well, Busby, what are you bothering about?"

"The frog, doctor. That croap louder than ever."

"You infernal old humbug! Get out!"

"But that's true, doctor – that's Gospel truth. Do you stoop down and you'll hear it for yourself. Master Sidney, *he* heard it where he sit."

"Did he, indeed! Then he's worse than you."

"But that steal every bit I eat; that do, that do," whined the sexton. "I've tried salts, I've tried a 'metic, an' what else can I try? That fare to know such a wunnerful lot. Salts an' 'metics, not him! He look t'other way, an' hang on like grim death for the next bit o' meat. That's killin' me, doctor. That's worse nor slow poison. That steal every bite I eat."

"Well, it won't steal this," said the doctor, dispensing half-a-crown. "Now get away to bed, you old fool, and don't bother me."

And neither thanks nor entreaties would divert his eyes from the burning church again.

The antiquated doctor was one of Nature's sportsmen: his inveterate sympathies were with the losers of up-hill games and games against time; and this blackguard parson had played his like a man, only to lose it with the thunder of the fire-engine in his ears. The roof had caught at last; in a little it would be blazing from end to end; and half-a-dozen country fire-engines, and half a hundred Robert Carltons, could do no good now. Carlton came slowly enough down his ladder this time, and stood apart with his beard on his chest.

"Hard lines, hard lines!" muttered Dr. Marigold in his top-coat collar; and "Those slow fools! Those sleepy old women!" with his favourite participle in each ejaculation.

A sky of lead had turned to one of silver. Across the open uplands, beyond the conflagration, a kindlier glow was in the east. And in the broad daylight the fire reached its height with as small effect as the firemen plied their water. Nothing could check the roof. Ceiling, joists, and slates burnt up like good fuel in a good grate. Now it was a watershed of living fire; now an avalanche of red-hot ruin; now a column of smoke and sparks, rising out of blackened walls; a column unbroken by the wind, which had fallen at dawn with a little rain, the edge of a shower that had shunned Long Stow.

When the roof fell in there were few of the hundreds present who had not retreated out of harm's way. Only the helmed

firemen held their ground, and two others with bare heads. Of the pair, one was standing dazed, with his beard on the rough coat thrown about him, and an ear deaf to his companion's entreaties, when the crash came and the sparks flew high and wide through rent walls and gaping windows. The sparks blackened as they fell. The first smoke lifted. And the dazed man lay upon his face, the other kneeling over him.

Dr. Marigold came running, for all his years and his long top-coat.

"Did anything hit him, Ivey?"

"Not that I saw, sir; but he fared as if he'd fainted on his feet, and when the roof went, why, so did he."

Marigold knelt also, and a thickening ring enclosed the three.

"He's rather nastily burnt, poor devil."

And the old doctor lifted a leaden wrist, felt it in a sudden hush, examined a burn upon the same arm, and looked up through eyebrows like white moustaches.

"But not dangerously, damn him!"

VII
THE SINNER'S PRAYER

The bishop of the diocese sat at the larger of the two desks in the palace library. It was the thirteenth of the following month, and a wet forenoon. At eleven o'clock his lordship was intent upon a sheet of unlined foolscap, with sundry notes dotted down the edge, and the rest of the leaf left blank. The bishop's sight was failing, but against glasses he had set his face. So his whiskers curled upon the paper; and the wide mouth between the whiskers was firmly compressed; and this compression lengthened a clean-shaven upper lip already unduly long. But the pose displayed a noble head covered with thin white hair, and the broad brow that was the casket of a broad mind. Seen at his desk, the massive head and shoulders suggested both strength and stature above the normal. Yet the bishop on his legs was a little man who limped. And the surprise of this discovery was not the last for an observer: for the little lame man had a dignity independent of his inches, and a majesty of mind which lost nothing, but gained in prominence, by the constant contrast of a bodily imperfection.

The bishop stood up when his visitor was announced, a minute after eleven, and supported himself with one hand while he stretched the other across his desk. Carlton took it in confusion. He had expected that shut mouth and piercing glance, but not this

kindly grasp. He was invited to sit down. The man who complied was the ghost of the Rector of Long Stow, as his spiritual overseer remembered him. His whole face was as white as his forehead had been on the day of the fire. It carried more than one still whiter scar. Yet in the eyes there burnt, brighter than ever, those fires of zeal and of enthusiasm which had warmed the bishop's heart in the past, but which somewhat puzzled him now.

"I am sorry," said his lordship, "that you should have such weather for what, I am sure, must have been an undertaking for you, Mr. Carlton. You still look far from strong. Before we begin, is there nothing – "

Carlton could hear no more. There was nothing at all. He was quite himself again. And he spoke with some coolness; for the other's manner, despite his mouth and his eyes, was almost cruel in its unexpected and undue consideration. It was less than ever this man's intention to play upon the pity of high or low. He had an appeal to make before he went, but it was not an appeal for pity. Meanwhile his back stiffened and his chest filled in the intensity of his desire not to look the invalid.

"In that case," resumed the bishop, "I am glad that you have seen your way to keeping the appointment I suggested. In cases of complaint – more especially a complaint of the grave character indicated in my letter – I make it a rule to see the person complained of before taking further steps. That is to say, if he will see me; and I don't think you will regret having done so, Mr. Carlton. It may give you pain – "

Carlton jerked his hands.

"But you shall have fair play!"

And his lordship looked point-blank at the bearded man, as he had looked in his day on many a younger culprit; and his voice was the peculiar voice that generations of schoolboys had set themselves to imitate, with less success than they supposed.

Carlton bowed acknowledgment of this promise.

"In the questions which I feel compelled to put" – and the bishop glanced at his sheet of foolscap – "you will perhaps give me credit for studying your feelings as far as is possible in the painful circumstances. I shall try not to leave them more painful than I find them, Mr. Carlton. But the complaint received is a very serious one, and it is not made by one person; it has very many signatures; and it necessitates plain speaking. It is a fact, then, that you are the father of an illegitimate child born on the twentieth of last month in your own parish?"

"It is a fact, my lord."

"And the woman is dead?"

"The young girl – is dead."

The bishop's pen had begun the descent of the clean part of his page of foolscap; when the last answer was inscribed, the writer looked up, neither in astonishment nor in horror, but with the clear eye and the serene brow of the ideal judge.

"Of course," said he, "I am informed that you have already made the admission. Let there be no affectation or misunderstanding between us, on that or any other point. But

as your bishop, and at least hitherto your friend, I desire to have refutation or confirmation from your own lips. You are at perfect liberty to deny me either. It will make no difference to the ultimate result. That, as you know, will be out of my hands."

"I desire to withhold nothing, my lord," said Robert Carlton in a firm voice.

"Very well. I think we understand each other. This poor young woman, I gather, was the daughter of a prominent parishioner?"

"Of a prominent resident in my parish – yes."

"But she herself was conspicuous in parochial work? Is it a fact that she played the organ in church?"

"It is."

The fact was noted, the pen laid down; and the little old man, who looked only great across his desk, leant back in his chair.

"I am exceedingly anxious that you should have fair play. Let me say plainly that these are not my first inquiries into the matter. I am informed – I wish to know with what truth – that the young woman disappeared for several months before her death?"

"It is quite true."

"And returned to give birth to her child?"

"And to die!" said Carlton, in his grim determination neither to shield nor to spare himself in any of his answers. But his hands were clenched, and his white face glistened with his pain.

The bishop watched him with an eye grown mild with understanding, and a heart hot with mercy for the man who had no mercy on himself. But the tight mouth never relaxed, and the

peculiar voice was unaltered when it broke the silence. It was the voice of justice, neither kind nor unkind, severe nor lenient, only grave, deliberate, matter-of-fact.

"My next question is dictated by information received, or let me say by suspicions communicated. It is a vital question; do not answer unless you like. It is, however, a question that will infallibly arise elsewhere. Were you, or were you not, privy to this poor young woman's disappearance?"

"Before God, my lord, I was not!"

"I understand that her parents had no idea where she was until the very end. Had you none either?"

"No more than they had. We were equally in the dark. We believed that she had gone to stay with a friend from the village – a young woman who had married from service, and was settled near London. It was several weeks before we discovered that her friend had never seen her."

"And all this time you did not suspect her condition?"

"Yes; then I did; but not before."

"She made no communication before she went away?"

"None whatever to me – none whatever, to my knowledge."

"And this was early in the year?"

"She left Long Stow in January, and we had no news of her till the middle of June, when strangers communicated with her father."

Again the bishop leant over his foolscap.

"Did you ever offer her marriage?" he asked abruptly.

"Repeatedly!"

The clear eyes looked up.

"Did you not tell her father this?"

"No; I couldn't condescend to tell him," said Carlton, flushing for the first time. "My lord, I have made no excuses. There are none to make. That was none at all."

His lordship regarded the changed face with no further change in his own.

"So you loved her," he said softly, after a pause.

"Ah! if only I had loved her more!"

"If excuse there could be.. love.. is some."

It was the old man murmuring, as old men will, all unknown to the bishop and the judge.

"But I want no excuses!" cried Carlton, wildly. "And let me be honest now, whatever I have been in the past; if I deceived myself and others, let me undeceive myself and you! Oh, my lord, that wasn't love! It's the bitterest thought of all, the most shameful confession of all. But love must be something better; that can't be love! It was passion, if you like; it was a passion that swept me away in the pride of my strength; but, God forgive me, it was not love!"

He hid his face in his writhing hands; and, with those wild eyes off him, the bishop could no longer swallow his compassion. The lines of his mouth relaxed, and lo, the mouth was beautiful. A tender light suffused the aged face, and behold, the face was gentle beyond belief.

"Love is everything," the old man said; "but even passion is something, in these cold days of little lives and little sins. And honesty like yours is a great deal, Robert Carlton, though your sin be as scarlet, and the Blood of our Blessed Lord alone can make you clean."

Carlton looked up swiftly, a new solicitude in his eyes.

"In me it was scarlet: not in her. She loved.. she loved. Oh, to have loved as well – to have that to remember!.. She thought it would spoil my life; and I never guessed it was that! But now I know, I know! It was for my sake she went away.. poor child.. poor mistaken heroine! She died for me, and I cannot die for her. Isn't that hard? I can't even die for her!"

His bodily weakness betrayed itself in his swimming eyes; in the night of his agony no tear had dimmed them before men. But his will was not all gone. With clenched fists, and locked jaw, and beaded brow, he fought his weakness, while the good bishop sat with his head on his hand, and closed eyes, praying for a brother in the valley of despair. When he opened his eyes, it was as though his prayer was heard; for Robert Carlton was bearing himself with a new bravery; and the incongruous unquenched fires, which had caused surprise at the outset of the interview, burnt brightly as before in the younger eyes. The old man met them with a sad, grave scrutiny. But the lines of his mouth remained relaxed. And, when he spoke again, his voice was very gentle.

"You may think that I have put you to unnecessary pain," he

said, "when I give you fair warning that your case must form the subject of further proceedings in another place. But I had heard that your conduct was indefensible, root and branch, from beginning to end. Of that I am now able to form my own opinion. Yet my individual opinion can make no difference in the result, since absolute deprivation I had never contemplated in your case, and it is only the extreme penalty which rests with me. On the other hand, it will be my duty to set the ecclesiastical law in motion; and the ecclesiastical law must take its course. I take it that you do not propose to defend your case?"

A grim light flickered for an instant in Robert Carlton's eyes. "Have I defended it hitherto, my lord?"

"Then there can only be one result; and you must make up your mind, as you have doubtless already done, to suspension for a term of years. If word of mine can lessen that term, it shall be spoken in your favour, both out of consideration of the great work that you were doing, and have done, and in view of certain circumstances which our conversation has brought to light."

"But can you want me back in the Church?" cried Carlton; and his heart beat high with the question; but turned heavier than before in the interval of prudent deliberation which preceded any answer.

"I would punish no man beyond the letter of the law," declared the bishop at length, "even if it were in my power to do so. The Act debars suspended clergymen from all exercise of their divine calling and from all pecuniary enjoyment of their benefice until

the term of such suspension is up. I would not, if I could, prolong the period of disability by throwing further let or hindrance in the way of an erring brother who repents him truly of his sin. I would rather say, 'Come back to your work, live down the past, and, by your example in the years that may be left you, pluck up the tares that your bad example has surely sown. Retrieve all but the irretrievable. Undo what you can.'"

Carlton's eyes melted in gratitude too great for speech, but plain as the benediction which his trembling lips left eloquently unsaid.

"That," continued the bishop, "is what I should say to you – because I think we understood each other. You have not sought to palliate your offence; nor are you the man to misconstrue the little I may have said concerning the offence itself. What is there to be said? You know well enough that I lament it as I lament its mournful result, and deplore it as I deplore the blot on the whole body of Christ's Church militant here on earth. You have committed a great sin, against humanity, against God, and against your Church; yet he would commit a greater who sought on that account to hound you from that Church for ever. Courage, brother! Pray without ceasing. Look forward, not back; and do not despair. Despair is the devil's best friend; better give way to deadly sin than to deadlier despair! Remember that you have done good work for God in days gone by; and live for that brighter day when you have purged your sin, and may be worthy to work for Him again."

"And meanwhile?" whispered Carlton, for fear of shouting it in his passionate anxiety. "Is there nothing I may do meanwhile – among my own poor people – before the tares come up?"

"If you are suspended you will be unable to hold any service; and I hardly think you will care to go among your parishioners while that is so."

"But I shall not be forbidden my own parish?"

"Not forbidden."

"Nor my rectory?"

"No; so far as I am aware, at least, you retain your right to reside there; but I can hardly think that it would be expedient."

"And the church! They must have their church back again. Who is going to rebuild it for them?"

Carlton was on his feet in the last excitement. The bishop regarded him with puzzled eyebrows.

"I have heard nothing on that subject as yet; it is a little early, is it not? But I have no doubt that it will be a matter for subscription among themselves."

"Among my poor people?"

"With substantial aid, I should hope, from men of substance in the neighbourhood."

"But why should they pay?" cried Carlton, impetuously. "The church was not burnt down for my neighbours' sins, nor for the sins of the parish, but for mine alone.. Oh, my lord, if I could but go back among my people, and be their servant, I who was too much their master before! I was not quite dependent – thank

God, I had a little of my own – but every penny should be theirs!"

And the profligate priest stood upright before his bishop – his white hands clasped, his white face shining, his burning eyes moist – zealot and suppliant in one.

"You desire to spend your income – "

"No, no, my capital!"

"On the poor of your parish? I – I fail to understand."

"And I scarcely dare make you!" confessed Carlton, his full voice failing him. "I so fear your disapproval; and I could set my face against all the world, but against you never, much less after this morning.. Oh, my lord, I have set my poor people a dastardly example, and brought cruel shame upon my cloth; for its sake and for theirs, if not for my own, let me at least leave among them a tangible sign and symbol of my true repentance. I have the chance! I have such a chance as God alone in His infinite mercy could vouchsafe to a miserable sinner. My church at Long Stow has been burnt down through me – through my sin – to punish me – "

"Are you sure of that, Mr. Carlton?"

"I know it, my lord. And I want to do what only seems to me my bounden and my obvious duty, and to do it soon."

The bishop looked enlightened but amazed.

"You would rebuild the church out of your own pocket? Is that really your wish?"

"It is my prayer!"

VIII
THE LORD OF THE MANOR

Wilton Gleed owed his success in life to a natural bent for the politic virtues, and to the quality of energy unalloyed by enterprise. He was a man of much shrewdness and extraordinary tenacity, but absolutely no initiative; so he had taken his opportunities and held his ground without running a risk that he could remember. Not a self-made man, he was, however, the son of one who had made himself by dint of that very enterprise which was lacking in Wilton Gleed. The father had seen a certain want and filled it to the satisfaction of the wide world; the son had extended the business without meddling with the product of the firm. Monopolies die hard. Gleed & Son did nothing to deserve a swift demise. They just stalked behind the times, and appeared to thrive on a sublime contempt of competition. And those who knew him best were the most surprised when Wilton Gleed turned the great concern into a limited liability company, and made a fortune out of the transaction alone; it was the most daring thing that he had ever done.

The reason for the step may be related as characteristic of the man. Age had given the firm a certain aristocracy of degree – not of kind – even age could not soften the fact that Gleed & Son sold things in tins. And the tins it was that turned plain Gleed

& Son into Gleed & Son, Limited. Some innovator was making tins with cunning openers attached; the lesser firms jumped at the improvement. The lesser firms were already doing Gleeds' some slight damage in their go-ahead little way; but the worst they could all do together was as nothing compared with the extra expenditure of an appreciable fraction of a farthing per tin on an output of millions in the year. Wilton Gleed could not face the immediate hole in his profits. He had never taken a risk in his life, and was not going to begin. He had increased his expenses by going into Parliament, and he was not such a fool as to play tricks with his income. He faced the situation as though it were ruin staring him in the face, and lost a discernible measure of flesh before his big resolve. It was all he did lose over the ultimate operation. He retired into private and public life with more money than he knew how to spend.

The average man is at his best as host, and in that capacity Wilton Gleed was popular among his friends. He was an excellent sportsman of the selfish sort; cherished a contempt for the various games which involve playing for one's side; but was a first-rate shot, a fine fisherman, and a good rider spoilt by his great principle of refusing the risks. To shoot and dine with him was to see Gleed at his very best. He was a bald little man, with silver-sandy moustache and close-cropped whiskers; but his full-blooded face was still pink with health, his fixed eye unerring as ever, his step elastic as the heather he loved to tread. Gun in hand, in his tweeds and gaiters, and with his cap pulled well

over his head, Wilton Gleed never passed the prime of life; it was late in the evening before he collected the years blown away on the moor; and in its way the evening was as delectable as the day. The dinner was a good one, and the host abandoned himself to its joys with a schoolboy's ardour. Irreproachable champagne flowed like water, more especially at the head of the table. Gleed carried it like a gentleman, also the port that followed, though a little inclined to be garrulous about the latter. As he sipped and gossiped, and settled the Eastern Question in two words, and Mr. Gladstone's hash in one, the skin would shine as it tightened on the bald head, and the always intent eye would fix the listener beyond the needs of the conversation. It was very seldom, however, that a syllable slid out of place, or that Wilton Gleed went to bed looking quite his age.

For some years he had leased various shootings in the autumn, spending the other seasons at a lordly but suburban retreat inherited from his father, with an occasional swoop abroad – the correct place at the correct time – less for enjoyment than for other reasons. Gun, rod, and cellar were what he did enjoy, and of these delights he vowed to have his fill after getting out of Gleeds with unexpected spoils. A sporting estate was in the market within two hours and a half of town; and for forty thousand pounds Wilton Gleed became squire of Long Stow, patron of an excellent living, and a large landowner in a country where he had a nucleus of friends and soon made more. As Member of Parliament for that division of London in which Gleeds had

employed hundreds of hands for half a hundred years, he at the same time bought a house in town, and let the place outside. Subtler investments followed. The man was becoming a gambler in his old age; but he played his own game with ineradicable care and foresight, and rose Sir Wilton Gleed when his side lost in the General Election of 1880. It was only a knighthood, and Sir Wilton might have entertained justifiable hopes of his baronetcy; but one or the other had been a moral certainty for some time.

It was in Hyde Park Place that Sir Wilton first heard of the Long Stow scandal and its immediate sequel. The news came in a few dry lines from Sidney, by the first post on the Monday morning, June 26, 1882. It fell like a firebrand in a keg of gunpowder. Sir Wilton, however, had even better reasons than were obvious for his paroxysm of rage and indignation; personal mortification was not the least of his emotions. He would have gone down by the next train to "horsewhip the hound within an inch of his life," but the cur had taken refuge in Lakenhall Infirmary, "with very little the matter with him," in Sidney's words. And just then the House was an Aceldama which no good soldier could desert for a night, with the Government satisfactorily on the spit between Phœnix Park and Alexandria, and the Opposition creeping up vote by vote. Sir Wilton decided to run down on the Wednesday for twenty-four hours, and talked of having the rectory furniture thrown into the street if the rector was not there to take it and himself away for good. Sir Wilton had his own impression as to his powers as patron of the living,

and he very naturally swore that he would "have that blackguard out of it" within the week. A friend at the Carlton put him right on the point.

"You can't do that, Gleed. A living's like nothing else. My lord gives, but my lord can't take away."

"Then what on earth am I to do?"

"Get him inhibited and make him resign. It will come to the same thing."

The fire was in all the newspapers, with the hint of a scandal at the end of the paragraph. Among those who spoke to Sir Wilton on the subject was a jaunty politician who had never yet recognised him at the club.

"Sir Wilton Gleed, I think? I fancy we have met before?"

"Indeed, my lord?"

It was the noble who had chosen to forget the circumstance hitherto; to-day he was all courtesy and confidential concern. What was this about the church that had been burnt down? He had heard it was on the other's estate. Sir Wilton professed to know no more as yet than the papers told him.

"I ask because it reads to me – don't you know? Some scandal – what? And I'm sorry to say – fellow Carlton – sort of connection of mine."

"To be sure," said Sir Wilton. "I remember hearing it."

"Odd fish, I'm afraid. Here in town for years, at that ritualistic shop across the park – forget my own name next. Might have had a good time if he'd liked. Never went out. Preferred the

mews. Made a specialty of footmen and fellows. Had a night club somewhere, where he taught 'em to box, and brought my own man home himself one night with an eye like your boot. It was about the only time we met. Remember hearing he could preach, though; only hope he hasn't been making a fool of himself down there!"

"I hope not also," said the discreet knight; "but I am going down to-morrow, so I shall hear."

He went down very grim: for Robert Carlton had not only been a thorn in his side that twelve-month past; he actually stood for the one false move, of importance, which Sir Wilton Gleed was conscious of having made in all his life. Yet he had taken no step with more complete confidence and self-approval. A gentleman and man of brain, reported by Lady Gleed and their daughter, and duly admitted by himself, to be the best preacher they had ever heard; a man of family into the bargain, and not such a distant cadet as the head of that family implied; could any combination have promised a more suitable successor to the venerable sportsman who had scorned white ties and caught his death coursing in mid-winter with Dr. Marigold? And yet the fellow had proved a perfect pest from the beginning. He had gone his own gait with a quiet independence only less exasperating than his personal courtesy and deference in every quarrel. In fact there had been no regular quarrel: the squire had only been rather rude to the rector's face, and very abusive behind his back. Nor was Sir Wilton's annoyance in the least surprising.

Devoid himself of a single religious conviction, but the natural enemy of change, he viewed the inevitable, but too immediate, innovations in the light of a personal affront; but when his own expostulations were met with polite argument on a subject which he had never studied, and he found himself at issue with a cleverer and a stronger man, who put him in the illogical position of objecting in the country to what his family approved in town, then there was no alternative for the squire but to withdraw from the unequal field and wait upon revenge. Too politic to break with one who after all had more followers than foes, and who speedily made himself the first person in the parish, Sir Wilton very naturally hated his man the more for those very considerations which induced him to curb his tongue. But his disappointment was manifold. It was not as if the fellow had proved personally congenial to himself. He preferred teaching the lads cricket to shooting with the squire, and he was a poor diner-out. His predecessor had shot almost (but not quite) as well as Sir Wilton himself, and had the harder head of the two for port. Carlton was not even in touch with his own people. There was no advantage in the man at all.

But now the end was in sight – the incredibly premature and disgraceful end. Sir Wilton went down grim enough, but much less angry and indignant than he supposed. Most of his wrath was the accumulation of months, free for expression at last. He was, however, a good and clean citizen according to his lights, and he did undoubtedly feel the rightful indignation with which

the story from Long Stow was calculated to inspire many a worse man. Arrived at Lakenhall, where the stanhope was waiting for him, he asked but one question on the way to Long Stow, and then drove straight past the hall to the church. Here he got down, and examined the black ruins with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders very square and a fixed glare of mingled rage and exultation. Then he walked past the broken windows, and the stanhope met him at the rectory gate. He drove home without a word. His one question had elicited the fact that the rector was still in the infirmary.

The village street cut clean through the high-walled hall garden, and the brown-brick hall itself stood as near the road as the mansion in Hyde Park Place, and was the uglier building of the two, from the dormer windows in the steep slates to the portico with the painted pillars. Within was the depressing atmosphere of a great house all but empty. Sir Wilton hurried through a twilit drawing-room in deadly order, and forth by a French window into a pleasaunce of elms and plane-trees whose shadows lay sharp as themselves upon the shaven sward. A girl was coming across the grass to meet him, a girl at the awkward age, with her dark hair in a plait and her black dress neither long nor short. Sir Wilton brushed her cheek with his bleached moustache.

"Where's Fraulein?" he said.

"In the schoolroom, I think, uncle."

"I want to speak to her. I'm only down for the night and shall

be busy. I'll be looking round the garden, tell her."

And he walked away from the house, treading vigorously on the cropped grass; and presently a little middle-aged lady, with a plain, shrewd face, flitted over it in her turn. She found Sir Wilton between the four yew hedges and the mathematical parterres of the Italian garden at the further end of the lawn. He shook hands with her, but gave free rein, for the second time in five minutes, to his idiosyncrasy of hard staring.

Fraulein Hentig had been many years in the family, and had taken many parts; at present she was permanent housekeeper in the country, but had lately also recommenced old schoolroom duties on the adoption by Sir Wilton of his only brother's only child. There was no nonsense about Fraulein Hentig. She told Sir William all that she had heard and all that she believed was true, without mincing facts or wincing at the expletives which more than once interrupted her tale. As it proceeded the fixed eyes lightened with a vindictive glitter; but the end found Sir Wilton scowling.

"I wish I'd been here! I wouldn't have let them break his windows; no, I should have claimed the privilege of horsewhipping him with my own hands. I'd do it still if he were here; but he'll never show his nose in Long Stow again. I suppose there's no doubt the church was wilfully set fire to?"

"None at all from what I hear, Sir Wilton."

"Is nobody suspected?"

"George Mellis was. They say he was in love with the girl, and

he disappeared on Saturday night. However, it turns out that he was already in Lakenhall hours before the fire, and he never came back. It appears he went straight to the rectory when he heard the scandal, and almost as straight out of Long Stow when Mr. Carlton admitted everything. Already I hear that he has enlisted in London."

"You don't mean it! That's another thing at that blackguard's door; it's a nice list! But it's enough to send the whole parish to the dogs. By the way, you would get Lady Gleed's letter?"

"Yes, Sir Wilton. I wrote last night to tell her ladyship that she might make her mind easy about her niece. She is very innocent, and when I told her the windows had been broken because Mr. Carlton had done something dishonourable, she was amazed of course, but she asked no more questions. I spoke at once to the servants, and I made Gwynneth promise not to go among the people at present; they have already typhoid fever in one of the cottages, and that was my excuse."

"Excellent!" said Sir Wilton. "I won't have her in and out of the cottages in any case, and I shall tell her so before I go. She's much too young for that kind of nonsense. And she mustn't read just exactly what she likes. She had a book in her hand just now – I couldn't see what – but she seems inclined to fill her head with any folly. We must find a school for her, and meanwhile bring her up as we've brought up our own child."

Fraulein Hentig smiled judiciously.

"They are already rather different characters," she said. "But

I will do my best, Sir Wilton."

When the pair quitted the Italian garden, the gentleman hurrying to make other inquiries before dinner, while the German gentlewoman dropped behind, two brown eyes saw them from an upper window, whither the girl had carried her book in vain. Her attention had been intermittent before, but now she could not even try to read. The air was full of mystery, and the mystery was more absorbing than that in any book. It was also absolute and unfathomable in the girl's mind. Yet her brain teemed with questions and surmises. She had come upstairs because she felt that they wanted her out of the way, her uncle and the good, slow, serious Fraulein. Yet that was not enough for them: they also must retire as far as possible for their talk. Of course Gwynneth knew what they had to talk about; but what was the dishonourable action that a clergyman could commit and that could not be so much as mentioned in her hearing? She was not thinking of "a clergyman" in the abstract. She was thinking of the man with the beautiful, sad face; of the passionate preacher with the voice that thrilled the senses and the words that filled the mind. She had heard him preach of sin and suffering with equal sympathy. Phrases came back to her. Now she understood. But what could he have done, that he should suffer so, and that a perfectly kind person like Fraulein Hentig should exult in his suffering?

Gwynneth was splendidly and terribly innocent, but all the more inquisitive on that account. She was unacquainted with the

facts, yet not with the tragedy of life. In a tragic atmosphere she had been born and bred. Quentin Gleed had been fatally lacking in the politic virtues cultivated by his brother. He had deserted his wife and drunk himself to death within the memory of Gwynneth. The young girl recalled dim years of bitter scenes in a luxurious home, and vivid years of peace and poverty in a tiny cottage. And now her mother was gone also; the dear, independent, wilful little mother, who had taught her child all but the wickedness that was in the world! And that child sat at her bedroom window in the new home that never could be home to her; and the drooping sun could find no bottom to her dark and limpid eyes, no flaw upon her pure warm skin; and neither the cuckoo in the poplar, nor the thrush in the elm, nor the sparrows in the eaves just overhead, could tell her anything of the wickedness that was in even her small world.

IX
A DUEL BEGINS

Late in the afternoon of July 13, a Lakenhall fly rattled through Long Stow, and waited in the rain outside the rectory gate while one of the occupants ran up to the house. He was such a short time gone, and so few people were about in the wet, that the fly was on its way back to Lakenhall before the Long Stow folk realised that it was the rector who had upset prophecy by showing his nose among them in broad daylight. He had done no more, however, nor was anything further seen or heard of him during the month of July. It appeared that he had returned for some private papers only. The rectory was locked up by the squire's orders, but the rector had forced his own study door, and his muddy footmarks were confined to that room. The same evening he went up to town – and disappeared. But his address was known in an official quarter. And all day and every day he might have been discovered in the reading room of the British Museum: a memorable figure, stooping amid mountains of architectural tomes, and drawing or copying plans in the few inches of table-land they left him, all with a nervous eagerness of face and hand not daily to be seen beneath that dispiriting dome.

Then the call came, and he was tried in the consistorial court of his own diocese, before the chancellor thereof, at the

beginning of August. No need to record more than the fact. The proceedings were brief because the accused pleaded guilty and his own word was the only evidence against him. The sentence was that of suspension foreshadowed by the bishop. The Reverend Robert Carlton was formally suspended *ab officio et beneficio* for the period of five years.

The result was reported in the London papers; there was only matter for a few lines. "Mr. Carlton was suspended for five years" was the concluding sentence in *The Times* report; and that was good enough for Sir Wilton Gleed. It was a happy omen for the holidays, which began for him that very day. The family were already in the country. Sir Wilton took the last train to Lakenhall and drove himself home for good in the highest spirits. Four miles of the five were over his own acres, and every one of them was crumbling with rabbits in the rosy dusk. Later, the larkspur and peonies on the dinner-table were as the very breath and blush of the gorgeous English country; and a thrush sang its welcome through the open window, and a nightingale trilled the tired Londoner to sleep; but he dreamt of a pheasant that he had heard calling between Lakenhall and Long Stow.

In the country Sir Wilton was an early riser, and he was abroad next morning while the shadows of the elms still stretched to the house and quivered up its bare brick walls. The great lawn was dusted with a milky dew in which Sir Wilton positively wallowed in his water-tight boots; it was not his least delight to be in shooting-boots and knickerbockers and soft raiment once

more. The first few minutes of the more excellent life produced an unseasonable geniality in the breast of Wilton Gleed. The man was a human being, and he longed for companionship in his joy. But Sidney never rose before he must, nor the gardeners either, it appeared. In the stable-yard a groom was encountered, but Sir Wilton had seen his face every day in town. He went out into the village, and naturally turned to the left. The cottage doors were open, and they were filled with homely figures that touched a cap or courtesied as he passed with a pleasant word for all. It was good to be back, to be a little king again. Sir Wilton pulled the cap over his eyes because the sun was in them, and admired the ripe wheat in the field beyond the post-office, the barley in the field beyond that. So he passed the Flint House on the other side with unruffled mind, and was passing the Flint House meadow before his thoughts took the inevitable turn which led to profane mutterings through shut teeth. But this morning it did not lead quite so far; this morning, with the scented air of England in his nostrils, and a twitter in the ears from every thatch, even Sir Wilton Gleed could find it in his heart to pity the sinner fallen from his high estate in what was paradise enough for the squire.

"Poor devil!" he said as he came to the rectory gate and saw the long grass within. It was sufficiently in key with the old quaint rectory, in its rags of ivy and its shawl of disreputable tiles. The windows were still broken and the shutters shut. Otherwise the picture was as alluring as its fellows to the lord of the manor. The trees that hid the church at midsummer would screen its ruins

for many a day.

Sir Wilton entered to refresh his memory as to the minor damages, and they changed his mood. Who was to pay for twenty-nine panes of glass – no, he had missed a window – for thirty-three? He was a man who did not care to spend a penny without obtaining his pennyworth; but he was not clear as to his legal obligations; and he bristled at the idea of paying for the immorality of the parson and the excesses of his flock. He had paid enough in other ways. And there was the church. Who was to rebuild the church? They might expect him to do that once he began doing things; and the man fell into premature fuming between his love of the lavish and his detestation of expense. Meanwhile he had found a whole window, that of the study, and the door beside it stood ajar. This he pushed open as though the place belonged to him (his view in so many words), and stood still upon the threshold.

"Well, I'm damned!" he cried at last.

Robert Carlton sat asleep in his chair, his hands in his overcoat pockets, the collar turned up about his ears. His boots and trousers were brown and yellow with the dust of the district. In an instant he was on his feet, scared, startled, and abashed.

"So you've come back, have you?"

"An hour or two ago. I walked from Cambridge. I don't know how you heard!"

"Heard? You must think me in a hurry for your society! No, this is an unexpected pleasure, and I use the words advisedly. It's

something to find you don't come twice in broad daylight."

"I have come on business, as before, but this time the business will occupy more than a few minutes. I wished to get it in train with as little fuss as possible. Then I was coming to see you, Sir Wilton."

It was quietly spoken, without bitterness or defiance, but also without the abject humility which had trembled in the clergyman's first words. The other made some attempt to modify his manner: nothing could put him in the wrong, but he realised that it might be as well to abstain from mere brutality. And what he had just heard implied a certain reassurance.

"I see," said Gleed. "You have come to make arrangements about your furniture and effects. I am glad to hear it."

"My furniture and effects?" queried Carlton. "What arrangements do you mean?"

"Well, you can't leave them here, can you?"

"Why not, Sir Wilton?"

"Why not!" echoed the squire, turning from pink to purple with the two words. "Because you've been disgraced and degraded as you deserve; because you're the hound you are; because you've been suspended for five years, and I won't have you or your belongings cumber my ground for a single day of them! So now you know," continued Gleed in lower tones, his venom spent. "I didn't think it would be necessary to tell you my opinion of you; but you've brought it on yourself."

Carlton bowed to that, but respectfully pointed out the

difference between suspension and deprivation, his tone one of apology rather than of triumph.

"I don't say which I deserved," he added, "but I do thank God for the mercy He has shown me. This gives me another chance – in five years' time. Meanwhile I am not only entitled to keep my furniture in the rectory. I believe I may live in it if I like."

Gleed stood convulsed with wrath redoubled. He had been too busy in town to prime himself upon a point which could not arise before he went down to the country; and here it was, awaiting him. His disadvantage alone was enough to put him in a passion; but the last statement was monstrous in itself.

"I don't believe it! I don't believe a word you say! A man who can live a lie will tell nothing else!"

Carlton drew himself up, his nostrils curling.

"Better go and ask your solicitor," he said. "I have forfeited the right – as you so well know – to the only possible reply."

"Rights apart," rejoined Gleed, his colour heightening by a shade, "do you mean to tell me you would seriously think of remaining on the very scene of your shame?"

"I didn't say I would do anything. I said I believed I could."

"You have done enough harm in the place; surely you wouldn't come back to do more?"

"No; if I came at all, it would be to undo a little of the harm – to live it down, Sir Wilton, by God's help!" said Carlton, and his voice shook. "But I do not mean to live here. I have spoken to the bishop, and his advice is against it, though he leaves me

free to follow my own judgment. This afternoon I hoped to speak to you. There is another matter which is really a duty, so that I can be in no doubt as to what to do there. It will not involve my remaining on the spot, or obtruding myself in any way. But the church has been burnt down on my account, and I intend to rebuild it before the winter."

"The church is mine!" said Gleed, savagely.

"I don't want to contradict you, Sir Wilton; but you should really see your lawyer on all these points."

"The land is mine!"

"Not the church land, Sir Wilton; and the rector is not only entitled, but he may be compelled, to restore and rebuild within certain limits. Your solicitor will turn up the Act and show it you in black and white. And after that I think you will hardly stand between me and my bounden duty."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.