Thomas Wingfold, Curate

George MacDonald

Title: Thomas Wingfold, Curate

Author: George MacDonald

Release Date: June, 2004 [EBook #5976]
[Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule]
[This file was first posted on October 2, 2002]

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

Charles Franks, Charles Aldarondo, and the Online Distributed Proofreading
Team.

THOMAS WINGFOLD, CURATE.

By George MacDonald, LL.D.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL I.

THOMAS WINGFOLD, CURATE.

CHAPTER I.

HELEN LINGARD.

A swift, gray November wind had taken every chimney of the house for an organ-pipe, and was roaring in them all at once, quelling the more distant and varied noises of the woods, which moaned and surged like a sea. Helen Lingard had not been out all day. The morning, indeed, had been fine, but she had been writing a long letter to her brother Leopold at Cambridge, and had put off her walk in the neighbouring park till after luncheon, and in the meantime the wind had risen, and brought with it a haze that threatened rain. She was in admirable health, had never had a day's illness in her life, was hardly more afraid of getting wet than a young farmer, and enjoyed wind, especially when she was on horseback. Yet as she stood looking from her window, across a balcony where shivered more than one autumnal plant that ought to have been removed a week ago, out upon the old-fashioned garden and meadows beyond, where each lonely tree bowed with drifting garments--I was going to say, like a suppliant, but it was AWAY from its storming enemy--she did not feel inclined to go out. That she was healthy was no reason why she should be unimpressible, any more than that good temper should be a reason for indifference to the behaviour of one's friend. She always felt happier in a new dress, when it was made to her mind and fitted her body; and when the sun shone she was lighter-hearted than when it rained: I had written MERRIER, but Helen was seldom merry, and had she been made aware of the fact, and questioned why, would have answered--Because she so seldom saw reason.

She was what all her friends called a sensible girl; but, as I say, that was no reason why she should be an insensible girl as well, and be subject to none of the influences of the weather. She did feel those influences, and therefore it was that she turned away from the window with the sense, rather than the conviction, that the fireside in her own room was rendered even, more attractive by the unfriendly aspect of things outside and the roar in the chimney, which happily was not accompanied by a change in the current of the smoke.

The hours between luncheon and tea are confessedly dull, but dulness is not inimical to a certain kind of comfort, and Helen liked to be that way comfortable. Nor had she ever yet been aware of self-rebuke

because of the liking. Let us see what kind and degree of comfort she had in the course of an hour and a half attained. And in discovering this I shall be able to present her to my reader with a little more circumstance.

She sat before the fire in a rather masculine posture. I would not willingly be rude, but the fact remains--a posture in which she would not, I think, have sat for her photograph--leaning back in a chintz-covered easy-chair, all the lines of direction about her parallel with the lines of the chair, her arms lying on its arms, and the fingers of each hand folded down over the end of each arm--square, straight, right-angled,--gazing into the fire, with something of the look of a sage, but one who has made no discovery.

She had just finished the novel of the day, and was suffering a mild reaction--the milder, perhaps, that she was not altogether satisfied with the consummation. For the heroine had, after much sorrow and patient endurance, at length married a man whom she could not help knowing to be not worth having. For the author even knew it, only such was his reading of life, and such his theory of artistic duty, that what it was a disappointment to Helen to peruse, it seemed to have been a comfort to him to write. Indeed, her dissatisfaction went so far that, although the fire kept burning away in perfect content before her, enhanced by the bellowing complaint of the wind in the chimney, she yet came nearer thinking than she had ever been in her life. Now thinking, especially to one who tries it for the first time, is seldom, or never, a quite comfortable operation, and hence Helen was very near becoming actually uncomfortable. She was even on the borders of making the unpleasant discovery that the business of life--and that not only for North Pole expeditions, African explorers, pyramid-inspectors, and such like, but for every man and woman born into the blindness of the planet--is to discover; after which discovery there is little more comfort to be had of the sort with which Helen was chiefly conversant. But she escaped for the time after a very simple and primitive fashion, although it was indeed a narrow escape.

Let me not be misunderstood, however, and supposed to imply that Helen was dull in faculty, or that she contributed nothing to the bubbling of the intellectual pool in the social gatherings at Glaston. Far from it. When I say that she came near thinking, I say more for her than any but the few who know what thinking is will understand, for that which chiefly distinguishes man from those he calls the lower animals is the faculty he most rarely exercises. True, Helen supposed she could think--like other people, because the thoughts of other people had passed through her in tolerable plenty, leaving many a phantom conclusion behind; but this was THEIR thinking, not hers. She had thought no more than was necessary now and then to the persuasion that she saw what a sentence meant, after which, her acceptance or rejection of what was contained in it, never more than lukewarm, depended solely upon its relation to what she had somehow or other, she could seldom have told how, come to regard as the proper style of opinion to hold upon things in general.

The social matrix which up to this time had ministered to her development, had some relations with Mayfair, it is true, but scanty ones indeed with the universe; so that her present condition was like that of the common bees, every one of which Nature fits for a

queen, but its nurses, prevent from growing one by providing for it a cell too narrow for the unrolling of royalty, and supplying it with food not potent enough for the nurture of the ideal--with this difference, however, that the cramped and stinted thing comes out, if no queen, then a working bee, and Helen, who might be both, was neither yet. If I were at liberty to mention the books on her table, it would give a few of my readers no small help towards the settling of her position in the "valued file" of the young women of her generation; but there are reasons against it.

She was the daughter of an officer, who, her mother dying when she was born, committed her to the care of a widowed aunt, and almost immediately left for India, where he rose to high rank, and somehow or other amassed a considerable fortune, partly through his marriage with a Hindoo lady, by whom he had one child, a boy some three years younger than Helen. When he died, he left his fortune equally divided between the two children.

Helen was now three-and-twenty, and her own mistress. Her appearance suggested Norwegian blood, for she was tall, blue-eyed, and dark-haired--but fair-skinned, with regular features, and an over still-some who did not like her said hard--expression of countenance. No one had ever called her NELLY; yet she had long remained a girl, lingering on the broken borderland after several of her school companions had become young matrons. Her drawing-master, a man of some observation and insight, used to say Miss Lingard would wake up somewhere about forty.

The cause of her so nearly touching the borders of thought this afternoon, was, that she became suddenly aware of feeling bored. Now Helen was even seldomer bored than merry, and this time she saw no reason for it, neither had any person to lay the blame upon. She might have said it was the weather, but the weather had never done it before. Nor could it be want of society, for George Bascombe was to dine with them. So was the curate, but he did not count for much. Neither was she weary of herself. That, indeed, might be only a question of time, for the most complete egotist, Julius Caesar, or Napoleon Bonaparte, must at length get weary of his paltry self; but Helen, from the slow rate of her expansion, was not old enough yet. Nor was she in any special sense wrapt up in herself: it was only that she had never yet broken the shell which continues to shut in so many human chickens, long after they imagine themselves citizens of the real world.

Being somewhat bored then, and dimly aware that to be bored was out of harmony with something or other, Helen was on the verge of thinking, but, as I have said, escaped the snare in a very direct and simple fashion: she went fast asleep, and never woke till her maid brought her the cup of kitchen-tea from which the inmates of some houses derive the strength to prepare for dinner.

CHAPTER II.

THOMAS WINGFOLD.

The morning, whose afternoon was thus stormy, had been fine, and the curate went out for a walk. Had it been just as stormy, however, he would have gone all the same. Not that he was a great walker, or, indeed, fond of exercise of any sort, and his walking, as an Irishman might say, was half sitting--on stiles and stones and fallen trees. He was not in bad health, he was not lazy, or given to self-preservation, but he had little impulse to activity of any sort. The springs in his well of life did not seem to flow quite fast enough.

He strolled through Osterfield park, and down the deep descent to the river, where, chilly as it was, he seated himself upon a large stone on the bank, and knew that he was there, and that he had to answer to Thomas Wingfold; but why he was there, and why he was not called something else, he did not know. On each side of the stream rose a steeply-sloping bank, on which grew many fern-bushes, now half withered, and the sunlight upon them, this November morning, seemed as cold as the wind that blew about their golden and green fronds. Over a rocky bottom the stream went--talking rather than singing--down the valley towards the town, where it seemed to linger a moment to embrace the old abbey church, before it set out on its leisurely slide through the low level to the sea. Its talk was chilly, and its ripples, which came half from the obstructions in its channel below, and half from the wind that ruffled it above, were not smiles, but wrinkles rather--even in the sunshine. Thomas felt cold himself, but the cold was of the sort that comes from the look rather than the feel of things. He did not, however, much care how he felt--not enough, certainly, to have made him put on a great-coat: he was not deeply interested in himself. With his stick, a very ordinary bit of oak, he kept knocking pebbles into the water, and listlessly watching them splash. The wind blew, the sun shone, the water ran, the ferns waved, the clouds went drifting over his head, but he never looked up, or took any notice of the doings of Mother Nature at her house-work: everything seemed to him to be doing only what it had got to do, because it had got it to do, and not because it cared about it, or had any end in doing it. For he, like every other man, could read nature only by his own lamp, and this was very much how he had hitherto responded to the demands made upon him.

His life had not been a very interesting one, although early passages in it had been painful. He had done fairly well at Oxford: it had been expected of him, and he had answered expectation; he had not distinguished himself, nor cared to do so. He had known from the first that he was intended for the church, and had not objected, but received it as his destiny--had even, in dim obedience, kept before his mental vision the necessity of yielding to the heights and hollows of the mould into which he was being thrust. But he had taken no great interest in the matter.

The church was to him an ancient institution of such approved respectability that it was able to communicate it, possessing emoluments, and requiring observances. He had entered her service; she was his mistress, and in return for the narrow shelter, humble

fare, and not quite too shabby garments she allotted him, he would perform her hests--in the spirit of a servant who abideth not in the house for ever. He was now six and twenty years of age, and had never dreamed of marriage, or even been troubled with a thought of its unattainable remoteness. He did not philosophize much upon life or his position in it, taking everything with a cold, hopeless kind of acceptance, and laying no claim to courage, devotion, or even bare suffering. He had a certain dull prejudice in favour of honesty, would not have told the shadow of a lie to be made Archbishop of Canterbury, and yet was so uninstructed in the things that constitute practical honesty that some of his opinions would have considerably astonished St. Paul. He liked reading the prayers, for the making of them vocal in the church was pleasant to him, and he had a not unmusical voice. He visited the sick--with some repugnance, it is true, but without delay, and spoke to them such religious commonplaces as occurred to him, depending mainly on the prayers belonging to their condition for the right performance of his office. He never thought about being a gentleman, but always behaved like one.

I suspect that at this time there lay somewhere in his mind, keeping generally well out of sight however, that is, below the skin of his consciousness, the unacknowledged feeling that he had been hardly dealt with. But at no time, even when it rose plainest, would he have dared to add--by Providence. Had the temptation come, he would have banished it and the feeling together.

He did not read much, browsed over his newspaper at breakfast with a polite curiosity, sufficient to season the loneliness of his slice of fried bacon, and took more interest in some of the naval intelligence than in anything else. Indeed it would have been difficult for himself even to say in what he did take a large interest. When leisure awoke a question as to how he should employ it, he would generally take up his Horace and read aloud one of his more mournful odes--with such attention to the rhythm, I must add, as, although plentiful enough among scholars in respect of the dead letter, is rarely found with them in respect of the living vocal utterance.

Nor had he now sat long upon his stone, heedless of the world's preparations for winter, before he began repeating to himself the poet's Aequam memento rebus in arduis, which he had been trying much, but with small success, to reproduce in similar English cadences, moved thereto in part by the success of Tennyson in his O mighty-mouthed inventor of harmonies--a thing as yet alone in the language, so far as I know. It was perhaps a little strange that the curate should draw the strength of which he was most conscious from the pages of a poet whose hereafter was chiefly servicable to him--in virtue of its unsubstantiality and poverty, the dreamlike thinness of its reality--in enhancing the pleasures of the world of sun and air, cooling shade and songful streams, the world of wine and jest, of forms that melted more slowly from encircling arms, and eyes that did not so swiftly fade and vanish in the distance. Yet when one reflects but for a moment on the poverty-stricken expectations of Christians from their hereafter, I cease to wonder at Wingfold; for human sympathy is lovely and pleasant, and if a Christian priest and a pagan poet feel much in the same tone concerning the affairs of a universe, why should they not comfort each other by sitting down together in the dust?

"No hair it boots thee whether from Inachus
Ancient descended, or, of the poorest born,
Thy being drags, all bare and roofless--
Victim the same to the heartless Orcus.

All are on one road driven; for each of us
The urn is tossed, and, later or earlier,
The lot will drop and all be sentenced
Into the boat of eternal exile."

Having thus far succeeded with these two stanzas, Wingfold rose, a little pleased with himself, and climbed the bank above him, wading through mingled sun and wind and ferns--so careless of their shivering beauty and their coming exile, that a watcher might have said the prospect of one day leaving behind him the shows of this upper world could have no part in the curate's sympathy with Horace.

CHAPTER III.

THE DINERS.

Mrs. Ramshorn, Helen's aunt, was past the middle age of woman; had been handsome and pleasing, had long ceased to be either; had but sparingly recognised the fact, yet had recognised it, and felt aggrieved. Hence in part it was that her mouth had gathered that peevish and wronged expression which tends to produce a moral nausea in the beholder. If she had but known how much uglier in the eyes of her fellow-mortals her own discontent made her, than the severest operation of the laws of mortal decay could have done, she might have tried to think less of her wrongs and more of her privileges. As it was, her own face wronged her own heart, which was still womanly, and capable of much pity--seldom exercised. Her husband had been dean of Halystone, a man of insufficient weight of character to have the right influence in the formation of his wife's. He had left her tolerably comfortable as to circumstances, but childless. She loved Helen, whose even imperturbability had by mere weight, as it might seem, gained such a power over her that she was really mistress in the house without either of them knowing it.

Naturally desirous of keeping Helen's fortune in the family, and having, as I say, no son of her own, she had yet not far to look to find a cousin capable, as she might well imagine, of rendering himself acceptable to the heiress. He was the son of her younger sister, married, like herself, to a dignitary of the Church, a canon of a northern cathedral. This youth, therefore, Greorge Bascombe by name, whose visible calling at present was to eat his way to the bar, she often invited to Glaston; and on this Friday afternoon he was on his way from London to spend the Saturday and Sunday with the two ladies. The cousins liked each other, had not had more of each

other's society than was favourable to their aunt's designs, who was far too prudent to have made as yet any reference to them, and stood altogether in as suitable a relative position for falling in love with each other as Mrs. Ramshorn could well have desired. Her chief, almost her only uneasiness, arose from the important and but too evident fact, that Helen Lingard was not a girl of the sort to fall readily in love. That, however, was of no consequence, provided it did not come in the way of marrying her cousin, who, her aunt felt confident, was better fitted to rouse her dormant affections than any other youth she had ever seen, or was ever likely to see. Upon this occasion she had asked Thomas Wingfold to meet him, partly with the design that he should act as a foil to her nephew, partly in order to do her duty by the church, to which she felt herself belong not as a lay member, but in some undefined professional capacity, in virtue of her departed dean. Wingfold had but lately come to the parish, and, as he was merely curate, she had not been in haste to invite him. On the other hand, he was the only clergyman officiating in the abbey church, which was grand and old, with a miserable living and a non-resident rector. He, to do him justice, paid nearly the amount of the tithes in salary to his curate, and spent the rest on the church material, of which, for certain reasons, he retained the incumbency, the presentation to which belonged to his own family.

The curate presented himself at the dinner-hour in Mrs. Ramshorn's drawing-room, looking like any other gentleman, satisfied with his share in the administration of things, and affecting nothing of the professional either in dress, manner, or tone. Helen saw him for the first time in private life, and, as she had expected, saw nothing remarkable--a man who looked about thirty, was a little over the middle height, and well enough constructed as men go, had a good forehead, a questionable nose, clear grey eyes, long, mobile, sensitive mouth, large chin, pale complexion, and straight black hair, and might have been a lawyer just as well as a clergyman. A keener, that is, a more interested eye than hers, might have discovered traces of suffering in the forms of the wrinkles which, as he talked, would now and then flit like ripples over his forehead; but Helen's eyes seldom did more than slip over the faces presented to her; and had it been otherwise, who could be expected to pay much regard to Thomas Wingfold when George Bascombe was present? There, indeed, stood a man by the corner of the mantelpiece!--tall and handsome as an Apollo, and strong as the young Hercules, dressed in the top of the plainest fashion, self-satisfied, but not offensively so, good-natured, ready to smile, as clean in conscience, apparently, and as large in sympathy, as his shirt-front. Everybody who knew him, counted George Bascombe a genuine good fellow, and George himself knew little to the contrary, while Helen knew nothing.

One who had only chanced to get a glimpse of her in her own room, as in imagination my reader has done, would hardly have recognised her again in the drawing-room. For in her own room she was but as she appeared to herself in her mirror--dull, inanimate; but in the drawing-room her reflection from living eyes and presences served to stir up what waking life was in her. When she spoke, her face dawned with a clear, although not warm light; and although it must be owned that when it was at rest, the same over-stillness, amounting almost to dulness, the same seeming immobility, ruled as before, yet, even when she was not speaking, the rest was often broken by a smile--a

genuine one, for although there was much that was stiff, there was nothing artificial about Helen. Neither was there much of the artificial about her cousin; for his good-nature, and his smile, and whatever else appeared upon him, were all genuine enough--the only thing in this respect not quite satisfactory to the morally fastidious man being his tone in speaking. Whether he had caught it at the university, or amongst his father's clerical friends, or in the professional society he now frequented, I cannot tell, but it had been manufactured somewhere--after a large, scrolly kind of pattern, sounding well-bred and dignified. I wonder how many speak with the voices that really belong to them.

Plainly, to judge from the one Bascombe used, he was accustomed to lay down the law, but in gentlemanly fashion, and not as if he cared a bit about the thing in question himself. By the side of his easy carriage, his broad chest, and towering Greek-shaped head, Thomas Wingfold dwindled almost to vanishing--in a word, looked nobody. And besides his inferiority in size and self-presentment, he had a slight hesitation of manner, which seemed to anticipate, if not to court, the subordinate position which most men, and most women too, were ready to assign him. He said, "Don't you think?" far oftener than "I think" and was always more ready to fix his attention upon the strong points of an opponent's argument than to re-assert his own in slightly altered phrase like most men, or even in fresh forms like a few; hence--self-assertion, either modestly worn like a shirt of fine chain-armour, or gaunt and obtrusive like plates of steel, being the strength of the ordinary man--what could the curate appear but defenceless, therefore weak, and therefore contemptible? The truth is, he had less self-conceit than a mortal's usual share, and was not yet possessed of any opinions interesting enough to himself to seem worth defending with any approach to vivacity.

Bascombe and he bowed in response to their introduction with proper indifference, after a moment's solemn pause exchanged a sentence or two which resembled an exercise in the proper use of a foreign language, and then gave what attention Englishmen are capable of before dinner to the two ladies--the elder of whom, I may just mention, was dressed in black velvet with heavy Venetian lace, and the younger in black silk, with old Honiton. Neither of them did much towards enlivening the conversation. Mrs. Ramshorn, whose dinner had as yet gained in interest with her years, sat peevishly longing for its arrival, but cast every now and then a look of mild satisfaction upon her nephew, which, however, while it made her eyes sweeter, did not much alter the expression of her mouth. Helen improved, as she fancied, the arrangement of a few green-house flowers in an ugly vase on the table.

At length the butler appeared, the curate took Mrs. Ramshorn, and the cousins followed--making, in the judgment of the butler as he stood in the hall, and the housekeeper as she peeped from the baise-covered door that led to the still-room, as handsome a couple as mortal eyes need wish to see. They looked nearly of an age, the lady the more stately, the gentleman the more graceful, or, perhaps rather, ELEGANT, of the two.

CHAPTER IV.

THEIR TALK.

During dinner, Bascombe had the talk mostly to himself, and rattled well, occasionally rebuked by his aunt for some remark which might to a clergyman appear objectionable; nor as a partisan was she altogether satisfied with the curate that he did not seem inclined to take clerical exception. He ate his dinner, quietly responding to Bascombe's sallies--which had usually more of vivacity than keenness, more of good spirits than wit--with a curious flickering smile, or a single word of agreement. It might have seemed that he was humouring a younger man, but the truth was, the curate had not yet seen cause for opposing him.

How any friend could have come to send Helen poetry I cannot imagine, but that very morning she had received by post a small volume of verse, which, although just out, and by an unknown author, had already been talked of in what are called literary circles. Wingfold had read some extracts from the book that same morning, and was therefore not quite unprepared when Helen asked him if he had seen it. He suggested that the poems, if the few lines he had seen made a fair sample, were rather of the wailful order.

"If there is one thing I despise more than another," said Bascombe, "it is to hear a man, a fellow with legs and arms, pour out his griefs into the bosom of that most discreet of confidantes, Society, bewailing his hard fate, and calling upon youths and maidens to fill their watering-pots with tears, and with him water the sorrowful pansies and undying rue of the race. I believe I am quoting."

"I think you must be, George," said Helen. "I never knew you venture so near the edge of poetry before."

"Ah, that is all you know of me, Miss Lingard!" returned Bascombe. "--And then," he resumed, turning again to Wingfold, "what is it they complain of? That some girls preferred a better man perhaps, or that a penny paper once told the truth of their poetry."

"Or it may be only that it is their humour to be sad," said Wingfold. "But don't you think," he continued, "it is hardly worth while to be indignant with them? Their verses are a relief to them, and do nobody any harm."

"They do all the boys and girls harm that read them, and themselves who write them more harm than anybody, confirming them in tearful habits, and teaching eyes unused to weep. I quote again, I believe, but from whom I am innocent. If I ever had a grief, I should have along with it the decency to keep it to myself."

"I don't doubt you would, George," said his cousin, who seemed more playfully inclined than usual. "But," she added, with a smile, "would your silence be voluntary, or enforced?"

"What!" returned Bascombe, "you think I could not plain my woes to the moon? Why not I as well as another? I could roar you as 'twere any nightingale."

"You have had your sorrows, then, George?"

"Never anything worse yet than a tailor's bill, Helen, and I hope you won't provide me with any. I am not in love with decay. I remember a fellow at Trinity, the merriest of all our set at a wine-party, who, alone with his ink-pot, was for ever enacting the part of the unheeded poet, complaining of the hard hearts and tuneless ears of his generation. I went into his room once, and found him with the tears running down his face, a pot of stout half empty on the table, and his den all but opaque with tobacco-smoke, reciting, with sobs--I had repeated the lines so often before they ceased to amuse me, that I can never forget them--

'Heard'st thou a quiver and clang?
In thy sleep did it make thee start?
'Twas a chord in twain that sprang--
But the lyre-shell was my heart.'

He took a pull at the stout, laid his head on the table, and sobbed like a locomotive."

"But it's not very bad--not bad at all, so far as I see," said Helen, who had a woman's weakness for the side attacked, in addition to a human partiality for fair play.

"No, not bad at all--for absolute nonsense," said Bascombe.

"He had been reading Heine," said Wingfold.

"And burlesquing him," returned Bascombe. "Fancy hearing one of the fellow's heart-strings crack, and taking it for a string of his fiddle in the press! By the way, what are the heart-strings? Have they any anatomical synonym? But I have no doubt it was good poetry."

"Do you think poetry and common sense necessarily opposed to each other?" asked Wingfold.

"I confess a leaning to that opinion," replied Bascombe, with a half-conscious smile.

"What do you say of Horace, now?" suggested Wingfold.

"Unfortunately for me, you have mentioned the one poet for whom I have any respect. But what I like in him is just his common sense. He never cries over spilt milk, even if the jug be broken to the bargain. But common sense would be just as good in prose as in verse."

"Possibly; but what we have of it in Horace would never have reached us but for the forms into which he has cast it. How much more enticing acorns in the cup are! I was watching two children picking them up to-day."

"That may be; there have always been more children than grown men,"

returned Bascombe. "For my part, I would sweep away all illusions, and get at the heart of the affair."

"But," said Wingfold, with the look of one who, as he tries to say it, is seeing a thing for the first time, "does not the acorn-cup belong to the acorn? May not some of what you call illusions, be the finer, or at least more ethereal qualities of the thing itself? You do not object to music in church, for instance?"

Bascombe was on the point of saying he objected to it nowhere except in church, but for his aunt's sake, or rather for his own sake in his aunt's eyes, he restrained himself, and uttered his feelings only in a peculiar smile, of import so mingled, that its meaning was illegible ere it had quivered along his lip and vanished.

"I am no metaphysician," he said, and Wingfold accepted the dismissal of the subject.

Little passed between the two men over their wine; and as neither of them cared to drink more than a couple of glasses, they soon rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room.

Mrs. Ramshorn was taking her usual forty winks in her arm-chair, and their entrance did not disturb her. Helen was turning over some music.

"I am looking for a song for you, George," she said. "I want Mr. Wingfold to hear you sing, lest he should take you for a man of stone and lime."

"Never mind looking," returned her cousin. "I will sing one you have never heard."

And seating himself at the piano, he sang the following verses. They were his own, a fact he would probably have allowed to creep out, had they met with more sympathy. His voice was a full bass one, full of tone.

"Each man has his lampful, his lampful of oil;
He may dull its glimmer with sorrow and toil;
He may leave it unlit, and let it dry,
Or wave it aloft, and hold it high:
For mine, it shall burn with a fearless flame
In the front of the darkness that has no name.

"Sunshine and Wind?--are ye there? Ho! ho!
Are ye comrades or lords, as ye shine and blow?
I care not, I! I will lift my head
Till ye shine and blow on my grassy bed.
See, brother Sun, I am shining too!
Wind, I am living as well as you!

"Though the sun go out like a vagrant spark,
And his daughter planets are left in the dark,
I care not, I! For why should I care?
I shall be hurtless, nor here nor there.
Sun and Wind, let us shine and shout,
For the day draws nigh when we all go out!"

"I don't like the song," said Helen, wrinkling her brows a little. "It sounds--well, heathenish."

She would, I fear, have said nothing of the sort, being used to that kind of sound from her cousin, had not a clergyman been present. Yet she said it from no hypocrisy, but simple regard to his professional feelings,

"I sung it for Mr. Wingfold," returned Bascombe. "It would have been a song after Horace's own heart."

"Don't you think," rejoined the curate, "the defiant tone of your song would have been strange to him? I confess that what I find chiefly attractive in Horace is his sad submission to the inevitable."

"Sad?" echoed Bascombe.

"Don't you think so?"

"No. He makes the best of it, and as merrily as he can."

"AS HE CAN, I grant you," said Wingfold.

Here Mrs. Ramshorn woke, and the subject was dropped, leaving Mr. Wingfold in some perplexity as to this young man and his talk, and what the phenomenon signified. Was heathenism after all secretly cherished, and about to become fashionable in English society? He saw little of its phases, and for what he knew it might be so.

Helen sat down to the piano. Her time was perfect, and she never blundered a note. She played well and woodenly, and had for her reward a certain wooden satisfaction in her own performance. The music she chose was good of its kind, but had more to do with the instrument than the feelings, and was more dependent upon execution than expression. Bascombe yawned behind his handkerchief, and Wingfold gazed at the profile of the player, wondering how, with such fine features and complexion, with such a fine-shaped and well-set head? her face should be so far short of interesting. It seemed a face that had no story.

CHAPTER V.

A STAGGERING QUESTION.

It was time the curate should take his leave. Bascombe would go out with him and have his last cigar. The wind had fallen, and the moon was shining. A vague sense of contrast came over Wingfold, and as he stepped on the pavement from the threshold of the high gates of wrought iron, he turned involuntarily and looked back at the house.

It was of red brick, and flat-faced in the style of Queen Anne's time, so that the light could do nothing with it in the way of shadow, and dwelt only on the dignity of its unpretentiousness. But aloft over its ridge the moon floated in the softest, loveliest blue, with just a cloud here and there to show how blue it was, and a sparkle where its blueness took fire in a star. It was autumn, almost winter, below, and the creepers that clung to the house waved in the now gentle wind like the straggling tresses of old age; but above was a sky that might have overhung the last melting of spring into summer. At the end of the street rose the great square tower of the church, seeming larger than in the daylight. There was something in it all that made the curate feel there ought to be more--as if the night knew something he did not; and he yielded himself to its invasion.

His companion having carefully lighted his cigar all round its extreme periphery, took it from his mouth, regarded its glowing end with a smile of satisfaction, and burst into a laugh. It was not a scornful laugh, neither was it a merry or a humorous laugh; it was one of satisfaction and amusement.

"Let me have a share in the fun," said the curate.

"You have it," said his companion--rudely, indeed, but not quite offensively, and put his cigar in his mouth again.

Wingfold was not one to take umbrage easily. He was not important enough in his own eyes for that, but he did not choose to go farther.

"That's a fine old church," he said, pointing to the dark mass invading the blue--so solid, yet so clear in outline.

"I am glad the mason-work is to your mind," returned Bascombe, almost compassionately. "It must be some satisfaction, perhaps consolation to you."

Before he had thus concluded the sentence a little scorn had crept into his tone.

"You make some allusion which I do not quite apprehend," said the curate.

"Now, I am going to be honest with you," said Bascombe abruptly, and stopping, he turned towards his companion, and took the full-flavoured Havannah from his lips. "I like you," he went on, "for you seem reasonable; and besides, a man ought to speak out what he thinks. So here goes!--Tell me honestly--do you believe one word of all that!"

And he in his turn pointed in the direction of the great tower.

The curate was taken by surprise and made no answer: it was as if he had received a sudden blow in the face. Recovering himself presently, however, he sought room to pass the question without direct encounter.

"How came the thing there?" he said, once more indicating the church-tower.

"By faith, no doubt," answered Bascombe, laughing,--"but not your faith; no, nor the faith of any of the last few generations."

"There are more churches built now, ten times over, than in any former period of our history."

"True; but of what sort? All imitation--never an original amongst them all!"

"If they had found out the right way, why change it?"

"Good! But it is rather ominous for the claim of a divine origin to your religion that it should be the only one thing that in these days takes the crab's move--backwards. You are indebted to your forefathers for your would-be belief, as well as for their genuine churches. You hardly know what your belief is. There is my aunt--as good a specimen as I know of what you call a Christian!--so accustomed is she to think and speak too after the forms of what you heard my cousin call heathenism, that she would never have discovered, had she been as wide awake as she was sound asleep, that the song I sung was anything but a good Christian ballad."

"Pardon me; I think you are wrong there."

"What! did you never remark how these Christian people, who profess to believe that their great man has conquered death, and all that rubbish--did you never observe the way they look if the least allusion is made to death, or the eternity they say they expect beyond it? Do they not stare as if you had committed a breach of manners? Religion itself is the same way: as much as you like about the church, but don't mention Christ! At the same time, to do them justice, it is only of death in the abstract they decline to hear; they will listen to the news of the death of a great and good man, without any such emotion. Look at the poetry of death--I mean the way Christian poets write of it! A dreamless sleep they call it--the bourne from whence, knows no waking. 'She is gone for ever!' cries the mother over her daughter. And that is why such things are not to be mentioned, because in their hearts they have no hope, and in their minds no courage to face the facts of existence. We haven't the pluck of the old fellows, who, that they might look death himself in the face without dismay, accustomed themselves, even at their banquets, to the sight of his most loathsome handiwork, his most significant symbol--and enjoyed their wine the better for it!--your friend Horace, for instance."

"But your aunt now would never consent to such an interpretation of her opinions. Nor do I allow that it is fair."

"My dear sir, if there is one thing I pride myself upon, it is fair play, and I grant you at once she would not. But I am speaking, not of creeds, but of beliefs. And I assert that the forms of common Christian speech regarding death come nearer those of Horace than your saint, the old Jew, Saul of Tarsus."

It did not occur to Wingfold that people generally speak from the surfaces, not the depths of their minds, even when those depths are moved; nor yet that possibly Mrs. Ramshorn was not the best type of a Christian, even in his soft-walking congregation! In fact, nothing

came into his mind with which to meet what Bascombe said--the real force whereof he could not help feeling--and he answered nothing. His companion followed his apparent yielding with fresh pressure.

"In truth," he said, "I do not believe that YOU believe more than an atom here and there of what you profess. I am confident you have more good sense by a great deal."

"I am sorry to find that you place good sense above good faith, Mr. Bascombe; but I am obliged by your good opinion, which, as I read it, amounts to this--that I am one of the greatest humbugs you have the misfortune to be acquainted with."

"Ha! ha! ha!--No, no; I don't say that. I know so well how to make allowance for the prejudices a man has inherited from foolish ancestors, and which have been instilled into him, as well, with his earliest nourishment, both bodily and mental. But--come now--I do love open dealing--I am myself open as the day--did you not take to the church as a profession, in which you might eat a piece of bread--as somebody says in your own blessed Bible--dry enough bread it may be, for the old lady is not over-generous to her younger children--still a gentlemanly sort of livelihood?"

Wingfold held his peace. It was incontestably with such a view that he had signed the articles and sought holy orders--and that without a single question as to truth or reality in either act.

"Your silence is honesty, Mr. Wingfold, and I honour you for it," said Bascombe. "It is an easy thing for a man in another profession to speak his mind, but silence such as yours, casting a shadow backward over your past, require courage: I honour you, sir."

As he spoke, he laid his hand on Wingfold's shoulder with the grasp of an athlete.

"Can the sherry have anything to do with it?" thought the curate. The fellow was, or seemed to be, years younger than himself! It was an assurance unimaginable--yet there it stood--six feet of it good! He glanced at the church tower. It had not vanished in mist! It

still made its own strong, clear mark on the eternal blue!

"I must not allow you to mistake my silence, Mr. Bascombe," he answered the same moment. "It is not easy to reply to such demands all at once. It is not easy to say in times like these, and at a moment's notice, what or how much a man believes. But whatever my answer might be had I time to consider it, my silence must at least not be interpreted to mean that I do NOT believe as my profession indicates. That, at all events, would be untrue."

"Then I am to understand, Mr. Wingfold, that you neither believe nor disbelieve the tenets of the church whose bread you eat?" said Bascombe, with the air of a reprover of sin.

"I decline to place myself between the horns of any such dilemma," returned Wingfold, who was now more than a little annoyed at his persistency in forcing his way within the precincts of another's personality.

"It is but one more proof--more than was necessary--to convince me that the old system is a lie--a lie of the worst sort, seeing it may prevail even to the self-deception of a man otherwise remarkable for honesty and directness. Good night, Mr. Wingfold."

With lifted hats, but no hand-shaking, the men parted.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CURATE IN THE CHURCHYARD.

Bascombe was chagrined to find that the persuasive eloquence with which he hoped soon to play upon the convictions of jurymen at his own sweet will, had not begotten even communicativenes, not to say confidence, in the mind of a parson who knew himself fooled,--and partly that it gave him cause to doubt how far it might be safe to urge his attack in another and to him more important quarter. He had a passion for convincing people, this Hercules of the new world. He sauntered slowly back to his aunt's, husbanding his cigar a little, and looking up at the moon now and then,--not to admire the marvel of her shining, but to think yet again what a fit type of an effete superstition she was, in that she retained her power of fascination even in death.

Wingfold walked slowly away, with his eyes on the ground gliding from under his footsteps. It was only eleven o'clock, but this the oldest part of the town seemed already asleep. They had not met a single person on their way, and hardly seen a lighted window. But he felt unwilling to go home, which at first he was fain to attribute to his having drunk a little more wine than was good for him, whence this feverishness and restlessness so strange to his experience. In the churchyard, on the other side of which his lodging lay, he turned aside from the flagged path and sat down upon a gravestone, where he was hardly seated ere he began to discover that it was something else than the wine which had made him feel so uncomfortable. What an objectionable young fellow that Bascombe was! --presuming and arrogant to a degree rare, he hoped, even in a profession for which insolence was a qualification. What rendered it worse was that his good nature--and indeed every one of his gifts, which were all of the popular order--was subservient to an assumption not only self-satisfied but obtrusive!--And yet--and yet--the objectionable character of his self-constituted judge being clear as the moon to the mind of the curate, was there not something in what he had said? This much remained undeniable at least, that when the very existence of the church was denounced as a humbug in the hearing of one who ate her bread, and was her pledged servant, his very honesty had kept that man from speaking a word in her behalf! Something must be wrong somewhere: was it in him or in the church? In him assuredly, whether in her or not. For had he not been unable to utter the simple assertion that he did believe the things

which, as the mouthpiece of the church, he had been speaking in the name of the truth every Sunday--would again speak the day after to-morrow? And now the point was--WHY could he not say he believed them? He had never consciously questioned them; he did not question them now; and yet, when a forward, overbearing young infidel of a lawyer put it to him--plump--as if he were in the witness-box, or rather indeed in the dock--did he believe a word of what the church had set him to teach?--a strange something--was it honesty?--if so, how dishonest had he not hitherto been?--was it diffidence?--if so, how presumptuous his position in that church!--this nondescript something seemed to raise a "viewless obstruction" in his throat, and, having thus rendered him the first moment incapable of speaking out like a man, had taught him the next--had it?--to quibble--"like a priest" the lawyer-fellow would doubtless have said! He must go home and study Paley--or perhaps Butler's Analogy--he owed the church something, and ought to be able to strike a blow for her. Or would not Leighton be better? Or a more modern writer--say Neander, or Coleridge, or perhaps Dr. Liddon? There were thousands able to fit him out for the silencing of such foolish men as this Bascombe of the shirt-front!

Wingfold found himself filled with contempt, but the next moment was not sure whether this Bascombe or one Wingfold were the more legitimate object of it. One thing was undeniable--his friends HAD put him into the priest's office, and he had yielded to go, that he might eat a piece of bread. He had no love for it except by fits, when the beauty of an anthem, or the composition of a collect, awoke in him a faint consenting admiration, or a weak, responsive sympathy. Did he not, indeed, sometimes despise himself, and that pretty heartily, for earning his bread by work which any pious old woman could do better than he? True, he attended to his duties; not merely "did church," but his endeavour also that all things should be done decently and in order. All the same it remained a fact that if Barrister Bascombe were to stand up and assert in full congregation--as no doubt he was perfectly prepared to do--that there was no God anywhere in the universe, the Rev. Thomas Wingfold could not, on the church's part, prove to anybody that there was;--dared not, indeed, so certain would he be of discomfiture, advance a single argument on his side of the question. Was it even HIS side of the question? Could he say he believed there was a God? Or was not this all he knew--that there was a church of England, which paid him for reading public prayers to a God in whom the congregation--and himself--were supposed by some to believe, by others, Bascombe, for instance, not?

These reflections were not pleasant, especially with Sunday so near. For what if there were hundreds, yes, thousands of books, triumphantly settling every question which an over-seething and ill-instructed brain might by any chance suggest,--what could it boot?--how was a poor finite mortal, with much the ordinary faculty and capacity, and but a very small stock already stored, to set about reading, studying, understanding, mastering, appropriating the contents of those thousands of volumes necessary to the arming of him who, without pretending himself the mighty champion to seek the dragon in his den, might yet hope not to let the loathly worm swallow him, armour and all, at one gulp in the highway? Add to this that--thought of all most dismayful!--he had himself to convince first, the worst dragon of all to kill, for bare honesty's sake, in his own field; while, all the time he was arming and fighting--like

the waves of the flowing tide in a sou'-wester, Sunday came in upon Sunday, roaring on his flat, defenceless shore, Sunday behind Sunday rose towering, in awful perspective, away to the verge of an infinite horizon--Sunday after Sunday of dishonesty and sham--yes, hypocrisy, far worse than any idolatry. To begin now, and in such circumstances, to study the evidences of Christianity, were about as reasonable as to send a man, whose children were crying for their dinner, off to China to make his fortune!

He laughed the idea to scorn, discovered that a gravestone in a November midnight was a cold chair for study, rose, stretched himself disconsolately, almost despairingly, looked long at the persistent solidity of the dark church and the waving line of its age-slackened ridge, which, like a mountain-range, shot up suddenly in the tower and ceased--then turning away left the houses of the dead crowded all about the house of the resurrection. At the farther gate he turned yet again, and gazed another moment on the tower. Towards the sky it towered, and led his gaze upward. There still soared, yet rested, the same quiet night with its delicate heaps of transparent blue, its cool-glowing moon, its steely stars, and its something he did not understand. He went home a little quieter of heart, as if he had heard from afar something sweet and strange.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COUSINS.

George Bascombe was a peculiar development of the present century, almost of the present generation. In the last century, beyond a doubt, the description of such a man would have been incredible. I do not mean that he was the worse or the better for that. There are types both of good and of evil which to the past would have been incredible because unintelligible.

It is very hard sometimes for a tolerably honest man, as we have just seen in the case of Wingfold, to say what he believes, and it ought to be yet harder to say what another man does not believe; therefore I shall presume no farther concerning Bascombe in this respect than to say that the thing he SEEMED most to believe was that he had a mission to destroy the beliefs of everybody else. Whence he derived this mission he would not have thought a reasonable question--would have answered that, if any man knew any truth unknown to another, understood any truth better, or could present it more clearly than another, the truth itself was his commission of apostleship. And his stand was indubitably a firm one. Only there was the question--whether his presumed commission was verily truth or no. It must be allowed that a good deal turns upon that.

According to the judgment of some men who thought they knew him,

Bascombe was as yet--I will not say incapable of distinguishing, but careless of the distinction between--not a fact and a law, perhaps, but a law and a truth. They said also that he inveighed against the beliefs of other people, without having ever seen more than a distorted shadow of those beliefs--some of them he was not capable of seeing, they said--only capable of denying. Now while he would have been perfectly justified, they said, in asserting that he saw no truth in the things he denied, was he justifiable in concluding that his not seeing a thing was a proof of its non-existence--anything more, in fact, than a presumption against its existence? or in denouncing every man who said he believed this or that which Bascombe did not believe, as either a knave or a fool, if not both in one? He would, they said, judge anybody--a Shakespeare, a Bacon, a Milton--without a moment's hesitation or a quiver of reverence--judge men who, beside him, were as the living ocean to a rose-diamond. If he was armed in honesty, the rivets were of self-satisfaction. The suit, they allowed, was adamantine, unpierceable.

That region of a man's nature which has to do with the unknown was in Bascombe shut off by a wall without chink or cranny; he was unaware of its existence. He had come out of the darkness, and was going back into the darkness; all that lay between, plain and clear, he had to do with--nothing more. He could not present to himself the idea of a man who found it impossible to live without some dealings with the supernal. To him a man's imagination was of no higher calling than to amuse him with its vagaries. He did not know, apparently, that Imagination had been the guide to all the physical discoveries which he worshipped, therefore could not reason that perhaps she might be able to carry a glimmering light even into the forest of the supersensible.

How far he was original in the views he propounded, will, to those who understand the times of which I write, be plain enough. The lively reception of another man's doctrine, especially if it comes over water or across a few ages of semi-oblivion, and has to be gathered with occasional help from a dictionary, raises many a man, in his own esteem, to the same rank with its first propounder; after which he will propound it so heartily himself as to forget the difference, and love it as his own child.

It may seem strange that the son of a clergyman should take such a part in the world's affairs, but one who observes will discover that, at college at least, the behaviour of sons of clergymen resembles in general as little as that of any, and less than that of most, the behaviour enjoined by the doctrines their fathers have to teach. The cause of this is matter of consideration for those fathers. In Bascombe's case, it must be mentioned also that, instead of taking freedom from prejudice as a portion of the natural accomplishment of a gentleman, he prided himself upon it, and THEREFORE would often go dead against the things presumed to be held by THE CLOTH, long before he had begun to take his position as an iconoclast.

Lest I should, however, tire my reader with the delineations of a character not of the most interesting, I shall, for the present, only add that Bascombe had persuaded himself, and without much difficulty, that he was one of the prophets of a new order of things. At Cambridge he had been so regarded by a few who had lauded

him as a mighty foe to humbug--and in some true measure he deserved the praise. Since then he had found a larger circle, and had even radiated of his light, such, as it was, from the centres of London editorial offices. But all I have to do with now is the fact that he had grown desirous to add his cousin, Helen Lingard, to the number of those who believed in him, and over whom, therefore, he exercised a prophet's influence.

No doubt it added much to the attractiveness of the intellectual game that the hunt was on the home grounds of such a proprietress as Helen--a handsome, a gifted, and, above all, a ladylike young woman. To do Bascombe justice, the fact that she was an heiress also had very little weight in the matter. If he had ever had any thought of marrying her, that thought was not consciously present to him when first he became aware of his wish to convert her to his views of life. But, although he was not in love with her, he admired her, and believed he saw in her one that resembled himself.

As to Helen, although she was no more conscious of cause of self-dissatisfaction than her cousin, she was not therefore positively self-satisfied like him. For that her mind was not active enough.

If it seem, as it may, to some of my readers, difficult to believe that she should have come to her years without encountering any questions, giving life to any aspirations, or even forming any opinions that could rightly be called her own, I would remind them that she had always had good health, and that her intellectual faculties had been kept in full and healthy exercise, nor had once afforded the suspicion of a tendency towards artistic utterance in any direction. She was no mere dabbler in anything: in music, for instance, she had studied thorough bass, and studied it well; yet her playing was such as I have already described it. She understood perspective, and could copy an etching, in pen and ink, to a hair's-breadth, yet her drawing was hard and mechanical. She was pretty much at home in Euclid, and thoroughly enjoyed a geometric relation, but had never yet shown her English master the slightest pleasure in an analogy, or the smallest sympathy with any poetry higher than such as very properly delights schoolboys. Ten thousand things she knew without wondering at one of them. Any attempt to rouse her admiration, she invariably received with quiet intelligence but no response. Yet her drawing-master was convinced there lay a large soul asleep somewhere below the calm grey morning of that wide-awake yet reposeful intelligence.

As far as she knew--only she had never thought anything about it--she was in harmony with creation animate and inanimate, and for what might or might not be above creation, or at the back, or the heart, or the mere root of it, how could she think about a something the idea of which had never yet been presented to her by love or philosophy, or even curiosity? As for any influence from the public offices of religion, a contented soul may glide through them all for a long life, unstruck to the last, buoyant and evasive as a bee amongst hailstones. And now her cousin, unsolicited, was about to assume, if she should permit him, the unspiritual direction of her being, so that she need never be troubled from the quarter of the unknown.

Mrs. Ramshorn's house had formerly been the manor-house, and,

although it now stood in an old street, with only a few yards of ground between it and the road, it had a large and ancient garden behind it. A large garden of any sort is valuable, but an ancient garden is invaluable, and this one had retained a very antique loveliness. The quaint memorials of its history lived on into the new, changed, unsympathetic time, and stood there, aged, modest, and unabashed. Yet not one of the family had ever cared for it on the ground of its old-fashionedness; its preservation was owing merely to the fact that their gardener was blessed with a wholesome stupidity rendering him incapable of unlearning what his father, who had been gardener there before him, had had marvellous difficulty in teaching him. We do not half appreciate the benefits to the race that spring from honest dulness. The CLEVER people are the ruin of everything.

Into this garden, Bascombe walked the next morning, after breakfast, and Helen, who, next to the smell of a fir-wood fire, honestly liked the odour of a good cigar, spying him from her balcony, which was the roof of the veranda, where she was trimming the few remaining chrysanthemums that stood outside the window of her room, ran down the little wooden stair that led from it to the garden, and joined him. Nothing could just at present have been more to his mind.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GARDEN.

"Take a cigar, Helen?" said George.

"No, thank you," answered Helen; "I like it diluted."

"I don't see why ladies should not have things strong as men."

"Not if they don't want them. You can't enjoy everything--I mean, one can't have the strong and the delicate both at once. I don't believe a smoker can have the same pleasure in smelling a rose that I have."

"Isn't it a pity we never can compare sensations?"

"I don't think it matters much: everyone would have to keep to his own after all."

"That's good, Helen! If ever man try to humbug you, he will find he has lost his stirrups. If only there were enough like you left in this miserable old hulk of a creation!"

It was an odd thing that when in the humour of finding fault, Bascombe would not unfrequently speak of the cosmos as a creation. He was himself unaware of the curious fact.

"You seem to have a standing quarrel with the creation, George! Yet one might think you had as little ground as most people to complain of your portion in it," said Helen.

"Well, you know, I don't complain for myself. I don't pretend to think I am specially ill-used. But I am not everybody. And then there's such a lot of born-fools in it!"

"If they are born-fools they can't help it."

"That may be; only it makes it none the pleasanter for other people; but, unfortunately, they are not the only or the worst sort of fools. For one born-fool there are a thousand wilful ones. For one man that will honestly face an honest argument, there are ten thousand that will dishonestly shirk it. There's that curate-fellow now--Wingfold I think aunt called him--look at him now!"

"I can't see much in him to rouse indignation," said Helen. "He seems a very inoffensive man."

"I don't call it inoffensive when a man sells himself to the keeping up of a system that----"

Here Bascombe checked himself, remembering that a sudden attack upon what was, at least, the more was the pity, a time-honoured system, might rouse a woman's prejudices; and as Helen had already listened to a large amount of undermining remark without perceiving the direction of his tunnels, he resolved, before venturing an open assault, to make sure that those prejudices stood, lightly borne, over an abyss of seething objection. He had had his experiences as the prophet-pioneer of glad tidings to the nations, and had before now, although such weakness he could not anticipate in Helen, seen one whom he considered a most promising pupil, turned suddenly away in a storm of terror and disgust.

"What a folly is it now," he instantly resumed, leaving the general and attacking a particular, "to think to make people good by promises and threats--promises of a heaven that would bore the dullest among them to death, and threats of a hell the very idea of which, if only half conceived, would be enough to paralyse every nerve of healthy action in the human system!"

"All nations have believed in a future state, either of reward or punishment," objected Helen.

"Mere Brocken-spectres of their own approbation or disapprobation of themselves. And whither has it brought the race?"

"What then would you substitute for it, George?"

"Why substitute anything? Ought not men be good to one another because they are made up of ones and others? Do you or I need threats and promises to make us kind? And what right have we to judge others worse than ourselves? Mutual compassion," he went on, blowing out a mouthful of smoke and then swelling his big chest with a huge lungsful of air, "might be sufficient to teach poor ephemerals kindness and consideration enough to last their time."

"But how would you bring such reflections to bear?" asked Helen, pertinently.

"I would reason thus: You must consider that you are but a part of the whole, and that whatever you do to hurt the whole, or injure any of its parts, will return upon you who form one of those parts."

"How would that influence the man whose favourite amusement is to beat his wife!"

"Not at all, I grant you. But that man is what he is from being born and bred under a false and brutal system. Having deluged his delicate brain with the poisonous fumes of adulterated liquor, and so roused all the terrors of a phantom-haunted imagination, he sees hostile powers above watching for his fall, and fiery ruin beneath gaping to receive him, and in pure despair acts like the madman the priests and the publicans have made him. Helen," continued Bascombe with solemnity, regarding her fixedly, "to deliver the race from the horrors of such falsehoods, which by no means operate only on the vulgar and brutal, for to how many of the most refined and delicate of human beings are not their lives rendered bitter by the evil suggestions of lying systems--I care not what they are called--philosophy, religion, society, I care not?--to deliver men, I say, from such ghouls of the human brain, were indeed to have lived! and in the consciousness of having spent his life in the slaying of such dragons, a man may well go from the nameless past into the nameless future rejoicing, careless even if his poor length of days be shortened by his labours to leave blessing behind him, and, full of courage even in the moment of final dissolution, cast her mockery back into the face of mocking Life, and die her enemy, and the friend of Death!"

George's language was a little confused. Perhaps he mingled his ideas a little for Helen's sake--or rather for obscurity's sake. Anyhow, the mournful touch in it was not his own, but taken from the poems of certain persons whose opinions resembled his, but floated on the surface of mighty and sad hearts. Tall, stately, comfortable Helen walked composedly by his side, softly shared his cigar, and thought what a splendid pleader he would make. Perhaps to her it sounded rather finer than it was, for its tone of unselfishness, the aroma of self-devotion that floated about it, pleased and attracted her. Was not here a youth in the prime of being and the dawn of success, handsome, and smoking the oldest of Havannahs, who, so far from being enamoured of his own existence, was anxious and careful about that of less favoured mortals, for whose welfare indeed he was willing to sacrifice his life?--nothing less could be what he meant. And how fine he looked as he said it, with his head erect, and his nostrils quivering like those of a horse! For his honesty, that was self-evident!

Perhaps, had she been capable of looking into it, the self-evident honesty might have resolved itself into this--that he thoroughly believed in himself; that he meant what he said; and that he offered her nothing he did not prize and cleave to as his own.

To one who had read Darwin, and had chanced to see them as they walked in their steady, stately young life among the ancient cedars and clipped yews of the garden, with the rags and tatters of the ruined summer hanging over and around them, they must have looked as fine an instance of natural selection as the world had to show. And

now in truth for the first time, with any shadow of purpose, that is, did the thought of Helen as a wife occur to Bascombe. She listened so well, was so ready to take what he presented to her, was evidently so willing to become a pupil, that he began to say to himself that here was the very woman made--no, not made, that implied a maker--but for him, without the MADE; that is, if ever he should bring himself by marriage to limit the freedom to which man, the crown of the world, the blossom of nature, the cauliflower of the spine, was predestined or doomed, without will in himself or beyond himself, from an eternity of unthinking matter, ever producing what was better than itself in the prolific darkness of non-intent.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PARK.

At the bottom of Mrs. Ramshorn's garden was a deep sunk fence, which allowed a large meadow, a fragment of what had once been the manor-park, to belong, so far as the eye was concerned, to the garden. Nor was this all, for in the sunk fence was a door with a little tunnel, by which they could pass at once from the garden to the meadow. So, the day being wonderfully fine, Bascombe proposed to his cousin a walk in the park, the close-paling of which, with a small door in it, whereto Mrs. Ramshorn had the privilege of a key, was visible on the other side of the meadow. The two keys had but to be fetched from the house, and in a few minutes they were in the park. The turf was dry, the air was still, and although the woods were very silent, and looked mournfully bare, the grass drew nearer to the roots of the trees, and the sunshine filled them with streaks of gold, blending lovelily with the bright green of the moss that patched the older stems. Neither horses nor dogs say to themselves, I suppose, that the sunshine makes them glad, yet both are happier, after the rules of equine and canine existence, on a bright day: neither Helen nor George could have understood a poem of Keats--not to say Wordsworth--(I do not mean they would not have fancied they did)--and yet the soul of nature that dwelt in these common shows did not altogether fail of influence upon them.

"I wonder what the birds do with themselves all the winter," said Helen.

"Eat berries, and make the best of it," answered George.

"I mean what becomes of them all. We see so few of them."

"About as many as you see in summer. Because you hear them you fancy you see them."

"But there is so little to hide them in winter."

"Little is wanted to hide our dusky creatures."

"They must have a hard time of it in frost and snow."

"Oh! I don't know," returned George. "They enjoy life on the whole, I believe. It ain't such a very bad sort of a world as some people would have it. Nature is cruel enough in some of her arrangements, it can't be denied. She don't scruple to carry out her plans. It is nothing to her that for the life of one great monster of a high-priest, millions upon millions of submissive little fishes should be sacrificed; and then if anybody come within the teeth of her machinery, don't she mangle him finely--with her fevers and her agues and her convulsions and consumptions and what not? But still, barring her own necessities, and the consequences of man's ignorance and foolhardiness, she is on the whole rather a good-natured old woman, and scatters a deal of tolerably fair enjoyment around her."

"One WOULD think the birds must be happy in summer, at least, to hear them sing," corroborated Helen.

"Yes, or to see them stripping a hawthorn bush in winter--always provided the cat or the hawk don't get hold of them. With that nature does not trouble herself. Well, it's soon over--with all of us, and that's a comfort. If men would only get rid of their cats and hawks,--such as the fancy for instance, that all their suffering comes of the will of a malignant power! That is the kind of thing that makes the misery of the world!"

"I don't quite see----" began Helen.

"We were talking about the birds in winter," interrupted George, careful not to swell too suddenly any of the air-bags with which he would float Helen's belief. He knew wisely, and he knew how, to leave a hint to work while it was yet not half understood. By the time it was understood, it would have grown a little familiar: the supposed pup when it turned out a cub, would not be so terrible as if it had presented itself at once as leonate.

And so they wandered across the park, talking easily.

"They've got on a good way since I was here last," said George, as they came in sight of the new house the new earl was building. "But they don't seem much in a hurry with it either."

"Aunt says it is twenty years since the foundations were laid by the uncle of the present earl," said Helen; "and then for some reason or other the thing was dropped."

"Was there no house on the place before?"

"Oh! yes--not much of a house, though."

"And they pulled it down, I suppose."

"No; it stands there still."

"Where?"

"Down in the hollow there--over those trees--about the worst place they could have built in. Surely you have seen it! Poldie and I used to run all over it."

"No, I never saw it. Was it empty then?"

"Yes, or almost. I can remember some little attention paid to the garden, but none to the house. It is just falling slowly to pieces. Would you like to see it?"

"That I should," returned Bascombe, who was always ready for any new impression on his sensorium, and away they went to look at the old house of Glaston as it was called, after some greatly older and probably fortified place.

In the hollow all the water of the park gathered to a lake before finding its way to the river Lythe. This lake was at the bottom of the old garden, and the house at the top of it. The garden was walled on the two sides, and the walls ran right down to the lake. There were wonderful legends current amongst the children of Glaston concerning that lake, its depth, and the creatures in it; and one terrible story, which had been made a ballad of, about a lady drowned in a sack, whose ghost might still be seen when the moon was old, haunting the gardens and the house. Hence it came that none of them went near it, except those few whose appetites for adventure now and then grew keen enough to prevent their imaginations from rousing more fear than supplied the proper relish of danger. The house itself even those few never dared to enter.

Not so had it been with Helen and Leopold. The latter had imagination enough to receive everything offered, but Helen was the leader, and she had next to none. In her childhood she had heard the tales alluded to from her nurses, but she had been to school since, and had learned not to believe them; and certainly she was not one to be frightened at what she did not believe. So when Leopold came in the holidays, the place was one of their favoured haunts, and they knew every cubic yard in the house.

"Here," said Helen to her cousin, as she opened the door in a little closet, and showed a dusky room which had no window but a small one high up in the wall of a back staircase, "here is one room into which I never could get Poldie without the greatest trouble. I gave it up at last, he always trembled so till he got out again. I will show you such a curious place at the other end of it."

She led the way to a closet similar to that by which they had entered, and directed Bascombe how to raise a trap which filled all the floor of it so that it did not show. Under the trap was a sort of well, big enough to hold three upon emergency.

"If only they could contrive to breathe," said George. "It looks ugly. If it had but a brain and a tongue it could tell tales."

"Come," said Helen. "I don't know how it is, but I don't like the look of it myself now. Let us get into the open air again."

Ascending from the hollow, and passing through a deep belt of trees that surrounded it, they came again to the open park, and by-and-by reached the road that led from the lodge to the new building, upon

which they presently encountered a strange couple.

CHAPTER X.

THE DWARFS.

The moment they had passed them, George turned to his cousin with a countenance which bore moral indignation mingled with disgust. The healthy instincts of the elect of his race were offended by the sight of such physical failures, such mockeries of humanity as those.

The woman was little if anything over four feet in height. She was crooked, had a high shoulder, and walked like a crab, one leg being shorter than the other. Her companion walked quite straight, with a certain appearance of dignity which he neither assumed nor could have avoided, and which gave his gait the air of a march. He was not an inch taller than the woman, had broad, square shoulders, pigeon-breast, and invisible neck. He was twice her age, and they seemed father and daughter. They heard his breathing, loud with asthma, as they went by.

"Poor things!" said Helen, with cold kindness.

"It is shameful!" said George, in a tone of righteous anger. "Such creatures have no right to existence. The horrid manakin!"

"But, George!" said Helen, in expostulation, "the poor wretch can't help his deformity."

"No; but what right had he to marry and perpetuate such odious misery!"

"You are too hasty: the young woman is his niece."

"She ought to have been strangled the moment she was born--for the sake of humanity. Monsters ought not to live."

"Unfortunately they have all got mothers," said Helen; and something in her face made him fear he had gone too far.

"Don't mistake me, dear Helen," he said. "I would neither starve nor drown them after they had reached the faculty of resenting such treatment--of the justice of which," he added, smiling, "I am afraid it would be hard to convince them. But such people actually marry --I have known cases,--and that ought to be provided against by suitable enactments and penalties."

"And so," rejoined Helen, "because they are unhappy already, you would heap unhappiness upon them?"

"Now, Helen, you must not be unfair to me any more than to your hunchbacks. It is the good of the many I seek, and surely that is better than the good of the few."

"What I object to is, that it should be at the expense of the few--who are least able to bear it."

"The expense is trifling," said Bascombe. "Grant that it would be better for society that no such--or rather put it this way: grant that it would be well for each individual that goes to make up society that he were neither deformed, sickly, nor idiotic, and you mean the same that I do. A given space of territory under given conditions will always maintain a certain number of human beings; therefore such a law as I propose would not mean that the number drawing the breath of heaven should, to take the instance before us in illustration, be two less, but that a certain two of them should not be such as he or she who passed now, creatures whose existence is a burden to them, but such as you and I, Helen, who may say without presumption that we are no disgrace to Nature's handicraft."

Helen was not sensitive. She neither blushed nor cast down her eyes. But his tenets, thus expounded, had nothing very repulsive in them so far as she saw, and she made no further objection to them.

As they walked up the garden again, through the many lingering signs of a more stately if less luxurious existence than that of their generation, she was calmly listening to a lecture on the ground of law, namely, the resignation of certain personal rights for the securing of other and more important ones: she understood, was mildly interested, and entirely satisfied.

They seated themselves in the summer-house, a little wooden room under the down-sloping boughs of a huge cedar, and pursued their conversation--or rather Bascombe pursued his monologue. A lively girl would in all probability have been bored to death by him, but Helen was not a lively girl, and was not bored at all. Ere they went into the house she had heard, amongst a hundred other things of wisdom, his views concerning crime and punishment--with which, good and bad, true and false, I shall not trouble my reader, except in regard to one point--that of the obligation to punish. Upon this point he was severe.

No person, he said, ought to allow any weakness of pity to prevent him from bringing to punishment the person who broke the laws upon which the well-being of the community depended. A man must remember that the good of the whole, and not the fate of the individual, was to be regarded.

It was altogether a notable sort of tete-a-tete between two such perfect specimens of the race, and as at length they entered the house, they professed to each other to have much enjoyed their walk.

Holding the opinions he did, Bascombe was in one thing inconsistent: he went to "divine service" on the Sunday with his aunt and cousin--not to humour Helen's prejudices, but those of Mrs. Ramshorn, who, belonging, as I have said, to the profession, had strong opinions as to the wickedness of not going to church. It was of no use, he said to himself, trying to upset her ideas, for to

succeed would only be to make her miserable, and his design was to make the race happy. In the grand old Abbey, therefore, they heard together morning prayers, the Litany, and the Communion, all in one, after a weariful and lazy modern custom not yet extinct, and then a dull, sensible sermon, short, and tolerably well read, on the duty of forgiveness of injuries.

I dare say it did most of the people present a little good, undefinable as the faint influences of starlight, to sit under that "high embowed roof," within that vast artistic isolation, through whose mighty limiting the boundless is embodied, and we learn to feel the awful infinitude of the parent space out of which it is scooped. I dare also say that the tones of the mellow old organ spoke to something in many of the listeners that lay deeper far than the plummet of their self-knowledge had ever sounded. I think also that the prayers, the reading of which, in respect of intelligence, was admirable, were not only regarded as sacred utterances, but felt to be soothing influences by not a few of those who made not the slightest effort to follow them with their hearts; and I trust that on the whole their church-going tended rather to make them better than to harden them. But as to the main point, the stirring up of the children of the Highest to lay hold of the skirts of their Father's robe, the waking of the individual conscience to say I WILL ARISE, and the strengthening of the captive Will to break its bonds and stand free in the name of the eternal creating Freedom--for nothing of that was there any special provision. This belonged, in the nature of things, to the sermon, in which, if anywhere, the voice of the indwelling Spirit might surely be heard--out of his holy temple, if indeed that be the living soul of man, as St. Paul believed; but there was no sign that the preacher regarded his office as having any such end, although in his sermon lingered the rudimentary tokens that such must have been the original intent of pulpit-utterance.

On the way home, Bascombe made some objections to the discourse, partly to show his aunt that he had been attending. He admitted that one might forgive and forget what did not come within the scope of the law, but, as he had said to Helen before, a man was bound, he said, to punish the wrong which through him affected the community.

"George," said his aunt, "I differ from you there. Nobody ought to go to the law to punish an injury. I would forgive ever so many before I would run the risk of the law. But as to FORGETTING an injury--some injuries at least--no, that I never would!--And I don't believe, let the young man say what he will, that that is required of anyone."

Helen said nothing. She had no enemies to forgive, no wrongs worth remembering, and was not interested in the question. She thought it a very good sermon indeed.

When Bascombe left for London in the morning, he carried with him the lingering rustle of silk, the odour of lavender, and a certain blueness, not of the sky, which seemed to have something behind it, as never did the sky to him. He had never met woman so worthy of being his mate, either as regarded the perfection of her form, or the hidden development of her brain--evident in her capacity for the reception of truth, as his own cousin, Helen Lingard. Might not the relationship account for the fact?

Helen thought nothing to correspond. She considered George a fine manly fellow. What bold and original ideas he had about everything! Her brother was a baby to him! But then Leopold was such a love of a boy! Such eyes and such a smile were not to be seen on this side the world. Helen liked her cousin, was attached to her aunt, but loved her brother Leopold, and loved nobody else. His Hindoo mother, high of caste, had given him her lustrous eyes and pearly smile, which, the first moment she saw him, won his sister's heart. He was then but eight years old, and she but eleven. Since then, he had been brought up by his father's elder brother, who had the family estate in Yorkshire, but he had spent part of all his holidays with her, and they often wrote to each other. Of late indeed his letters had not been many, and a rumour had reached her that he was not doing quite satisfactorily at Cambridge, but she explained it away to the full contentment of her own heart, and went on building such castles as her poor aerolithic skill could command, with Leopold ever and always as the sharer of her self-expansion.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CURATE AT HOME.

If we could arrive at the feelings of a fish of the northern ocean around which the waters suddenly rose to tropical temperature, and swarmed with strange forms of life, uncouth and threatening, we should have a fair symbol of the mental condition in which Thomas Wingfold now found himself. The spiritual fluid in which his being floated had become all at once more potent, and he was in consequence uncomfortable. A certain intermittent stinging, as if from the flashes of some moral electricity, had begun to pass in various directions through the crude and chaotic mass he called himself, and he felt strangely restless. It never occurred to him--as how should it?--that he might have commenced undergoing the most marvellous of all changes,--one so marvellous, indeed, that for a man to foreknow its result or understand what he was passing through, would be more strange than that a caterpillar should recognise in the rainbow-winged butterfly hovering over the flower at whose leaf he was gnawing, the perfected idea of his own potential self--I mean the change of being born again. Nor were the symptoms such as would necessarily have suggested, even to a man experienced in the natural history of the infinite, that the process had commenced.

A restless night followed his reflections in the churchyard, and he did not wake at all comfortable. Not that ever he had been in the way of feeling comfortable. To him life had not been a land flowing with milk and honey. He had had few smiles, and not many of those grasps of the hand which let a man know another man is near him in

the battle--for had it not been something of a battle, how could he have come to the age of six-and-twenty without being worse than he was? He would not have said: "All these have I kept from my youth up;" but I can say that for several of them he had shown fight, although only One knew anything of it. This morning, then, it was not merely that he did not feel comfortable: he was consciously uncomfortable. Things were getting too hot for him. That infidel fellow had poked several most awkward questions at him--yes, into him, and a good many more had in him--self arisen to meet them. Usually he lay a little while before he came to himself; but this morning he came to himself at once, and not liking the interview, jumped out of bed as if he had hoped to leave himself there behind him.

He had always scorned lying, until one day, when still a boy at school, he suddenly found that he had told a lie, after which he hated it--yet now, if he was to believe--ah! whom? did not the positive fellow and his own conscience say the same thing?--his profession, his very life was a lie! the very bread he ate grew on the rank fields of falsehood!--No, no; it was absurd! it could not be! What had he done to find himself damned to such a depth? Yet the thing must be looked to. He batht himself without remorse and never even shivered, though the water in his tub was bitterly cold, dressed with more haste than precision, hurried over his breakfast, neglected his newspaper, and took down a volume of early church history. But he could not read: the thing was hopeless--utterly. With the wolves of doubt and the jackals of shame howling at his heels, how could he start for a thousand-mile race! For God's sake give him a weapon to turn and face them with! Evidence! all of it that was to be had, was but such as one man received, another man refused; and the popular acceptance was worth no more in respect of Christianity than of Mahometanism, for how many had given the subject at all better consideration than himself? And there was Sunday with its wolves and jackals, and but a hedge between! He did not so much mind reading the prayers: he was not accountable for what was in them, although it was bad enough to stand up and read them. Happy thing he was not a dissenter, for then he would have had to pretend to pray from his own soul, which would have been too horrible! But there was the sermon! That at least was supposed to contain, or to be presented as containing, his own sentiments. Now what were his sentiments? For the life of him he could not tell. Had he ANY sentiments, any opinions, any beliefs, any unbeliefs? He had plenty of sermons--old, yellow, respectable sermons, not lithographed, neither composed by mind nor copied out by hand unknown, but in the neat writing of his old D.D. uncle, so legible that he never felt it necessary to read them over beforehand--just saw that he had the right one. A hundred and fifty-seven such sermons, the odd one for the year that began on a Sunday, of unquestionable orthodoxy, had his kind old uncle left him in his will, with the feeling probably that he was not only setting him up in sermons for life, but giving him a fair start as well in the race of which a stall in some high cathedral was the goal. For his own part he had never made a sermon, at least never one he had judged worth preaching to a congregation. He had rather a high idea, he thought, of preaching, and these sermons of his uncle he considered really excellent. Some of them, however, were altogether doctrinal, some very polemical: of such he must now beware. He would see of what kind was the next in order; he would read it and make sure it contained nothing he was not, in some degree at least, prepared to

hold his face to and defend--if he could not absolutely swear he believed it purely true.

He did as resolved. The first he took up was in defence of the Athanasian creed! That would not do. He tried another. That was upon the Inspiration of the Scriptures. He glanced through it--found Moses on a level with St. Paul, and Jonah with St. John, and doubted gr

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