

Peccavi

by

E. W. Hornung

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PECCAVI

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

A BRIDE FROM THE BUSH.
UNDER TWO SKIES.
TINY LUTTRELL.
THE BOSS OF TAROOMBA.
THE UNBIDDEN GUEST.
THE ROGUE'S MARCH.
TUALIE'S BUSHRANGER.
MY LORD DUKE.
YOUNG BLOOD.
SOME PERSONS UNKNOWN.
THE AMATEUR CRACKSMAN.
DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES.
THE BELLE OF TOORAK.

PECCAVI

BY

E. W. HORNING

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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

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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

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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

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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."*

"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

* Transepts and gargoyles.

Dust to Dust

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, 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

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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,

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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?"

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"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

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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*, un-

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opened, 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."

Dust to Dust

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 Chief Mourner

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

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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

The Chief Mourner

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 ?"

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"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."

The Chief Mourner

"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.

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"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

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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

A Confession

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

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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

A Confession

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

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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

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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 recognisable as that of Jasper Musk, it was so low and calm; yet there was an intensity in the deep, slow tones that matched the

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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

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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

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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,

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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

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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

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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 realise was that 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

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chimney-piece, 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

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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.

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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

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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 than ! 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

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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 realised 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

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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 realise 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

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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

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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

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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 Glead.

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

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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 innkeeper'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?"

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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

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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

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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 his 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,

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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

Midsummer Night

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——”

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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 spirits 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 realise 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

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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

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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

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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 outdoor 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

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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

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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

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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 mid-summer 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

Fire

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

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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 mouth-piece 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

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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."

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"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:

Fire

"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.

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"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

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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;

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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

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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

Peccavi

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

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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.

Peccavi

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 Glead.

"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

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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."

Peccavi

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. Mari-gold 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

Fire

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

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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.

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"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."

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"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.

Peccavi

"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?"

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"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.

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"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

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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

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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

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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?”

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"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!"

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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.

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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,

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and a good rider spoilt by his great principle of refusing the risks. To shoot and dine with him was to see Glead 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 Glead 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. Glead 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 Glead 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 enjoy-

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ment 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 land-owner 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

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"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 Phoenix 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?"

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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 speciality 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 Glead was conscious of having made in all his life. Yet he

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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,

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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 with-

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out 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 twilight 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.

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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

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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 Glead'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

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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

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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

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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 Glead. 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.

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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 Glead. 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,

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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.

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"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 Glead. "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?"

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"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

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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 Glead, 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 Glead, 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!"

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"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."

"I don't recognise it as your duty. Your first duty is to resign the living lock-stock-and-barrel—if you've any sense of decency left; but you haven't—not you, you infernal blackguard, you!"

Gleed was standing on the drive, his arms akimbo and his fists clenched, his flushed face thrust forward and his stockinged legs planted firmly apart. It was Carlton's lithe figure which had been filling the doorway for some minutes; but at this he strode upon his adversary, and towered over him with a hand that itched.

"Why must you insult me?" he cried. "Do you think that's the way to get me to do anything? Or are you bent upon having me up for assault? For heaven's sake remember your own manhood, Sir Wilton, and respect mine; don't trade too far upon my readiness to admit that I am all men choose to call me. Have a little pride! I am ready to take my punishment, and more. I will keep away from the place as much as possible. If I can let the rectory, that will be so much more money for the church. Don't oppose me; if you can't help me by your countenance (and I grant you it's more than I have a right to expect), at

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least be neutral, and let me work out my own salvation in my own way. It will make no difference to the past. It may make all the difference in the future. God knows I can't reinstate myself in His sight and in the hearts of men by building a church! But I can leave behind me a sign of my sorrow and my true penitence. I can leave behind me a name and an example, bad enough in all conscience, but yet not wholly vile to the very last. And think what even that would be to me! And think what it would be if I could but pave the way, not to forgiveness, but to some reconciliation with those whom I have loved but led amiss . . . Well, that may be too much to hope . . . no, I have no right to dream of that . . . but at least let me make the one material reparation in my power; let me do my duty! When it is done, if you and they will have no more of me, then you shall all be rid of me for good."

Gleed wavered, partly because in mere personality he was no match for the other, partly because the prospect of a new church for nothing made its own appeal to the man who had counted the cost of the broken windows. His mind ran over the pecuniary scheme and detected a flaw.

"And what's to become of the parish for the next five years?" he asked. "Who's to pay a man to do your work?"

"There's the stipend I cannot touch and would not if I could; a part of that will doubtless be set aside. Until the church is habitable, how-

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ever, the case will probably be met by one of the curates coming over from Lakenhall and taking a service in the schoolroom."

"And how do *you* know?" cried Sir Wilton, not unjustifiably.

"The bishop sent for me," said Carlton—and his eyes fell. "I ventured to speak to him on the subject before I left. Do you think I don't care what happens here in my absence? I hope the services will begin next Sunday—the building next week. I have worked the whole thing out. I could show you the figures and the plans. The new ones are ready, if you can call them new. I shall be my own architect as before for the transepts, but the rest shall be exactly as it was."

"We'll see about that," said Sir Wilton grimly. He knew those melting eyes, that enthusiastic voice. They had brought their hundreds to this man's feet before. They might do so again. Even the squire felt their power in his own despite.

"It is my one chance!" the voice went on in softer accents. "Do not ask me to forego it altogether; but I will keep in the background as much as you like; all I want to know is that the work is going on. Suppose I did resign, and you appointed another man. Why should he give towards the church? Why should he come where there is none? Let me build the new one first!"

"Has it come to letting? I understood I couldn't prevent you?"

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"No more you can; although——"

"We'll see!" cried Gleed. "That's quite enough for me. We'll see!"

"But, Sir Wilton——"

"Damn your 'buts,' sir!" shouted the other, shaking with rage. "You disgrace the parish, and you won't leave it. You come back, and set yourself against me, and think you can do what you like after doing what you've done. By God, it's monstrous! There's not a man in the country who won't agree with me; you'll find that out to your cost. Build the church, would you? I'll see you further! Law or no law, I'll have you out of this! I'll hound you out of it! I'll have you torn in pieces if you stay!"

"I have already told you I don't intend to stay," said Carlton quietly. "I only intend to rebuild the church."

"All right! You try! You try!"

And with his fixed eyes flashing, and his fresh face aged with anger, but scored with implacable resolve, Sir Wilton Gleed swung on his heel, and so down the drive with every step a stamp.

X.

THE LETTER OF THE LAW.

IN the village he met Tom Ivey, but passed him with a savage nod, and was some yards further on when a thought smote him so that he spun round in his stride.

"That you, Ivey?" he called. "I wasn't thinking; you're the very man I wanted to see. How are you, eh?"

"Nicely, thank you, Sir Wilton," said Tom, coming up.

"Plenty of work, I hope?"

"Well, not just lately, Sir Wilton."

"Good! I may have some for you. I'll see you about it this evening or to-morrow; meanwhile keep yourself free. By the way, how's your mother?"

"Very sadly, Sir Wilton. I sometimes fare to think she's not long for this world."

"Nonsense, man! What's the matter with her?"

Tom hardly knew. That was old age, *he* thought. Then the house was that old and small; sometimes she fared to stifle for want of air. And this Tom said doggedly, for a reason.

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"Ah!" cried Sir Wilton, his fixed eye brightening. "Wasn't there a question of repairs some time since?"

"There was, Sir Wilton."

"Well, I'll reconsider it. We must do what we can to make the old lady comfortable for the winter. I'll come and see her, and I'll see you again about the other matter. Keep yourself free meanwhile. Don't you let any of those Lakenhall fellows snap you up!"

And Sir Wilton went on chuckling, but again turned quickly and called the other back.

"By the way, Tom, who *were* those fellows you used to work for in Lakenhall?"

"Tait & Taplin, Sir Wilton."

A note was taken of the names.

"The only builders in the town, eh?"

"Well, Sir Wilton there's old Isaac Hoole, the stonemason."

"A stonemason, by Jove!" and down went his name. "What other builders and stonemasons have we in the district—near enough to undertake some work here? I'm not thinking of the job I've got for you, Tom."

Ivey thought of three within fifteen miles, and several at greater distances, but doubted whether any of the latter would accept a contract so far afield. Their names were taken, nevertheless, and Sir Wilton stared his hardest as he put his pocket-book away.

"I shall want you all the same," he said, "and I shall expect to get you when I want you."

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Understand? If anybody else offers you a job, remember you've got one. And I'll see your mother this morning."

Tom went his way with his honest wits in a knot. He could not conceive what was coming. Ten minutes ago he had found a note slipped under the door in the night, and he was going straight to the rectory without his breakfast. Had Sir Wilton been there before him, and was he going to rebuild the church? Then what had the reverend to say to it, now that he was suspended for five years? And what in the world could he have to say to Tom Ivey?

He said nothing at all until they had shaken hands, and nothing then about the fire; it is with the hand alone that men pay their big debts to men, and Robert Carlton did not weaken his thanks with words.

"Have you got a job, Tom?" were his first.

"I have and I haven't, sir," said Ivey.

"You're not free to take one from me?"

"I wish I was, sir!" cried Tom, impulsively (he was not so sure about it on reflection); and in his simplicity he explained why he was not free. "But perhaps that's the same job, sir?" he added, hopefully.

Carlton shook his head, and looked wistfully on the friendly face; a few words (he knew his power) and the very man he wanted would be on his side against all odds. But he must not begin by dividing the village into factions; he must fight

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his own battle, with mercenaries from neutral ground, or none at all.

"Where was it you served your time, Tom?" he asked at length.

"Tait & Taplin's, sir, in Lakenhall."

"Thanks. I won't keep you, Tom. It will do you no good to be seen up here."

He held out his hand with a dismal smile. It was the other's turn to wring hard. "I care nothing about that, sir! We've been shoulder to shoulder once already; my mind don't go no further back than that; and we'll be shoulder to shoulder again!"

Carlton found flour and tea in the store-room, and in the fowl-house two new-laid eggs. He cooked his first breakfast with the sun pouring through the open kitchen window upon six weeks' dirt and dust. He was not a man of very hearty habit, but he had learnt of old the evil of exercise upon too light a diet. His pony was fattening in the glebe; but a fastidious sense of fitness forbade him to drive, and between nine and ten he set out for Lakenhall on foot.

It was an ordeal for the first half-mile: the sunlight flooding the village felt like limelight turned on him alone. Some children courtesied as though nothing was changed; their elders stared at him without further sign; only one shouted after him, he knew not who or what. He reached the open country with a raging pulse, thinking only upon circuitous ways back; but three solitary miles restored his nerve. And in

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Lakenhall it was only every other passer who stopped and turned and stared. Entering the town he was nearly run over by a dog-cart. It was Sir Wilton driving, and Carlton caught the gleam of his eye even as he leapt to one side for his life, but mistook its significance until he was within sight of Tait & Taplin's. Then it occurred to him, and he entered fully prepared.

"No, thank you, sir—not for us! We've heard of you, and we don't deal with your sort. Do you hear, or do you want to hear more?"

Carlton searched in vain for another builder, and only got the name of a stonemason by going into the cemetery and looking at the newer grave-stones. He had then to discover where the man lived, and he was ashamed to ask questions in shops. He was still scouring the town, and it was afternoon, when a gig was pulled up in the middle of the road.

"So you're back? Well, you look better than you did."

"I am," said Carlton, "thanks to you."

"Who are you looking for?"

"Hoole, the stonemason."

"Jump up and I'll drive you there."

The tone was too humane for Carlton.

"Thank you, doctor, but I like walking."

"Then find him for yourself, and be damned to you!"

And Marigold drove on, red to the hoar of his eighty years; but, as Carlton stood watching him out of sight with vain compunction, the old doctor

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turned in his seat and pointed up an alley with his whip in passing.

Hoole, the stonemason, was not rude, but he was as firm as Tait & Taplin in his refusal. He was an elderly man, of few words, but he admitted that Sir Wilton Gleed had been there that morning. That was enough for Carlton, who was turning away when something in his visible fatigue and dejection moved the mason to give him a hint.

"You won't get anybody in the district to work for you against Sir Wilton," he said. "That stand to reason."

"Then I must go out of the district," said Carlton. And he bought a county directory at a shop where he had been a regular customer; but they insisted on the settlement of his current bill first; and even then he had to help himself to the new book, and leave the money on the counter, because they scorned to serve him. The directory contained the names and addresses of the very few builders and master-masons within a day's journey of Long Stow. And it was all there was to show for the long day's round of retribution and rebuff when, late in the afternoon, Carlton returned as he had come, too tired and too dispirited to walk an inch out of his way; and the school-children who had courtesied in the morning knew better now, and cried after the bent figure slinking home at dusk.

The next day was Sunday, and the school-bell tinkled towards eleven o'clock, and stopped pre-

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cisely at the hour. Then Carlton knew that his own idea had been adopted, and that somebody was saying matins in the parish school-room: he read the service to himself in his study, and evensong when evening came, with a sermon of Charles Kingsley's after each: for doctrine could not help him now, but brave humanity could and did.

The Monday was Bank Holiday; but Carlton only knew it when he had trudged ten miles to have speech with a builder whose premises were closed; and so another day was lost. On the Tuesday he tried again, but with as little avail. Sir Wilton Gleed had been there before him (as long ago as the Saturday afternoon), and it was the same elsewhere. The week went in fruitless visits to small contractors and working masons in this large village or in that little town; the enemy had been first in every field, with a cunning formula which Carlton reconstructed from the various answers he received.

"Of course, the church will have to be rebuilt," Sir Wilton had been saying; "but not by him. He hasn't the money, for one thing; it had better be an iron church, if he is to pay you for it. Help me to get rid of him, and you shall hear from me again. We will have a decent church when we are about it, and a local man shall get the job."

Meanwhile the boycott was nowhere more operative than in Long Stow itself, and no human being came near the rectory, where the rector subsisted on a providential store of bacon and the

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daily deposit of eggs, and on strange bread of his own baking, for he would risk no more insults in the shops. But one night a forgotten friend came back into his life : his collie, Glen, came bounding down the drive to meet him, and the mad uproar of that welcome was heard through half the village, and duly became the talk. The dog had been a vagabond and a rogue for six wild weeks, and it came back gaunt and hard, its brush clotted and raw underneath with the spray from a farmer's gun. Carlton washed the wound with warm water, and the two pariahs supped together, and lay that night upon the same bed, and went abroad together next morning, to try the last man left.

The day after that they stayed at home, and word reached the hall that the rector had been seen among the ruins of his church ; he was, indeed, exploring them for the first time, and that both with method and deliberation. When seen, however (from the lane that runs under the fine east window of to-day, past the lawn-tennis court which was then a fowl run, and the glebe that is still the glebe), he was seated on a sandstone block in front of the little lean-to shed ; and, as a matter of fact, his back was to the ruins. He was contemplating similar blocks and slabs of the undressed stone that lay where they had been lying on Midsummer Day : some were still smutty from the fire, all were slightly stained by the weather, otherwise there was no change that Carlton could see as he sat thus. At one end of the shed rose a great

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yellow cairn of material raw from the quarry—a stack of stones about as much of one size and shape as so many lumps of sugar; enough to finish the transepts, as matters had stood; a mere fraction of the amount required now. Carlton looked on what he had got, and his eyes closed in a calculation beyond his powers in mental arithmetic; he had to take a pencil to it, and then a foot-rule to the blackened courses, and presently a pair of compasses to the plans in the study.

In the afternoon he tidied the shed. Every tool was intact; a little rust had been the worst intruder; and the feel of the cool sleek handles quickened Carlton's pulse. Nay, the hammer rang a few strokes on the cold-chisel, for he could not help it, and the music reminded him of his poor bells, now cumbering the porch; it was almost as good to hear; and the way the soft stone peeled, in creamy flakes, thrilled the hand as it charmed the eye. But a very few minutes served to make the enthusiast ashamed of his enthusiasm; and though he spent more time in the ruins, now testing a standing wall, now scraping a charred stone, ardour and determination had died down in an eye that was looking within; a wistful irresolution flickered in their place. And that night the lonely man walked his room once more, from twilight to twilight, with long intervals spent upon his knees, in agonies of doubt and self-distrust, in passionate entreaty for a right judgment, and for

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the strength to abide by it. Yet his duty had not dawned upon him with the day.

Towards eleven the school-bell tinkled. It was Sunday once more; and once more he read the prayers upon his knees and the psalms and lessons standing; but no sermon to-day. No man could help him in his struggle with himself; he must trust to the strength of his own soul, to the singleness of his own heart, and to the guidance of the God who was drawing nearer and nearer to him in these days—with each prayer that rose from his heart—with each bead that stood upon his brow. And so at last, when the burden of doubt and darkness became more than the man could bear, it was as though the heavens had opened, and a beam of celestial light flooded the narrow room with the low ceiling and the cross-beams; for the peace of a mind made up had descended upon the solitary therein. And that night his sleep was sound, so that in the morning he had to ask himself why; the answer made him catch his breath; it did not shake his resolve.

"He shall have his chance," said Carlton; "he shall have it fairly to his face. And he will take it—and that will be the end!"

He hung about the ruins till it was ten o'clock by his watch, and then went straight to the hall. Sir Wilton was at home; but the footman hesitated to admit this visitor. Carlton's own hesitation was, however, at an end, and his eye forbade rebuff. He was shown into the drawing-room,

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where a very young girl was at the piano, evidently practising, and yet playing in a way that made Carlton sorry when she stopped. The cool room smelling of flowers; the glimpse of garden through an open window, with the court marked out and chairs under the trees; the momentary sound of a fine instrument finely touched: it was all the very breath and essence of the pleasant every-day world from which he had rightly and richly earned dismissal, and it all was branded in his brain. Then the young girl rose, and stood in doubt with the sun upon her plaited hair, and eyes great with innocent distress; but Carlton barely bowed, and the child hardly knew how she got across the room.

Sir Wilton entered with jaunty step. His whiskered jaw was set like a vice, but the light of conscious triumph danced in his fixed eyeballs. Carlton had come prepared to have his intrusion treated as his latest crime; a glance convinced him that the other was too sure of victory to object to an interview with the virtually vanquished.

"So you are quite determined that I shall not rebuild the church?"

It was a point-blank beginning. Sir Wilton shrugged and smiled. "I have told you to build it if you can," said he.

"But you mean to make that an impossibility?"

"Naturally I don't intend to make it easy."

"Admit that by foul means, since none are

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fair, you are deliberately preventing me from doing my duty!" Carlton pressed his point with a heat he regretted, but could not help.

"I admit nothing," said the other, doggedly—"least of all what you are pleased to consider your 'duty.' Your real duty I've already told you. Resign the living. Let us see the last of you."

Carlton met the rigid stare with one as unwavering and more acute. It was as though he would have seen to the back of the other's brain.

"Very well," he said at length. "You shall!"

"Ah!" cried Sir Wilton, when he had recovered from his surprise. But it was not the cry of victory; there was an uncharacteristic lack of finality in the clergyman's tone.

"You shall see the last of me this very morning," he continued swiftly, nervously, "if you like! But it will rest with you. I am not going unconditionally. Will you listen to what I have to say?"

Gleed shrugged again, but this time there was no accompanying smile. The other threw up his head with a sudden decisiveness—a pulpit trick of his when about to make a primary point—and his right fist fell into his left palm without his knowing it.

"Very well," said Carlton; "now I'll tell you exactly on what conditions you shall have your heart's desire, and I will renounce mine. In spite of what I hear you've been saying, I have a little money of my own—not much, indeed—but enough for me to have subsisted upon for these next years. I am not going to touch a penny of it—I shall

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pick up a living for myself elsewhere. Meanwhile I have turned my income into capital which is now lying in the bank at Lakenhall. It is a trifle under two thousand pounds, and I want the whole of it to go into the new church. Wherever I am I ought to be able to earn a little more, either as a coach or with my pen ; so let the offer stand at a church to cost two thousand pounds. I long to have the building of it. I make no secret of that. But I have been trying to read my own heart, and I see the selfishness of such longings ; and I have been trying to read your heart, Sir Wilton, and I see the naturalness of your opposition. So I come to you and I say, build the church yourself, and I withdraw. Build a better church out of your abundance, and I will resign as you wish. Give me your written undertaking, here and now, and you shall have my written resignation in exchange."

The words clung to his lips ; he alone knew what it cost him to utter them ; he alone, in his absolute freedom from the mercenary instinct, would have felt certain of the result. But the rich man was touched upon his tender spot. What return was he offered for his money ? Who would thank him for building a church in the heart of the country ? The church could be built by subscription ; bad enough to have to head the list. Besides, he was flushed with triumph ; he saw but a beaten man in the nervous wretch before him. Fancy bribing a beaten man to fly !

"I like your impudence," said Wilton Gleed.

The Letter of the Law

"Upon my word! *My* written undertaking—to you!"

"Do you refuse to give it?" asked Carlton quickly.

"Certainly—to you."

"Undertakings apart, do you entertain my suggestion, or do you not?"

"That's my business."

Carlton felt his patience slipping.

"Do you mean to say that you don't even yet recognise that it's mine too, as rector of the parish? Are you still so ignorant of the legal bearings of the situation? God knows, Sir Wilton, it is not for me to speak of right and wrong; but I do assure you that you're putting yourself wilfully in the wrong in this matter. You hinder me from doing my legal duty, and you refuse to assume any responsibility! Suspended or not, I am bound to keep my chancel, at all events, 'in good and substantial repair, restoring and rebuilding when necessary.'"

Sir Wilton's eyes, fixed as usual, caught fire suddenly.

"Oh, you're bound, are you?"

"Legally bound."

"You're sure that's the law?"

"The very letter of the law, Sir Wilton."

"Then see that you keep it! You come here blustering about your legal rights; but you forget that I've got mine. Where there's a law there's a penalty, and by God I'll enforce it! 'The very letter of the law,' eh? I'll take you at your

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word; you shall keep it to the letter. Build away! Build away! The sooner you begin the better—for you!”

This was probably the boldest move that Sir Wilton Gleed ever made in his life; it was certainly the least considered. But what satisfaction sweeter than hoisting the enemy with his own petard? It is the quintessence of poetic justice, the acme of personal triumph; and the sudden opportunity of achieving his end by means so neat was more than even Wilton Gleed could resist. Every builder and mason within reach was already on his side; not a man of them who would work for dissolute hypocrisy in defiance of might and right. No need to say another word to the masons and the builders. They could be trusted on the whole, and the untrustworthy could be bribed. Gleed had not the smallest scruple in the matter, and he was characteristically forearmed with a public defence of his private conduct. He believed that every right-thinking man would applaud his sharp practice in the cause of religion and of morality; and his confidence was not to be shaken by the way in which his challenge was received.

“Are you in earnest?” asked Carlton. “Do you seriously propose to hinder me with one hand and to compel me with the other?”

“I mean to take you at your word,” Gleed repeated. “You are fond of talking about your duty. Let’s see you do it.”

“You set the builders against me, and then

The Letter of the Law

you tell me to build. May I ask if you are prepared to defend such clumsy trickery?"

"Any day you like, and glad of the opportunity!" cried Sir Wilton, cheerfully. "All I have done is to give you your proper character where it deserves to be known; you have it to thank if you can't get men to work for you; and it's your look-out. I've heard about enough of you and your church. Go and build it. Go and build it."

"I will," said Carlton. "You have had your chance." And he bowed and withdrew with strange serenity.

A parting shot followed him through the hall.

"You will have to do it with your own two hands!"

Carlton made no reply. But in the village he committed a fresh enormity.

He was seen to smile.

XI.

LABOUR OF HERCULES.

ALL the church had not been burnt to the ground. West of the porch (itself not hopelessly destroyed) stood thirteen feet of sound south wall, blackened on the inside, calcined in the upper courses, but plumb and firm as far as it went. A corresponding portion of the north wall, the sixteen-foot strip west of the window almost opposite the porch, stood equally rigid and erect. And, thus supported on either hand, the entire west end rose practically intact, without a missing or a ruined stone; the window was still truly bisected by its single mullion; neither head nor tracery had given the fraction of an inch; only the mangled leads, with here and there a fragment of smoked glass adhering, would have told of a fire to one led blindfold under the west window, and there given his first view of the church.

But that was the one good wall and real exception to a rule of utter ruin. The rest of the original building was either razed already or else unfit to stand. The embryonic transepts were not quite demolished, but they had never been many feet above ground. Sections of wall still

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stood where there were no windows to weaken them, but east of the porch nothing stood firm. Worst of all was the east end, from which the chancel walls had been burnt away on either side. It stood as though balanced, with an alarming outward list. One mullion of the great window had gone by the sill; the other was cracked and crooked, as if supporting the entire weight of the gable overhead; and it looked as though a push would send the tottering fabric flat.

Black ruin lay thick and deep within. To peep in was to see an ashpit through a microscope. The remnants of the slate and timber roof lay uppermost. Tie-beams, corbels, king-posts, ridge, struts, wall-plates, pole-plates, rafters principal and common, joists, battens, laths and fillets, half-burnt and black as the pit, save where some spilled sheet-lead shone in the sun, spread a common pall over nave and chancel, aisle and pews. It was as a midnight sea frozen in mid-storm, the twisted lectern alone rising salient like a mast. Slates lay in shallow heaps as though dealt from a pack; and certain pages, brown and brittle at the edges, which the wind had torn from the burnt Bible before Carlton rescued the remains, still fluttered in the crannies when the wind went its rounds. And the hum of bees was in the air; but there had been great distress among the sparrows, and one heard more of the rectory cocks and hens.

Upon this desolate and dead spot, in the heart of the warm, live country, Robert Carlton stood

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looking within a few minutes of his exit from the hall. But he did not stand looking long. He had changed into flannels at top speed, and there was still more change in the man. His eye glowed with a grim decision which lightened without dispelling the settled sadness of the face. Passionate aspiration had cooled and hardened into dogged and defiant resolve; and there was an end to all compunction and self-questioning suspense. Carlton knew exactly what he was going to do; he had known where to begin since the day before yesterday. He wore neither coat nor waistcoat, his sleeves were rolled up, he had a crowbar in one hand, and a heavy hammer in the other. He began immediately on the thirteen feet of good wall to the left of the porch.

He had tested this wall on Saturday. The upper courses were loose and crumbling; the sooner they went the better. Carlton climbed upon the wall, and, sitting astride where it was firmest, began working off the loose stones one by one with the crowbar. Iron would ring on iron twice or thrice, and then a twist of the bar send the charred stone tumbling. It was easy work, but the position was awkward, and Carlton soon went for a ladder; on the way he was surprised to find that he was already drenched with perspiration, and rather hungry.

But the next hour tired him more, or rather the time that seemed an hour to him, for it afterwards turned out to be three hours by the watch that he had left indoors. Only the topmost

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course, or the stones on which the red-hot eaves had rested, lent themselves to off-hand treatment ; they had been burnt to cinders—the mortar binding them, to powder ; it needed but a wrench to dislodge each one. But the next few courses were a different matter. Half the stones were too loose to leave, too good to chip in the removal. Carlton worked upon them with the cold-chisel first, the crowbar next, and finally with his naked fingers, removing the stones with immense care, and very deliberately dropping each into its own bed in the long grass outside. At last the little strip of wall was left without an unsound member from serrated crest to plinth : not a stone that shook or shifted at a conscientious push ; and the workman took his eyes from his work. But he did not peer through the trees in search of other eyes, for he was not thinking of himself or of his work from a spectacular point of view. He merely saw that the sun had travelled the church from end to end while he had been busy. And suddenly he found himself sinking for want of food, and unable to stand upright without intolerable pain. But he was back within half-an-hour, and remained at work upon the sixteen-foot strip opposite till after sunset.

“ But it hasn't been anything like a full day, old dog,” said Carlton, as they crept up to bed between eight and nine. And he set his seven-and-sixpenny alarum at four o'clock.

Next forenoon the sixteen-foot strip was done with in its turn ; no infirm stone left standing

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upon another. Scraped and repointed, with the uninjured pieces replaced in fresh mortar, and an entirely new top course, these two short walls would be worthy of the gallant west end to which they acted as buttresses. Its wounds were not skin-deep, thanks to the west wind which had driven the flames the other way. It looked as though a sponge would cleanse it, and Carlton sighed as he turned his back upon the one good wall.

Elsewhere, as has been said, there were fragments fit to use again, but not to remain as they were. It cost Carlton a couple of days to take these to pieces, laying the good stones carefully in the grass, as his practice had been hitherto. The fourth day, however, he tried a change of labour to ease his aching limbs, and went round and round with a barrow, picking the sound stones from the grass, and stacking them near the shed. Next morning he fought his way into the chancel, and stood chin-deep in the wreckage, contemplating the leaning east end. And all this time no soul had come near him; through the trees he had indeed heard whispers that were not of the trees, but he had never thrown more than a glance in their direction, and the green screen was still charitably thick.

The east end must come down sooner or later—therefore sooner. Carlton was no engineer, but he was a man with a distinct turn for mechanics; had used a lathe as a lad, and taught his Boys' Friendly how to use it in their turn;

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had picked up much from Tom Ivey, and was himself blessed with sound instincts concerning application and control of power. Here was a tottering wall to come down altogether. It was too insecure to pull to pieces. The problem was to get it down with as little damage and as little danger as possible. One man could do it, Carlton thought, but not without considerable risk of a broken head at least. If he could but make sure of the whole wall falling in the one outward direction! He revolved about it, mentally and on his feet, till he became angry with himself for the loss of time, ceased to speculate, and went to work in desperation. He would trust to luck; he despised himself for having studied a risk so small. He had done so out of no absurd consideration for his own skin, but entirely from the depth and strength of his artistic impulse to do a thing properly or not at all. Even now he had to prepare the ground: he had to clear the chancel enough to give himself free play.

Then he found a scaffolding-pole which had not been used, and tilted at a tree for practice. The pole was unmanageable from its length. He sawed it shorter. It was still too unwieldy to use amid the *débris*. He shortened it until he had a battering-ram some eighteen feet long. But all these preliminaries had taken unimagined hours, and again Carlton felt sick with hunger before he thought of food, and unequal to further effort until he had some. So he turned a breaking but reluctant back upon the church, and went indoors;

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remembering everything on the way, and loathing himself afresh : at his work he was beginning to forget !

Thus far this outcast had subsisted chiefly on eggs ; he beat up a couple now, and tossed the stuff off with a little wine and water. Then he fell upon a box of biscuits, but threw the dog as many as he munched himself, striding up and down the while, and for all his fatigue. The room was the one in which he had studied his own physiognomy. It might have been any other. He had no eyes for himself to-day, and not many thoughts, for, in the midst of his contrition for forgetting, he had forgotten again. His mind had escaped to the chancel ; the flesh followed in a few minutes, having eaten and rested on its legs.

The dog bounded ahead, and presently announced an intruder at the top of its voice. Carlton quickened his pace, frowning at the thought of interruption ; he was on the spot before curiosity had tempered his annoyance ; and there among the ruins stood Sir Wilton Gleed, not frowning at all, but forcing a smile behind his cigar.

"How long is this tomfoolery to go on?" said he.

Carlton stood looking at him for some seconds ; then he picked up his pole without replying. "You'd better stand to one side," was all he said, "Kennel up, Glen !"

"Going to do something desperate ?"

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"The further you get away from me the safer you'll be."

But he did not look round as he spoke, and Sir Wilton gripped his stick without occasion. Carlton's blood was boiling none the less. The enemy had surprised him at his worst. He was, for the first time, attempting single-handed the work of several men; and he might be going about it in a very ridiculous way. He could not tell till he tried; and it was one thing to experiment in private, but quite another thing to court open discomfiture of the very nature which would most delight the looker-on. And the man was worn out with hard and unaccustomed labour, dyspeptic from evil feeding, nervous and irritable from both causes combined. Sir Wilton Glead could hardly have chosen a worse moment for renewing the duel.

In Carlton the longing to do something violent suddenly outweighed his desire to raze the east end of the church. He poised his pole and fixed both eyes on the one remaining mullion of the east window. If the mullion went, he still thought that the whole fabric should collapse, forgetting the inherent independence of arches; and his mind dwelt wistfully on the effect of the crash upon Sir Wilton Glead. But his aim was not the less accurate, nor did his anxiety hinder him from utilising every muscle in his body at the ideal moment. The end of the ram smote the mullion fairly and powerfully, where it was already cracked. The mullion flew asunder; a

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quatrefoil shifted a little, robbed of its support. The whole wall seemed to shudder; but that was all.

"You remind me of Don Quixote," said Sir Wilton's voice.

Carlton spun round. The pole trailed behind him from his right hand. He took fresh hold of it, lower down, and there was no mistaking his look.

"You go about your business," said he, fiercely.

"I've come about it," was the bland reply. "I'm not trespassing either; don't put *yourself* in the wrong. Remember your own advice; and let's have a civil answer to a civil question. My good friend, what do you think you're trying to do?"

The artificial geniality of address, the settled malice underneath, the tone that people take with a wilful child, all galled and goaded the tired man beyond endurance.

"You had better go," he said.

"Do you really propose to rebuild the church with your own ten fingers?" inquired Sir Wilton, not to be daunted by a threat.

"You proposed it. I mean to do it."

Sir Wilton shook his head with a venomous smile. "Oh, no, you don't! You mean to pretend to try. You mean to pose."

Carlton flung the pole from him, and strode forward, swinging open hands.

"I'm not going to talk to you," he said, "and

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you sha'n't make me strike you ; but if you don't go out you'll be put out, Sir Wilton."

Gleed smiled again. His collar was seized. He smiled no more, but lashed out with his stick. The stick was wrenched away from him. It whistled in the air. And Robert Carlton had his enemy at his mercy, still held by the collar, in the place where he had preached goodwill to men. For he was much the taller of the two and an old athlete, whereas the other was only an elderly sportsman. Carlton could have whipped him like a little dog. He did almost worse: released him without a cut, and handed him his stick without a word.

And at that moment there came the crash that would have saved this collision a few seconds before. Both men turned, rubbing their eyes; a cloud of yellow dust had filled them as it filled the chancel. The cloud dispersed, and wall and window were gone from sill to gable; what remained was nowhere higher than a man could reach.

"Now leave me in peace," said Carlton, "for I shall have my hands full; and don't trouble to come again, because I sha'n't listen to you. You've had two chances. I promised to live away and only find the money and the men; you wouldn't have it. I invited you to build the church yourself; you wouldn't hear of that. No; you would force me to do my duty, having tied my hands! You would take me at my word. I am taking you at yours. I should try fresh

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ground, if I were you ; meanwhile you could sue me for assault."

Gleed had fully intended doing so, but the scornful suggestion killed the thought, and for once he had no last word. But his last look made amends.

XII.

A FRESH DISCOVERY.

HIS son was waiting for him at the gate.

"The man's mad!" cried Sir Wilton with a harsh laugh.

"What's he been doing? What was that row?"

Sidney's manner with his father was subtly disrespectful; he seldom addressed him by that name, enjoyed arguing with him (having the clearer head), and argued in slang. Yet his tongue was as dexterous and plausible as it was always smooth, and he was a difficult boy to convict of a specific rudeness.

"There's some method in his madness," was his comment on the father's account of the work accomplished under his eyes.

"But he says he's going to build it up again!"

"I wonder if he will," speculated Sidney.

"What—by himself?"

"Yes."

"Of course he won't. No man could. He's a lunatic."

They were walking home. Sidney said nothing for some paces. Then he asked an innocent question. It was a little way of his.

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"I suppose one man could finish one stone, though, father?"

Sir Wilton conceded this.

"And fix it in its place, shouldn't you say?"

A gruffer concession.

"Then I'm not sure that he couldn't do more than you think," said Sidney. "The windows might stump him, and the roof would; but he could do the rest."

"Nonsense!" cried Sir Wilton. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course I don't," admitted Sidney readily. "That was why I asked about the one man and the one stone."

Sir Wilton had not half his boy's brain. The cold-blooded little wretch would boast that he could "score off the governor without his knowing it." Sir Wilton's merit was his tenacity of purpose.

"I tell you the man's mad," he reiterated; "and if he doesn't take care I'll have him shut up."

"A great idea!" cried Sidney. "But, I say, if that's so we oughtn't to be too rough on him!"

"In any case I'll have him out of this," quoth Sir Wilton through his teeth; but his mind dwelt on the shutting-up notion: it really was "a great idea." And Carlton himself had given him another: he just would "take fresh ground."

He sought it that evening by a painful path. Jasper Musk and Sir Wilton Gleed were not friends; they had not spoken for years. Sir

A Fresh Discovery

Wilton had not been long in the parish before he discovered that Musk had "cheated" him over the Flint House. The word was much too strong ; but some little advantage had no doubt been taken. The quarrel had lasted to the present time ; but Sir Wilton had often felt that Musk must hate the common scourge even more bitterly than he did himself, and that he would be a very valuable ally. He was a strong man and solid, the one powerful peasant in the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, sciatica had bound him to his chair from the very day of his daughter's funeral. It would have been comparatively easy to accost the old fellow in the open, and to disarm him with instantaneous expressions of sympathy and of indignation. It was more difficult for the lord of the manor to knock at the door of an enemy who was not a tenant—a door opening on the very street, and a door that might be slammed in his face for all Long Stow to see or hear. So Sir Wilton went after dinner, on a dark night ; was admitted without demur ; and stayed till after eleven.

Next day he went again ; he was also seen at the village constable's ; and the village constable was seen at the Flint House ; and Sir Wilton happened to call once more while he was there. The afternoon was rich in developments, and duly murmurous with theory, prophecy, speculation. The schoolmaster was summoned from the school, the saddler from his bench : it was the latter who fetched Tom Ivey from the room that

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he was adding to his mother's cottage at Sir Wilton's expense. Meanwhile the village whisper became loud talk; but its arrows, shot at a venture, flew wide of any mark. For through all his dark disgrace, as now when the odium attaching to him was gathering like snow on a rolling snowball; from the night of the fire to this eighteenth day of August; there was one thing of which Robert Carlton had never been suspected by those who had loved or feared him for a year and a half.

Naturally the excitement penetrated to the hall, where Sir Wilton kept dinner waiting, but, very properly, did not refer to the unsavoury subject at that meal. He was, however, in singularly high spirits, and drank a vast amount of excellent champagne; yet his own wife left the table in ignorance of what had happened. Now Lady Gleed was a very particular person, a great stickler for restraint, her own being something strenuous and exotic. She seldom spoke of ordinary things above a whisper, and would have dealt with the village scandal in dumb show if she could. To her daughter she had genuinely preferred never to mention it at all.

But Lydia Gleed—it should have been Languish—was a more modern type. She was frankly interested in the affair. It had given quite a zest to what would otherwise have been an insufferably dull month for Lydia. The girl had the makings of a perfect woman of society, and yet the end of her second season found her

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still an unknown distance from the first step to the realisation of that ideal. Proposals she had received, but none such as an heiress of her calibre was entitled to expect. She had actually been engaged to an adventurer; but that had only retarded matters.

There may have been purer causes. Feeble and inanimate in her every-day life, and constitutionally bored by the familiar, Miss Gleed kept her best side for those whom she knew least; could chatter to acquaintances, the newer the better; was in her element at parties, and out of it at home. Even in her element, however, Lydia never forgot to conceal as much of her appreciation as possible, and would dance angelically with the corners of her mouth turned down, and take like medicine the wine which really did make glad her heart. This August she was feeling particularly *blasée* and dissatisfied; and the romantic downfall of the rector—whose sermons had kept her awake—was a French novel without the trouble of reading it or the risk of confiscation. To-night, therefore, it was Lydia who invited Gwynneth to play, and pressed the invitation with a compliment; it was her commoner practice to snub the much younger girl. And it was Lydia who drew her chair close to that of Lady Gleed, and began the whispering, to which Gwynneth was made to shut her ears with all ten fingers. Yet for once Lady Gleed was frankly interested herself.

“But what *has* he done?”

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The music had stopped. They had not noticed it. The ungrown girl was standing in the middle of the room. She was dressed in white, and her face looked as white in the candle-light, but her eyes and hair the darker and more brilliant by contrast. And the eyes were great with a pity and a pain which were at least not less than the natural curiosity of a healthy child.

"Mind your own business," said Lydia, bluntly.

But even as she spoke the door opened.

"What's this? What's this?" cried Sir Wilton, who was beaming, and good-naturedly concerned to see the tears starting to his brother's child's eyes. "Whose business have you been minding, little woman?"

"It was about Mr. Carlton," the child said with a sob. "I hear everybody saying nothing's bad enough for him—nothing—and I thought he was so good! I only asked what he had done. I won't again. Please—please let me go!"

"In an instant," said Sir Wilton, detaining her with familiarity. "You mustn't be a little goose."

"Let her go, Wilton," whispered his wife.

"Not till I've told her what Mr. Carlton has done!"

And Sir Wilton Gleed beamed more than ever upon the consternation of his ladies.

"But, Wilton——"

Lady Gleed had risen, and was even forgetting

A Fresh Discovery

to whisper. Lydia merely looked unusually wideawake, and prettier for once than the child under the chandelier, who was terribly disfigured by her embarrassment and distress.

“If you want to know what Mr. Carlton has done,” said Sir Wilton to his niece, “it was he who set fire to the church!”

XIII.

DEVICES OF A CASTAWAY.

LEFT in peace, Carlton threw himself into his task with redoubled spirit, and presently forgot the existence of Sir Wilton Gleed. He had just three hours before dark. In this time he succeeded in pulling the rest of the east wall to pieces, even to the loosened plinth, and was adding the good stones to his stack when night fell. It was a night not to be forgotten in the history of Robert Carlton's case. Nothing happened. But he had no proper food in the house, and he began to feel really ill for the want of it. Eggs and bacon he had, but the lighting of the fire fatigued him more than anything he had done all day, and he fell asleep in the kitchen, and the bacon went brittle, and his attempt at bread was become an un-masticable fossil. A very little whisky, from a bottle that had been open for months, did him more good, and enabled him to face the food problem in earnest before he went to bed. It was a very serious problem indeed. Health and strength, success or failure, continued vigour or a swift collapse, all hinged upon the inglorious question, which engrossed till near midnight one of the

Devices of a Castaway

plainest livers on earth, as his labours had absorbed him since dawn. He had to reckon with his enemies in the matter. He had not the slightest hope of obtaining supplies in the village. But at daylight he walked some miles to see a farmer who had sometimes trudged as many to hear him preach; and the farmer gave him breakfast with a surly pity, which Carlton suffered, as he accepted the meal, for his hard work's sake.

He had explained that he came on business, and after breakfast the farmer asked him, not without suspicion, what his business was.

"Do you kill your own sheep?" inquired Mr. Carlton.

"Only for ourselves."

"When do you kill?"

"Let's see. Friday, is it? Then we kill this mornin'."

"May I wait and watch?"

The other stared.

"I want some mutton," Carlton explained.

"But I don't keep a butcher's shop," growled the farmer. "Well, we'll see what we can do; we may be able to let you have a bit of the neck-end."

"I should be very grateful for it. But I'm afraid I want more."

"What more?"

"A flock of sheep."

He was willing to pay outside prices. So a bargain was struck; and the sheep were in the glebe that night. Meanwhile he had seen

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one killed and dressed, and was not the less thankful that he had neck-end chops enough to last him that week.

The stacking of the stones was finished early on the Friday afternoon, and Carlton determined to take the rest of that day easily. So he set himself to retrieve the lectern from the ruins, and did finally wheel it to the rectory, on two barrows; the first broke under its weight. Moreover, this had consumed the entire afternoon, as another would have foreseen at a glance, and Carlton emerged as from a pool of ink. Since he had made himself rather hot and black, however, he thought it a pity not to clear a little more of the interior while the light lasted. It must be done some day; but again the task was more formidable than it appeared to dauntless eyes still aflame with vast endeavour. The firemen had not spared the water when all was over, so the big bones of the roof were not burnt through. Tie-beams and principal rafters, in particular, lay whole and heavy, and immovable less from their weight than from the inextricable tangle in which they had fallen. There was nothing but the saw for these, and Carlton had already sawn the lectern from its grave. He learnt to saw with his left hand that evening; and after all had very little but his own personal condition to show for his labour: only the nucleus of a wood-heap near the stack of stones, and a crooked, blackened, brass thing in the dining-room. But then he had not intended to do much that afternoon; he went

Devices of a Castaway

indoors, and drew the water for his bath with that consolation.

Meat for the second time that day! Carlton began to feel a man. He paced his study with the old rapid step; and he determined to order and arrange his day's work so that the muscles should relieve each other in gangs: varied exertions; that was the principle of all continuous labour. You cannot sit down to rest when you are working hard; but you can do something else. Carlton never rested till he went to bed. But this evening he sat down at his desk.

A sheet of sermon paper was ruled in six columns and a margin; the columns were headed by the days of the week; down the margin the days were divided into three periods, a short and two long; it was the class-room chart of his school-days over again. In future he would rise at five; four was too early. The short period before breakfast should be daily devoted to work in the house. The place must be made and kept habitably clean; that could be left partly to the wet days. Then there was the kitchen work, the preparation of food for the day, baking two days a week, the occasional slaughter of a sheep; and here Carlton paused to grapple with the appalling problem presented by the hungriest of living men and the smallest of slain sheep . . . Salt seemed the solution . . . Salt mutton? . . . At any rate all carnal cares and menial duties should be disposed of for the day as early as possible in the early morning; not till then would he break his

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fast; and the real day's work should begin as near eight o'clock as might be, but as often as possible on the right side of the hour. Moreover, it should begin with the lighter labour: scraping and repointing the uncondemned walls, for example; that would take one man weeks or months; but it would not tire him out at the beginning of the day. Then there was the preparation of the stones; the careful scraping of those preserved; classification as to size for the various courses; cutting and fitting of fresh stones; the actual building with trowel and plummet. All this went under one head, and was for the body of the day; a long spell broken by a good meal and a determined rest. The day should finish, for many a day to come, with a savage attack upon the chaos within the walls. A hand too tired for skilled labour would still be fit for that.

And as Robert Carlton reached this stage in the laying of his ingenious plans, he leaned back in his chair, and stared at his dull reflection in the diamond panes above his writing table, in a sudden horror of himself and all his ways and works. He was actually happy—he! The reaction was the same in kind as that which had come to him at the shed, in the joy of touching hammer and chisel again, and which had driven him to the hall next morning. But it was greater in degree: for then he had seen how happy he might be; to-night he knew how happy he was.

“But only in my work! Only in my work!”

Devices of a Castaway

he cried, and fell upon his knees to crave forgiveness from the Almighty for daring to enjoy the consolation which He had ordained for him.

The artist was dead in Carlton for that night. He rose a very miserable sinner, every thought a whip for his poor spirit that had dared to come to life without leave. He had committed deadly sin with deadliest result ; let him never forget it ! He, God's servant—— the morbid rehearsal may be spared. But he did not spare himself. All the aggravating circumstances were recalled, none that extenuated ; all that he had suffered he must needs suffer anew, slowly, deliberately, and in due order ; that he might not forget, that he might never forget again ! Now he was confessing to Musk, now to George Mellis ; poor George, where was he ? Now they were breaking his windows, and now Tom Ivey was refusing his hand. But at last he was before the bishop ; that strong, queer voice was croaking across the desk ; and all at once the croak ended, and the voice rang like a sovereign with words of refined gold.

“ Courage, brother ! Pray without ceasing. Look forward, not back ; do not despair. Despair is the devil's best friend ; better give way to deadly sin than to deadlier despair ! ”

And he prayed again ; but not in the house.

“ For I will look forward,” he said as he went. “ But let me never again forget ! ”

There was neither wind nor moon. The sparrows were still, but not the shrill little swifts.

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And somewhere a thrush was singing, clear and mellow and certain as a bell ; and once a bat's wing brushed the bowed bare head of him who prayed not for forgiveness but for the peace of a soul ; for neither was it in the ruins that Robert Carlton knelt once more.

XIV.

THE LAST RESORT.

CARLTON chose a fresh stone from the heap ; he was going to begin all over again. He got it in his arms, and he managed to stagger with it to the front of the shed. The stone was at least two feet long, and its other dimensions were about half that of the length ; as Carlton set it down, himself all but on the top of it, he trusted it was the largest size in the heap. It was of a rich reddish yellow, roughly rectangular, but lumpy as ill-made porridge, exactly as it had come from the quarry. Carlton tilted it up against a smaller stone, smooth enough in parts, but palpably untrue in its planes and angles. This was the stone that he had been all day spoiling ; it had been as big as the new one that morning, when he had begun upon it with a view to the lower eleven-inch courses ; and now he had failed to make even a six-inch job of it. The stone was so soft. It cut like cheese. But he was not going to spoil another.

So he rested a minute before beginning again, and he marshalled his tools upon a barrow within reach of his hand. It was rather late on the Saturday afternoon. In the morning he had felt

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disinclined for violent exertion, but just equal to trying his hand at that stone-dressing which would presently become his chief labour; and his hand had disappointed him. It had the wrong kind of cunning: as amateurs will, Carlton had picked up his fancy craft at the fancy end: gargoyles were his speciality, and an even surface beyond him.

"But I can learn," he had been saying all day; and most times the dog had wagged his tail.

Ten minutes ago his tone had changed.

"I'll start afresh! I'll do one to-night! I won't be beaten!"

And that time Glen had leapt up with his master, and lashed his shins with his tail, as much as to say, "Beaten? Not you!" and had accompanied him to the heap, and was pretending to rest with him now. But Carlton was constitutionally impatient of conscious rest; and this afternoon certain sounds, louder though less incessant than those of his constant comrades, the bees and birds, informed him that the Boys' Friendly were not too proud to use the far strip of glebe land which the rector had levelled for them last year. The discovery made him glad. But it also brought him to his feet within the minute that he had promised himself; and the hammer rang swift blows on the cold-chisel as much to drown the music of bat and ball as to clear the grosser irregularities from one surface of the stone.

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This done (and this much he had done successfully enough before), hammer and cold-chisel were thrown aside, and the marbling-hammer taken up, because Tom Ivey had always used it to make the rough sufficiently smooth. But it is a mongrel implement at best, being hammer and chisel in one, with changeable bits like a brace, and yet with less of these than of the pickaxe in its cross-bred composition. Like a pick you wield it, yet lightly and with the one and only curve, or at a stroke you go too deep.

Chip, chip, chip went the sharp seven-eighths-of-an-inch bit; and off curved the soft yellow flakes, to turn to powder as they fell.

Chip, chip, chip along the top; and the keen bit left its mark each time; and the finished row of these was like the key-board of a toy piano.

Chip, chip, chip, always from left to right, a tier below, and then the tier below that. The toy piano is becoming a toy organ of many manuals; and the hue of the keys is not that of the rough outer surface: as they first see the light they are nearer the colour of cigar-ash.

Chip, chip, chip—chip, chip, chip; but *swish*, *swish* is a thought nearer the sound. So soft that stone, so sharp that bit, so timorous and tentative the unpractised strokes of Robert Carlton!

Every now and then he would stop, and anxiously apply a straight lath to the spreading smoothness; but he was improving, and in the end the plane was at least as true as it was

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smooth. The key-marks of the marbling-hammer were not always parallel or of even length, and the rows declined from left to right like the hand of a weak writer: "bad batting," Tom Ivey would have called it, a "bat" being the mark in question, and long, even bats, "straight along the stone," the mason's ideal, as the inquisitive amateur had discovered the first day Ivey worked for him. But knowledge and skill lie a gulf apart, and on the whole Carlton felt encouraged. He had done but one side of four, but the one was smooth enough to face the world as coursed rubble; let him but get and keep his angles, and the other three would matter less. So now he took the straight-edge, as the lath was called, and the bit of black slate which Tom had also left behind him; and with these and the mason's square a rectangular parallelogram with eleven-inch ends was duly ruled on the satisfactory surface. Hammer and cold-chisel again. Much use of the square, but no more play with the marbling-hammer. No need to perfect the parts doomed to mortar and eternal night; rough criss-cross work with a mason's axe is the thing for them; as Carlton knew when he rather reluctantly applied himself to the mastery of that implement, just as he was beginning to acquire some proficiency with the other. The mason's axe was the most treacherous of them all. It was a hand pickaxe with a point like a stiletto; a touch, and the steel lay buried. But it was the right tool to use, and Carlton used it to the best of his ability,

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stooping more and more over his work as the light began to fail him.

He was going to succeed at last ! If only he had not lost so much time ! Then he might have mixed some mortar and laid the first stone of his own cutting—the first stone of the new church ! That would have been something like a day's work ; yet he was not dissatisfied with his progress. Swish, swish, swish ; he might have done much worse. He had pulled down the bad walls—swish—and what was good of them—swish—he had saved and there they were. He looked up, the perspiration standing thick upon his white forehead, his eyes all eagerness and determination. He stood upright to rest a moment in the mellow light—happy again ! Happy because he had not time to think of himself, but only of what he was doing, and of what he felt certain he could do : happy in his aching limbs and soaking flannels, and all that with a happiness he was for once not destined to realise and to check. For, even as he stood, Glen barked, and Carlton turned in time to see the village constable tuck his cane under his arm while he stood still to feel in his pockets. The man was in full uniform—a strange circumstance in itself.

“ Good evening, Frost,” said Mr. Carlton.

“ Evenin', sir.”

The constable was an imposing figure of a man, with a handsome stupid face, and a stolid deliberation of word and deed which gave an impression of artless but indefatigable vigilance.

Peccavi

In reality the fellow had few inferiors in the parish.

"For me?" and Carlton held out his hand as the other produced a paper.

"For you an' me," said the constable, winking as he kept the paper to himself. And in an impressive voice he read out a warrant for the apprehension of the Reverend Robert Carlton, Clerk in Holy Orders, on a charge of unlawfully and maliciously setting fire to the parish church of Long Stow, in the County of Suffolk, on the night of the 24th or the morning of the 25th June, in the year of grace 1882; the warrant was signed by two justices—Sir Wilton Glead of Long Stow Hall, and Canon Wilders of Lakenhall.

"Like to see it for yourself?" inquired Frost.

"No, thank you; that's quite enough for me. Well, upon my word!"

And Carlton stood staring into space, a glitter in his eyes, a smile upon his lips, incapable of unmixed indignation: really, Sir Wilton was a better fighter than he had supposed.

"You will have to come with me to Lakenhall," said the constable's voice.

Carlton realised the situation.

"To-night?"

"At once, sir, if *you* please. They've sent a trap for us from Lakenhall. That's waiting at the gate."

The mason's axe was still in his hand, the

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unfinished stone at his feet. Carlton looked wistfully from one to the other, and thence in appeal to the officer of the law.

"I say, Frost, is there any hurry for a quarter of an hour? I'd—I'd give a sovereign to finish this stone!"

Virtue blazed in the constable's face.

"You don't bribe *me*, sir!" he cried. "I'm ashamed of you, I am, for tryin' that on! No, Mr. Carlton, you've got to come straight away."

"But surely I may change first?"

"You'll have to be quick, and I'll have to come with you."

"Is that necessary?" asked Carlton with some heat, as he flung his tools under cover.

"That's left to me, sir, and I don't trust no gentleman in his dressing-room. My orders are to take you alive, Mr. Carlton."

Carlton was upon him in two strides.

"Very well," said he, "you shall; and you shall come upstairs and see me change. But address another word to me at your peril!"

A small crowd had collected at the gate; a Lakenhall policeman was waiting in the trap. Carlton came down the drive with his long coat flying and his head thrown back. Somehow he was allowed to depart without a groan.

On the way he never spoke, and something kept the constables from speaking before him. They had a slow horse; it was nearly an hour before Carlton saw the inside of a police-station for the first time in his life. Here he was formally

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charged by a portly inspector with whom he had some slight acquaintance; the charge concluded with the usual warning that anything he said might be given in evidence against him.

"I hear," said Carlton. "And now?"

The inspector shrugged his personal regret.

"I'm afraid there's only one thing for it now, sir."

"The cells, eh?"

"That's it, Mr. Carlton."

"Till when?"

"Monday morning, sir, the magistrates sit."

"Lead the way, then," said Carlton. "I can spend my Sunday in gaol as well as in my own rectory."

His eye was stern but steady; he was filled with contempt, but without a fear. He knew who was at the bottom of this charge, and had begun by quite admiring the man's resource; but his admiration did not survive a second thought. What a fool the fellow must be! No fool like an old fool, said the proverb; and none so insanely reckless as your prudent people, once they lose their head, thought Robert Carlton in his cell. Of the charge itself he scarcely condescended to think at all; for to his mind, the more innocent on that score for his guilt upon another, the thing seemed more preposterous than it really was. He burn the church! With what object, pray? And what did they suppose he had risked his life for at the fire? Remorse, or show? He could have laughed; he was

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unable to imagine a shred of evidence against himself.

There was a Testament on the table, but he had brought his Bible in his pocket; and by the gas-jet in its wire guard, that striped the walls with lean shadows like the bars of some wild beast's cage, Robert Carlton forgot his own sins, persecution and imprisonment, in those of his hero St. Paul; and was in another world when the rattle of a key brought him back to this. It was the fat inspector himself, with good news on his face, and in his hand the card of Canon Wilders, Rector of Lakenhall and chairman of the local bench.

"He doesn't want to see me, does he?" said Carlton, in plain alarm.

"If you've no objection to seeing him, sir."

"But he was one of those who signed the warrant! Tell him I can't see anybody. Thank him very much. Say that I appreciate his kindness, but would prefer to be alone."

In a few minutes the man returned.

"That's a pity you won't see the canon, sir; he don't half like it. He couldn't help signing the warrant, not in his position; that seem to me to be the very reason why he come the minute he heard we had you here; and it's my opinion he'd like to see you out of custody."

"You mean on bail?"

"Yes, sir."

"Because I'm a clergyman, and it's a disgrace to the cloth!"

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This explanation was a sudden idea impulsively expressed ; but the inspector's face was its tacit confirmation.

"Is he here still ?" demanded the prisoner.

"Yes, sir, he is."

"Then you can say I've been taken on a false and abominable charge," cried Carlton, "and I don't want my liberty till the falsehood's proved ! But I am equally obliged to Canon Wilders," he added with less scorn, "and you will kindly tell him so with my compliments."

But he paced his cell in a curious twitter for one who had entered it without a qualm. In all his trouble this was the first word from a clerical neighbour : to a man they had stood aloof from him in his shame. His own movements were in part responsible : he had disappeared from view. Nor had he expected or coveted their sympathy ; yet, now that one of them had come forward, Carlton was conscious of a wound he had not felt before. There was Preston of Linkworth—but his wife would account for him. There was Bosanquet of Bedingfield, and there were others. They might have inquired at the infirmary (Preston had), but he had never heard of it. As for Wilders, he was a worthy man of local mark, for whom Carlton had preached upon occasion ; one prosperous alike in worldly welfare and in spiritual satisfaction ; the last person to go into disgrace ; and yet, by reason of a certain officiousness of character, the first to come forward as he had done. Carlton had no wish to be ungracious

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or ungrateful, or to make a personal matter of the signing of the warrant ; but he could not face his fellows with this new charge hanging over him, nor was he going free by the favour of living man. On the other hand, he pondered more upon his brother clergymen that Saturday night in gaol than in all these eight weeks past. And the sense of mere social downfall, the dullest of his aches hitherto, became suddenly acute, so that for that alone he wished they had not put him in prison. But for all the rest he cared as little as before, and showed as little interest in the pending event.

His indifference quite troubled the inspector, who evinced a desire to show the prisoner every possible consideration, and was an early visitor next morning.

“ That ain't no business of mine, sir ; but you'll be wanting to see a solicitor during the day ? ”

“ Why so ? ” asked Carlton.

“ Well, sir, your case will come up to-morrow morning.”

“ But what do I want with a solicitor ? ”

“ Why, sir, every pris—that is, accused——”

The inspector boggled at the word, and stood confounded by the other's density.

“ Oh, I see ! ” cried Carlton. “ So you're thinking of my defence, are you ? Thanks very much, but I don't want a lawyer to defend me. I make your side a present of the lawyers, Mr. Inspector ; they'll want them all. It's for them to prove me guilty, not for me to prove my innocence.”

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"And do you really think we have no case against you?" inquired the inspector, with a change of tone, for he happened to have charge of the case himself.

"I don't think about it," returned Carlton, with unaffected indifference. "The thing's too preposterous to be worth a thought."

"I'm glad you find it so," said the other, nettled; "let's hope you won't change your mind. I only spoke for your own good; there's plenty would blame me for speaking at all. I won't trouble you no more, sir. I might have known I'd get no thanks, after the way you served Canon Wilders last night. Defend yourself, and let's see you do it!"

The door shut with a clang, and Carlton watched the vibrations in some distress. He was sorry to hurt the feelings of his would-be friends, but he needed no man's friendship in the present crisis. God would be his friend; his faith in Him was as profound as his contempt of the false charge hanging over himself. The latter, he felt convinced, must break down as it deserved; but if not, then the meaning would be clear. It would mean that he had not been punished sufficiently for what he had done, and must accordingly be prepared to suffer something for that which he had not done, but of which his sin had indubitably caused the doing. And Robert Carlton was so prepared in his heart of hearts. Yet he was unable to carry his pious fatalism to its logical conclusion, and to abate his bitterness against the

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human instruments of a vengeance he was willing to think Divine.

On the contrary, he condescended at intervals of the day to give his mind to the proceedings of the next ; and he did recall one or two circumstances which prejudice and malice might twist against him. To consider these was to be instantly inspired with a conclusive reply on every point ; but Carlton was not sure whether the law would permit him to reply at all. So in the afternoon he begged for newspapers, and his request, though acceded to, was all over Lakenhall by nightfall. A suspended clergyman who thought so little of his notorious sins that he could ask for newspapers on a Sunday afternoon ! The inference drawn by a small community, greatly excited about the case, and unconsciously anxious to believe the worst of one who was bad enough at best, will be readily imagined. The whole town shook its head.

Meanwhile the object of popular detestation was comparatively happy in the exercise of his receptive powers. By good luck his bundle of provincial newspapers contained that which can only be met with in a local press : a verbatim report of the police-court proceedings in a painful case of infinitesimal interest to the world at large. The interest, however, was all-absorbing to Robert Carlton. The accused had been represented by a solicitor. The solicitor had fought his case tooth-and-nail. There had been certain "scenes in court" ; all were reported in the local paper, and no point involved was lost upon the alert

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brain of the imprisoned clergyman. It was with difficulty that he dismissed the subject from his mind when the church-bells rang once more through the quiet country town. It happened, however, that the parish church was quite near the police-court; and in the morning Carlton had been enabled to follow the whole service, partly through knowing it by heart, partly from the strains of hymn or psalm that reached him at due intervals through the grated window: and ever since then he had been looking forward to even-song. So now when first the bells ceased, and then the voluntary, the prisoner presently rehearsed the exhortation (in silence) on his feet, the general confession (half aloud) upon his knees; then followed the psalms, also from memory, his lips moving, his hands folded; then knelt again to pray the prayers. And his eyes were as earnest, his attitude as reverent, and even certain gestures as punctilious, as though he were back in his church that had been burnt, instead of lying in gaol for burning it.

The August evening came early to its close; a little while the new moon glimmered in the cell; then the organ pealed the people out of church, and a few steps passed that way, and a few voices floated in through the bars, before all was quiet in the little old town. And Robert Carlton thought no more that night upon his enemies, and took no further heed for the morrow.

XV.

HIS OWN LAWYER.

CANON WILDERS was supported by Mr. Preston, of Linkworth, and by a youthful justice whom Robert Carlton did not know by name, but who sat like the graven image of Rhadamanthus, encased in the atrocious trousers and the excruciating collar of the year 1882.

Considering the romantic interest of the case, this was by no means "a full bench"; there were, however, some conspicuous and deliberate absentees, including Sir Wilton Gleed and Dr. Marigold. Carlton was less surprised at his enemy's abstinence than at the position voluntarily occupied by James Preston, an indolent cleric but genial gentleman, who had been his friend. His surprise deepened when Preston nodded to him, hastily enough, and with a change of colour, but yet in a way that thrilled Carlton with a doubt as to whether he had altogether lost that friend. He was in no such suspense concerning the stately chairman, who very properly looked at the prisoner as though he had never seen him before, and never addressed him without tuning his voice to the proper pitch of distant

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disapproval. This was not a question of losing a friend, but of having made an enemy of the most potent personage in the court.

The latter was densely crowded when the stout inspector opened the case, but the familiar faces stood out in quick succession, and they were not a few. In a doorway apart stood a Long Stow trio—the saddler, the sexton, and Tom Ivey; all three were in their Sunday clothes, and more or less visibly ill at ease; but it was only Ivey who reddened and looked away when the prisoner caught his eye. As for Carlton, he became so lost in sudden and absorbing speculation that it was some minutes before he realised that the inspector had finished a bald brief statement of his case, and that a witness was already in the box and giving evidence. The witness, however, was only Frost, the village constable, and his evidence merely that of the arrest on the Saturday at Long Stow. Carlton nevertheless whipped out his pocket-book, and the witness waited before standing down.

“May I ask him two or three questions?” said the prisoner, addressing himself with courtesy to the bench.

“As many as you please,” replied the chairman, “provided they are relevant.”

Carlton bowed before turning to the witness.

“How far were you responsible for the warrant on which you arrested me?”

“Re-spon-si-ble!” exclaimed the chairman in separate syllables. “What do you mean?”

His own Lawyer

"I wish to ascertain exactly in what measure the witness has been concerned in trumping up this charge against me."

"That is not the language in which to inquire!"

"Your worships may discover that it is exceedingly mild language, before the case is over."

"I shall not allow you to cross-examine witnesses unless you do so with due respect to the bench."

The clerk to the justices, who had examined the witness, was the means of averting an immediate scene.

"I think, your worship, that he wishes to know whether the witness laid the information against him."

"I thank you," said Carlton, an incredible twinkle in his eye, as he again turned to the witness. "I do desire to ask you, with due respect to the bench, whether you 'laid this information' against me, or whether you did not?"

"I did," said Frost.

"Before whom did you 'lay' it?"

"The magistrate."

"What magistrate?"

"Sir Wilton Glead."

"And when?"

"Last Friday."

"The date, please!"

"That would be the 18th."

Peccavi

“The 18th of August! And the church was burnt on the morning of the 25th of June! How is it that it took you eight weeks all but two days to ‘lay your information’ against me?”

The witness looked confused; but the chairman was quick to interpose; he had been waiting his opportunity.

“That may or may not transpire in the evidence,” said he; “it is in either event an absolutely inadmissible question, and I should strongly recommend you to employ a solicitor. If you like I will adjourn the court for half-an-hour while you instruct one; but I will not have the time of the court wasted by irrelevant and inadmissible questions such as you seem inclined to put. If you have nothing better to ask the witness I shall order him to stand down.”

“Let him stand down,” returned the prisoner, indifferently. “I have done with him.”

Robert Carlton had surprised himself. He had come into court with the most admirable intentions that it was possible to entertain: he was to have kept cool but humble, to have curbed his contempt of proceedings conducted (if not instituted) in the best of good faith, and never for an instant to have forgotten his guilt of sin in his innocence of crime. In this spirit he had risen from his knees that morning, and with this resolve he had left his cell and been ushered into court; but the very atmosphere of the place had made the blood sing in his veins; and it needed but the chairman's voice to make it boil. He had sinned, and

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chosen to suffer for his sin : so no crime was too dastardly to lay at his door. He was down, and deservedly down, so friends and acquaintances alike must gather and conspire to trample him. Carlton's point of view went round like a weathercock in the wind ; flesh and blood flew to the front, in despite of spirit ; and all the man in him rebelled at man's injustice, in despite of his prayers.

So when the next witness was being sworn (it was his own sexton), and James Preston whispered to Canon Wilders, the man who had preached for both of them looked on grimly.

"As you seem bent upon conducting your own case," said Wilders, leaning back, "you may possibly prefer a chair at the table ; if so, there is one at your disposal." And he pointed into the well of the court.

Carlton thanked him in the voice that all his will could not purge of all its scorn ; he was perfectly comfortable where he was. Then he looked pointedly at Preston, and his face and tone softened together. "But I shall not forget the suggestion," he said ; and again his friend changed colour.

The decrepit hero of the overweening hallucination had hobbled into the witness-box meanwhile. Carlton had not come in contact with him since the morning before the fire, and he little thought that his last conversation with the sexton was about to come up in evidence against him. Yet such was the case.

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Old Busby had been responsible for the lighting of the church. He had kept the paraffin and filled the lamps. But in the month of June the lamps were rarely needed. They had not been lighted on the Sunday before the fire. There would have been even less occasion for them—by one minute—the following Sunday. And yet, on the Saturday morning, the prisoner had ordered the witness to see that the lamps were full!

So Busby deposed; and the point seemed of sinister significance. It took the prisoner plainly by surprise: the circumstance had escaped his memory. In a minute, however, he had recalled it in detail; and his cross-examination, though provocative of some mirth, and curtailed in consequence, was by no means ineffectual.

“You remember when the lamps went out, through your neglect, in the middle of even-song?”

“I’m like to remember it. That was when I swallowed the frog.”

The court laughed, but not the prisoner, who was too much in earnest even to smile.

“I reminded you pretty often about the lamps after that?”

“Ay, you were for ever at me about ’em.”

“Now, on the morning you mention, where was I when I told you to go and fill the lamps?”

The sexton thought.

“In your study, sir.”

His own Lawyer

"And what were you doing there? Do you remember?"

"I do that! I was telling you about the frog."

This time the prisoner smiled himself.

"And did I listen to you?" he demanded, a sudden change upon his face, as though the act of smiling had put him in pain.

"No, that you didn't," the old man grumbled; "you fared as though you didn't hear."

"So I told you to go away and fill your lamps," said Carlton, sadly, "even though it was Midsummer Day! I have finished with the witness."

He was as one who had brilliantly parried a deadly thrust, and yet received a secret wound in the onset. He rested his head upon his hand to hide his pain, and only raised it at the sound of James Preston's voice putting the first question from the bench:

"As sexton, did you keep the key of the church?"

"In the old days I did, sir; but that's been open church ever since Mr. Carlton come."

"You mean that the church was open day and night?"

"To be sure it was."

"Thank you," said Preston hastily, as though glad to relapse into silence. Carlton did not add to his embarrassment by a glance, but his heart throbbed with gratitude for the goodwill he could no longer question.

Peccavi

"*Did* you fill the lamps?" asked the chairman as the witness was preparing to hobble from the box.

"Yes, sir, I did."

And, watching the chairman's face, Carlton was still more thankful to have one friend upon the bench; for it seemed to him that the young gentleman in the tall collar and the tight trousers was alone in preserving a Rhadamanthine impartiality.

What surprised him equally was the strength and the nature of the evidence produced. In his complete innocence of the crime imputed to him, he had been unable to conceive or to recall a single incriminating circumstance not susceptible of an easy and immediate explanation. Yet more than one arose during the afternoon, when first the saddler, and afterwards Tom Ivey, went into the box to bear witness against him; and more than once the explanation, so full and clear in his own mind, was incapable of confirmation or admission in the form of evidence. The more striking instances were afforded by Fuller, whose testimony, though convincing enough, and not the less so for its real or apparent reluctance, came as a complete surprise to the prisoner. It appeared that the saddler had returned to the rectory on the fatal night, more than an hour after his first visit and summary dismissal, in order to have his "say," and "not let the reverend have it all his own way." The midnight visitor had found a light in the study, but the door shut, and only

His own Lawyer

the dog within. He had not entered, but had waited about the drive, till, seeing a light in the church, he had made up his mind that "the reverend" was there, and had decided not to interrupt him. So the saddler had gone home and to bed, and was fast asleep when the church-bells sounded the alarm.

"And what made you so sure that it was Mr. Carlton in the church with the light?" inquired Mr. Preston.

"Because I couldn't find him in the rectory."

"But you did not go in?"

"I knocked and called, but I only made the dog bark."

The chairman leaned forward in his turn.

"Was the barking loud?" he asked. "Loud enough to be heard all over the house?"

Carlton sprang to his feet. He had been accommodated with a chair, of which he had quietly availed himself during the examination of this witness, and the suddenness of his movement brought all eyes to his face. It was quick with impatience and sarcastic disregard.

"If you are labouring to prove that I was not at my house, but in the church," he cried, "your worship may save himself the time and trouble. I was in the church. I lit one of the lamps."

This did not strike the prisoner as the sensational statement that it was; he was therefore amazed at its effect upon the bench, where even Rhadamanthus came to life, while James Preston

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opened eyes of horror, and Wilders whispered to the clerk.

"That," said the chairman, "is an extremely serious statement, and one that you are surely ill-advised in making. It is not evidence, but it is being taken down in writing, and may be given in evidence against you at your trial. I should certainly advise you to refrain from further statements of the kind."

"I thought you wanted to get at the truth?"

"So we do. But I have warned you. Have you any questions to ask the witness?"

"Not one; he is equally correct in his statements and his suppositions."

Thomas Ivey was then sworn, amid the hush of deepening interest, and gave his evidence in a manly, straightforward, level-headed fashion, that added its own weight to what he said for good or ill; and his testimony told both ways. He described the scene in the church on his arrival; the character of the fire, and the attitude of Mr. Carlton; both of which, he admitted (in answer to a question from the chairman), had struck him as suspicious at the first glance.

"But did you see him *do* anything that you thought suspicious?" asked the well-meaning Mr. Preston.

"I did, sir."

"What was that?" from the chairman.

"He threw something into the flames. But I couldn't see what that was."

His own Lawyer

"Did you afterwards find out?"

"No, sir."

Once more the prisoner attracted every eye. It was felt that he would make another of his reckless and voluntary declarations. But this time he was silent enough; and though the evidence now took a turn in his favour, that silence left its mark.

Everybody knew how the clergyman had risked his life, when it was too late, to save the church. But the story had not yet been told as Mr. Preston contrived to elicit it from the lips of Tom Ivey. The Rector of Linkworth had been from home when the fire took place. There was nothing unnatural in his desire for details, nor did he put an improper question. The chairman, however, betrayed more than a little impatience, while the junior justice, on the other hand, displayed excitement of another kind, and actually put in his word at last.

"Do you mean to say you let him throw the water single-handed," said he, "while the rest of you stayed outside?"

"There was no stopping him, sir," said Ivey. "He would have all the danger to himself."

"Then you could not see what use he made of the water?" suggested the chairman, dryly.

"No, sir," said Tom; "I could only see the steam." And his tone was still more dry.

Wilders looked at the clock as the examination concluded. The case had not been taken till the afternoon; it was now nearly five. Wilders

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beckoned and spoke to the inspector, subsequently addressing the prisoner in his coldest tone.

"I understand that this is the last witness to be called against you," said he. "Do you propose to cross-examine him?"

"I do."

"And may I ask if you have any witnesses to call for your defence?"

"I may have one."

"Then it becomes my duty to adjourn the case." He whispered again to the inspector, and at greater length with his colleagues, James Preston appearing tenacious of some point upon which the chairman ultimately gave way. "As the police have completed their case," continued Wilders, "a remand of one day will be sufficient, and we shall simply adjourn until to-morrow morning. But you may, if you like, apply for bail; though the question, having due regard to the evidence which we have heard, is one that would now require our grave consideration."

"You may spare yourselves the trouble," said Carlton shortly. "I don't want bail."

And he went back to prison to lament his temper, but not to go through the form of further prayer for patience and humility; for he felt that these were beyond him in that public court, packed with prejudice from door to door.

"I told you what he'd say," grumbled Wilders in the retiring-room.

"I don't blame him," said Mr. Preston. "My dear sir, he's innocent of this!"

His own Lawyer

“ I shall form *my* opinion to-morrow,” returned the canon, with dignity. “ Meanwhile I confess to some curiosity as to whom he thinks of calling as his witness.”

“ The chappie shows us sport,” quoth Rhadamantus, “ guilty or not guilty ; and I’m not giving odds either way.”

XVI.

END OF THE DUEL.

RHADAMANTHUS reappeared without a visible garment that he had worn the day before. He came spurred and breeched from the saddle, with a horseshoe pin in his snowy tie, a more human collar, and a keener front for the proceedings withal. Carlton felt his eye upon him from the first, and returned the compliment by taking a new interest in the nameless youth; he had long read the minds of the other two; his fate was in this young fellow's keeping. He had no time, however, for idle speculation as to the result. Tom Ivey was back in the witness-box, and the accused was invited to cross-examine without delay.

Carlton soon showed that the interval had enabled him to profit by the experience of the previous day. His questions were cunningly prepared. He began with one not easy to put in an admissible form, yet he succeeded in so putting it.

"You have sworn," said he, "that your very first glimpse of me in the burning church was sufficient to create a certain suspicion in your mind. Did you mention this suspicion to anybody—that night?"

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"Not that night."

"That month?"

"Nor yet that month, sir."

"And why?"

"I didn't suspect you any more, sir."

Carlton tried hard to suppress his satisfaction, as a sensation to which he was no longer entitled. He had come back to this in the night; but it was harder to abide by it during the day. He paused a little, in honest effort to rid his mind and tone of any taint of triumph; but his advantage had to be pursued.

"May I ask when this suspicion perished?"

"Before we had been five minutes together, trying to save the church!"

"You are getting upon dangerous ground," said the chairman. "What the witness thought, or when he ceased to think it, is not evidence."

"Another point, then," said Carlton: "do you remember the appearance of the lamps?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"They were crooked."

"Did you notice any paraffin spilt about?"

"Yes, when my attention was called to it."

"Where was this paraffin?"

"On the pews that were catching fire."

"And who called your attention to it?"

"You did yourself, sir."

"I did myself!" repeated Carlton, struggling with his tone. "That will do for that. I am going back for a moment to those suspicions of

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yours. Have you never mentioned them to a human being?"

"Yes, sir, I have."

"As things of the past?"

"As things of the past."

"When was it that you first spoke of them?"

"Last Friday—the eighteenth, sir."

"And did you then speak of your own accord, or were you questioned?"

"I was questioned."

"As the first man to reach the burning church?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take care!" cried Wilders. "That was a leading question."

"It is the last," replied Carlton. "I have finished with the witness. I would take this opportunity, however, of apologising to your worships for the various errors and excesses which I have committed, and may still commit, in my ignorance and inexperience of the law, and my indignation at the charge. In this respect, and this alone, I crave the indulgence of the bench, and beg leave to rectify one of my mistakes. I spoke in haste when I said, yesterday, that I had no questions to ask the witness Fuller. I desire, with your worships' permission, to have that witness recalled."

The chairman was rather sharp: subsequent evidence might make the recall of witnesses a necessity, but the lost opportunities of counsel, or of accused persons conducting their own defence,

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were an altogether insufficient reason. However, the man was in court, and the application would be allowed.

"I appreciate the privilege," said Carlton, "and promise that it shall not detain us many moments."

He was becoming as fluent and adroit as a past practitioner; in the pauses of the fight he felt ashamed of his facility, a haunting sense that it was indecent in him to defend himself at all. Yet he was one against many, and, in this matter, an innocent man. Fight he must, and that with all the skill and spirit in his power. His liberty, his self-respect; his one remaining chance, object, and desire in life; nay, his very life itself was at stake with these. It was no time for dwelling upon the past. The sin that he had committed was one thing; the crime that he had not committed was another. It was his duty to be just to himself. Yet this was how he treated himself, whenever he had time to think! He resolved to give himself fairer play than he seemed likely to receive at the hands of others; and his resolve declared itself in the ringing voice that shocked not a few who heard it, having found him guilty already in their hearts.

"About that very story of the empty rectory and the light in the church," he began, with Fuller—"about that perfectly true story," he added, wilfully, "which you told us yesterday. Did you tell it to anybody at the time?"

"Only Tom Ivey."

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"Why only to him?"

"He asked me to keep that to myself."

"And did you?"

"I did my best, sir, but that slipped out one day when I was talking to——"

"Never mind his or her name. You did your best to keep the matter to yourself, but it slipped out one day in conversation. Now when did you last tell that true story, not counting yesterday, as fully and particularly as you told it here in court? Think. I want the exact date of the very last occasion."

"That was last Friday, sir—to-day's the 22nd—that would be the 18th of August."

"Last Friday, the 18th of August; a fatal date to me!" said Robert Carlton. "Thank you. That is all I want from you."

The justices put no question. The clerk did not re-examine. The witness was ordered to stand down. Then followed a short but heavy silence, pregnant with speculation as to the drift of all these questions and the object of so much unexplained insistence upon a date. It meant something. What could it mean? Carlton stood upright in the dock, calm, confident, inscrutable; it seemed a great many moments before the silence was broken by the formal tones of the clerk.

"Do you call any witness for the defence?" he asked.

Carlton dropped his eyes into the well of the court, and they fell upon a pair that were

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fastened upon his face with the glitter of fixed bayonets.

"Yes," said he. "I wish you to call Sir Wilton Glead."

Quietly though distinctly spoken, the name clapped like thunder on the court. Amazement fell on all alike, for the issue between these two had been the common theme for days. Popular sympathy had rightly sided with morality, and its champion had lost nothing by his tactful magnanimity in refraining from sitting upon the bench; that he should be put in the box instead, and by his shameless adversary, was an audacity as hard to credit as to understand. There was a moment's hush, then a minute's buzz, to which the justices themselves contributed. Wilders muttered that the man was mad; his colleague on the right confessed himself nonplussed; his colleague on the left dropped his shaven chin upon his gold horseshoe, and his shoulders shook with joy. Meanwhile Sir Wilton had forced a grin and found his voice.

"You want me in the box, do you?"

"I do."

"Very well; you shall have me."

And he was sworn, still grinning, with an odd mixture of malevolence and deprecation for those who ran to read. "I meant to keep out of this," the florid face said; "but now I'm in it—well, you'll see! It's the fellow's own fault; his blood" etc., etc. But this was not what Sir Wilton was saying in his heart.

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Carlton began at the beginning.

"You are the patron of the living of Long Stow, are you not?"

"You know I am."

"I want the bench to have it from you; kindly answer my question."

"I am the patron of the living of Long Stow," said Sir Wilton, with mock resignation.

"In the year 1880 did you, of your own free will and accord, present that living to me?"

"Yes, and I've repented it ever since!"

There was a sympathetic murmur at the back of the court. It was immediately checked. Every face was thrust forward, every ear strained, every eye absorbed between the prisoner in the dock and the witness in the box. It was no longer the uphill fight of one against many; it was single combat between man and man, and the electricity of single combat charged the air.

"You have repented it more than ever of late?" asked Carlton in steady tones. The skin upon his forehead seemed stretched with pain; the veins showed blue and swollen; but the many judged him from his voice alone.

"Naturally," sneered Sir Wilton.

"So much so that you were resolved I should resign?"

"I hoped you would have the decency to do so."

"Did you come to the rectory on the fifth of this month, and tell me it was my first duty to resign the living?"

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“I don't remember the date.”

“Was it the Saturday before Bank Holiday?”

“I daresay. Yes, it must have been. I didn't expect to find you there. I went to see the wreck and ruin of your home and church, not you.”

“But you did come, and you did see me, and you did tell me it was my first duty to resign my living?”

“Certainly I did.”

“Do you remember your words?”

“Some of them.”

Carlton looked at his pocket-book—at a note made overnight.

“Do you remember making use of the following expressions: ‘Law or no law, I'll have you out of this! I'll hound you out of it! I'll have you torn in pieces if you stay’?”

“I may have said something of the kind,” said the witness, with assumed indifference.

“Did you, or did you not?” cried Carlton, slapping his hand on the rail of the dock; the voice, the look, the gesture were familiar to many present who had heard him preach; and thrilled them for all their new knowledge of the preacher.

“Really I can't recall my exact words. I rather fancied they were stronger.”

Some one laughed at this, and the witness managed to recapture his grin; but his demeanour was unconvincing.

“I am not talking about their strength,” said

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Carlton. "Will you swear that you did *not* say, 'I'll have you out of this! I'll hound you out of it'?"

"No, I will not."

"I thank you," said Carlton; and his ringing voice fell at a word to the pitch of perfect courtesy. He ticked off the note in his pocket-book, and the court breathed again; but its worthy president did more: he had forgotten his position for several minutes, and he hastened to reassert it with the first observation that entered his head.

"I don't see the point of this examination," said Canon Wilders.

"You will presently."

"If I don't I shall put a stop to it!"

Carlton raised his eyes from his notes, but not to the bench; they were only for the witness now.

"Do you remember when and where we met again?"

"You had the insolence to call at my house."

"Was it on a Monday morning, the first after the Bank Holiday?"

"I suppose it was."

"I do not ask you to recall your exact words on that occasion. I simply ask you to inform the bench whether I did, or did not, offer to resign the living then and there—on a certain condition."

"Yes; you did," said Sir Wilton, doggedly. He was very red in the face.

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Carlton could not resist a moment's enjoyment of his discomfiture: it heightened the pleasure of letting him off.

"And did you decline?" he said at length.

"Stop a moment," said the chairman. "What was this condition, Sir Wilton?"

"Am I obliged to give it?"

"Oh, if you think it inexpedient——"

"I think it unnecessary," said the witness, emphatically. "I think it has nothing whatever to do with the case."

"In that case, Sir Wilton, we shall be only too happy not to press the point."

Carlton had a great mind to press it himself. He had invited his enemy to build the church out of his own pocket. The invitation had been declined. Would it also be denied? Carlton was curious to see; but he overcame his curiosity. It would not strengthen his defence, and to mere revenge he must not stoop. So one temptation was resisted, and one advantage thrown away, even in the final phase of the long duel between these good fighters. But the other saw the struggle, and felt as he had done when Carlton had returned him his stick in the ruins of the church.

"And did you decline?" repeated Carlton, in identically the same voice as before.

"I did."

"Did I then point out to you that I was not only entitled, but might be compelled, to keep my chancel, at any rate, 'in good and substantial repair, restoring and rebuilding when necessary'?"

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quote the Act, your worships, as I quoted it then. Do you remember, Sir Wilton?"

"I do."

"I made the point as plain as I have made it now?"

"Yes."

"And what did you say to that?"

The sudden change in the style of the question was glossed over by the single artifice which Robert Carlton permitted himself during the conduct of his case: instead of ringing triumphant, his voice dropped as though he feared the answer. Sir Wilton fell into the trap.

"I said, 'If that's the law I'll see you keep it. Go and build your church! Where there's a law there will be a penalty; go build your church or I'll enforce it.'"

"Which did you expect to enforce—the penalty or the law?"

"I didn't mind which," declared the witness, after hesitation; and his indifference was less successfully assumed than before.

"Oh!" said Carlton; "so you didn't mind my building the church after all?"

Sir Wilton appealed wildly to the bench.

"Am I to be browbeaten and insulted, by a convicted libertine and evil liver, without one word of protest or reproof?"

The chairman coloured with confusion and indecision.

"I am afraid that you must answer his question, Sir Wilton," said Mr. Preston, mildly.