

SHAKEN by the **WIND**

RAY STRACHEY

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Title: Shaken by the Wind: A Story of Fanaticism

Date of first publication: 1928

Author: Ray Strachey (4 June 1887 – 16 July 1940)

Date first posted: Dec. 10, 2017

Date last updated: Dec. 10, 2017

Faded Page eBook #20171214

This ebook was produced by: Alex White, David T. Jones, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

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Shaken
by the
Wind

A Story of Fanaticism

by
RAY STRACHEY

NEW YORK
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1928

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Set up and electrotyped.
Published January, 1928.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

PREFACE

THE LETTERS AND DOCUMENTS from which I have drawn the material for this novel were left to me by my Grandmother, Hannah Whitall Smith, with the injunction to publish them when the right time was come. They were packed in a large wooden case labelled "Fanaticism: The Purple Mother: The Holy Rollers: Internal Respiration: Spiritual Wives: etc.:" and into that case I have been delving for some years past. Strange and fantastic as some of the happenings in this story may seem, they have all been paralleled, and even surpassed in the history of real life; and indeed it is my belief that similar extravagances continue to this day.

I hope to publish shortly some of the actual documents on which this novel is based.

RAY STRACHEY.
1927.

CONTENTS

PART I

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE SHAKERS	3
II. THE PERFECTIONIST PREACHER	17
III. SARAH'S REVOLT	27
IV. THE SAINTLY NEIGHBOURS	40
V. LOTTIE	54
VI. GUIDANCE	63
VII. THE FALL	79
VIII. THE NEW BELIEVERS	88
IX. THE CAMP MEETING	100
X. THE LITTLE GIRLS	115
XI. CAROLINE CARP	130
XII. THE SCANDAL	148

PART II

I. THE FIRST REVELATION	163
II. THE HOLY DANCING	178
III. THE SECOND REVELATION	194
IV. EDMUND AND LOTTIE	205
V. THE PUNISHMENT ROOM	214
VI. APOSTACY	227
VII. THOMAS	238
VIII. EXORCISM	250
IX. THE CONFLICT	259
X. EDMUND'S RECOVERY	269
XI. THE ATTACK	279
XII. SARAH'S SIN	286

XIII. THE CRISIS	296
XIV. "GOD IS GREAT"	306
EPILOGUE	316

PART I

SHAKEN BY THE WIND

CHAPTER I

THE SHAKERS

“Oh way won wiste wah
Le Soka pom a pah!”

THE SHAKERS WERE standing in orderly rows in their empty barnlike meeting-house, the men on the East and the women on the West side, and the Elder and Eldress faced them from the top of the room. It was the Eldress who had uttered the strange remark, her worn and aged face glowing with sudden animation, and in the attentive silence which followed, Thomas and Sarah, his wife, looked at each other across the width of the room. What could that strange saying mean?

The young couple had decided to drive through the Shaker village more from curiosity than from any other motive, but the grave courtesy with which they had been greeted had shamed them into pretending to be earnest seekers after truth. And now they were admitted to the worship, and the brothers and sisters were all assembled before them, in their neat, prim-looking clothes, the women in their caps and shawls, the men in smocks, all grave, quiet and collected.

“Oh way won wiste wah!” repeated the Eldress again, and then in a thin, nasal voice she began to sing:

“My carnal life I will lay down
Because it is depraved,
I’m sure on any other ground
I never can be saved.
My haughty spirit I’ll subdue,
I’ll seek humiliation,
And if I’m true my work to do
I know I’ll find salvation.”

The tune was melancholy, but it had a strong rhythm, and she had not intoned three lines before a movement began in the ordered ranks before her. At first there was a stamping and shuffling of Shaker feet in the flat-heeled Shaker shoes, and then a slow marching forward and back along the room. All

the worshippers held their hands before them, the fingers pointing downwards, and shaking as they moved. The slow movements gradually quickened as the song went on; after a time both tune and step changed, and a much livelier motion began, still, however, up and down and not round the room. The new words were less lugubrious:

“Give us room to dance and play,
'Tis beautiful behaviour,
We have put our sins away,
And we will praise our Saviour.”

Another change of tune and step followed, and then another still and occasionally a harsh, discordant cry broke from one of the worshippers, but that was all. The real shaking, the rolling upon the ground, of which so much was said in the world outside did not then take place. It was a strange form of worship, but not exciting, and Thomas Sonning, who remained motionless, as he had promised, on the men's side of the building, found the time pass very slowly indeed.

If this was all they were to see, he thought, it was a pity to have stopped over. These elderly men and women were all right in their way, doubtless, but, after all, they didn't amount to much, and the atmosphere of the place was depressing for a honeymoon. His mind wandered away from the proceedings before him to the thought of his own concerns. He and Sarah had been married barely a week, and there was much that was pleasant to dwell upon.

His bride, on the other side of the room, was not feeling quite the same. To her the Shaker worship conveyed no sense of disappointment. Something in the air of the place, some catch in the rhythm, or the shaking of those downturned hands moved her strangely. For the time she forgot her absorbing personal concerns, and lost herself in the queer, intense emotion which the Shakers were enjoying. It was worship—with all her innocent eagerness she joined it, and her own private happiness welling up in her heart seemed like a prayer to God. An hour wore by, and another still, before the end came. At a signal, which neither of the visitors saw, the dancing stopped, and the Eldress who had opened the proceedings closed them, with another unintelligible sentence. Then the Shakers, brothers and sisters, trooped out in orderly fashion and proceeded to their evening meal.

One of the Elders remained behind to escort the guests, and although somewhat out of breath from his exercise he was ready enough to answer the first questions the two young people put to him.

Yes, he said, this was their ordinary form of worship. The Spirit did not often move them to the shaking and rolling which had given them their common name. That was only a special mercy meant for special times of trial; but the gift of song or the gift of speech in an unknown tongue came often to

one or other of them; the words they had heard that night had first been vouchsafed to Eldress Deborah King at Mount Lebanon in the State of New York some dozen years before.

The ending of the worship had ended the trance in which both young people had been watching, and Sarah and Thomas plied the gentle old man with eager questions as they walked along the well-kept avenue which led from the meeting-house to the high square dwelling in which most of the Shakers lived. They wanted to know everything at once, and their guide smiled kindly at their excitement.

“We are quiet people, you know,” he assured them. “There is always time enough for what we want to do or say.”

His guests took the hint and followed a little subdued, to the common dining-hall, where Sarah took her seat among the women and Thomas among the men, to partake of the simple meal of cooked fruit, milk and bread. Very little talking took place; a word or two here and there, a quiet laugh, and then a blessing uttered by the Eldress, and with gentle movements the board was cleared. Thomas and Sarah looked at each other again. They both very much wanted to talk and compare notes, but in accepting the Shakers’ hospitality for the night they had agreed to abide by the regulations of the household, and these separated the sexes very effectually. Sarah was carried off by the Eldress for a tour of the establishment, and Thomas was led off to the workshops. They did not see each other again till the next morning.

The houses, barns and outhouses of the community were all in spotless order, kept with a cleanliness which was positively bare. The long sheds where the fruit-preserving was carried on were as exquisitely neat as were the laundry and bakehouse, and the gardens and orchards were almost unnaturally trim. Every inch of the ground, every separate board of the flooring seemed to have received loving, personal care, and the Shakers themselves, moving almost silently about their tasks, wore faces of quiet and austere content.

The evening was spent in holy conversation, and both in the men’s and in the women’s parlours the same tale was told. Indeed, so steeped were the Shakers in the atmosphere of their community that the Elder and Eldress who instructed the visitors used almost identical terms in telling of the foundress of the Order, Mother Ann Lee, and of its early struggles and persecutions.

Sarah listened with deep interest to the revelation of their beliefs, and found something exceedingly attractive in the theory of the dual sex of the Almighty. There was, indeed, a feminine colour to the whole doctrine which Sarah found agreeable, and the complete acceptance of eldresses and the preaching and authority allowed to them gratified her own unconscious longing to be up and doing for the Lord. The doctrine of celibacy, too, was not unattractive. The Eldress who spoke with her felt it her duty to point out to the

bride that carnal love is ever sinful and displeasing to God; and Sarah, far from being angry, half agreed with her. Her own experience of married life was very short, and she had not as yet mastered an instinctive shrinking from the manifestations of sexual love. It seemed to her quite possible that the Shakers were choosing the better path. She did not indeed follow with her teacher when she went on to say that universal celibacy was soon to prevail, and that thus the end of the world would be brought about; but she did feel an uneasiness, and a sort of envy of their perfect tranquillity. To be done with all this human emotion, to have only God to think of, must be so restful, so pure! If she and Thomas, now, had been Shakers, what a holy, comfortable friendship they might have enjoyed. And yet, of course, it would never have suited Thomas.

Indeed, even the little glimpse, the brief explanations of the Elder who was entertaining him in the other parlour did not suit him. The whole thing seemed rather meaningless and distasteful, with nothing but its oddity to recommend it. His thoughts that night, as he lay on his narrow bed in the male visitors' room, were not much occupied with the Shakers or their beliefs. His own bright human life was too engrossing.

The Shakers and their guests rose early, and the frugal breakfast was eaten in silence. Then, after a few words of thanks, the guests departed, driving off again together in the little two-wheeled carriage in which they were touring the country. Before they were out of sight Thomas had taken his wife's hand:

"Oh, Sally!"

"Oh, Thomas!"

"How I want to talk it over!"

"What a lot I have to tell!"

The delight of being together again was extreme, and their impressions of all they had seen and heard among the Shakers had to wait awhile until the pleasure of being reunited had been thoroughly enjoyed.

After a time, however, they fell upon the subject of their visit, and compared notes as to all they had heard.

"Queer old people," Thomas said, "as dry as dust."

"There's something lovely about them, all the same," Sarah protested. "And I don't know, Thomas, but what they may be right in some ways."

"Rubbish, Sally; you don't mean that?"

"How can we be sure that what the Lord revealed to Mother Ann wasn't meant for us all?" asked Sarah, looking anxiously into the young man's face.

"Do you mean the doctrine that no one should marry, Sal?" he answered, smiling at her, "because I don't think it would suit you and me."

Sarah smiled back at him in a serious sort of fashion.

"I didn't mean that part, Thomas," she said untruthfully. "But you know they say that God is Mother as well as Father."

Thomas shook his head.

“There’s nothing about that in the Bible,” he said.

“Well, anyway, they are very good people,” Sarah replied, dismissing the point of doctrine for later consideration, “and I’ve never in my life set foot in so clean a place.”

Thomas agreed to this, but it did not seem to interest him. He attached little importance to the episode, now that it was over, and so, as they drove on through the hilly, wooded country, their talk fell back again to themselves and their present happiness. This much, however, Thomas did admit, that it had been an unusual glimpse. All their friends would like to hear of it when they got back home; no one they knew had seen Shakers at first hand before, and it would be an interesting thing to tell.

Sarah, for her part, dismissed it all less easily from her mind. She was conscious not only of the impression which the new notions had made upon her, but also of the fact that they had made none on Thomas at all. It was the first separate judgment, the first emancipation of her thought from his, and it went right down to the fundamental relationship between them, of which, already, she had found it impossible to speak to him. Faintly, amid her happiness and her pleasure, this knowledge troubled her. But she hid it carefully away out of sight, and soon forgot that it was there.

Like other young couples, Sarah and Thomas were full of plans and hopes, and delighted with their prospects in life. They finished their driving tour, therefore, and went back to the growing and prosperous city of Delaville which was their home, eager to prove that life was a perfect affair. If no one else knew it, they knew that it was possible to combine happiness on earth with that full submission to the will of God which would ensure happiness hereafter. They had no doubt of success.

The young people had lived all their lives among definitely religious people. Christianity affected the outward setting of their lives; it was not only the commonest subject of their conversation, but also the chief occupation of their thoughts. The business of discovering religious truth was of the first importance, and their energies were devoted to the effort to save their own souls and those of their immediate acquaintances. Religion was the language of their social intercourse, and about it clustered almost all the happenings of their lives. Love, friendship, enmity, sympathy, gossip, and all other human experiences readily found expression in its phraseology, and it was as natural for them to pray, as it was for them to eat, together.

There were some whose inner life withered away under the constant repetitions which this excessive preoccupation involved, and some whose grasp of the great beliefs grew weak, and whose hold upon Christianity became a matter of routine and habit. But Sarah Sonning was not of these; her

life deepened her longing for religious sincerity, and as she grew, and especially after her marriage, she turned the whole force of her will to the task of subduing herself to God.

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the state of earnest ignorance of the Sonnings and their friends. The early years of the nineteenth century were a time of scientific progress and intellectual development in Europe, but, except in Boston and New York, nothing of the kind could be detected in the United States. The prosperous little communities of Pennsylvania and New Jersey were small and narrow in their interests, conventional and hide-bound in their manners, and incredibly isolated from the rest of the world. Educated, in a sense, the people were, and yet learning, philosophy, mathematics, science, and all forms of abstract reasoning were ignored among them. The intelligence, the vigour and the brains of the people went into practical affairs, and were turned to the great adventures which arose in subduing their gigantic new land. Thousands of miles of unpeopled wilderness awaited them, and the adventures of scholarship paled before this mighty call. The best men were pioneering, the best thinkers planning out the physical and political features of the new world.

In religious matters it was just the same. While in England the Evangelicals were triumphant, and later when the Tractarian movement and the ingenious sophistries of early Victorian Anglicanism were coming to birth, the people in the eastern states of America were growing corn and apples, ignoring it all. The march of thought and of knowledge touched them not; a Puritan tradition, a social equality and a new country were by themselves enough.

Civilization, as it was known in England at that date, was curiously unlike its crude parallel across the ocean. The forms and ceremonies of antiquity had been shaken off so fully that beauty was lacking too. Music was elementary in the extreme, literature at an incredibly low ebb, and pictorial art had no existence at all. Religion was deprived of these aids, and cut off from tradition, from scholarship and from contemporary thought; and yet, in spite of its bareness, it held the very centre of the stage, and was the deepest, and often indeed the only abstraction within reach of thoughtful people. But what a queer religion it was! Anything might be true, if the Bible could be found to suggest it; and what could the Bible not be twisted to say? Moreover, anyone's rendering of a disputed passage might be valid, for all men were free and equal. There was nothing which might not come to pass on the favoured soil of America.

Revivals flourished in this hopeful field, rising and dying away in a kind of periodic cycle. New prophets and new teachers arose; it was a thrilling time.

In the township of Delaville, in which Sarah and her sister Anna grew up, none of the more startling religious manifestations were directly known.

Religious adventures, which were unceasing, centred round points of quite orthodox difficulty, such as the problem of Baptism, the nice question of whether a sermon might be read, instead of spoken, and the anxious query whether or not Salvation depended on public profession of faith. In these and similar struggles the devout passed their days. Not only were these questions in themselves so hard, but on their issue such great stakes hung! Eternal torment was no abstraction to these simple people; it was the ever present menace of their lives, and they knew for a fact that they would earn or escape Hell solely by the rightness of their personal belief.

Upon the minds of conscientious young people these problems weighed heavily. Sarah and her sister, growing up through the early years of the century, were more than a little troubled by predestination, sanctification and the atonement. They spoke hopefully in terms of grace; they agonized over their shortcomings; they compressed into their thin religious mould all the longings and fervours of their youth.

Of the two sisters Sarah was always the more practical and energetic, and if a new thing came their way it was she who rushed out to meet it. Even tempered and unselfconscious, she was perfectly happy and contented in her monstrously decorous life, and believed with her whole heart anything which she had once accepted. Anna was different; she had her black days, her unsatisfied longings, her vague discontents. As she grew older, too, she developed a slightly caustic turn of mind, and even, to the horror of her sister, she indulged for a brief moment in a mild form of religious doubt. The two sisters were intimately devoted to one another. Not a thought, not an aspiration, not a weakness did they try to conceal, and so this period of Anna's unsettlement was very grievous to her sister. It soon passed off, however, and in the long talks in which they nightly indulged Sarah brought Anna back to the paths of righteousness. How could she not do so, with God and all the world upon her side?

Within the social circle of their family there was a good deal of solid entertaining, and as the girls grew up the young sons and daughters of their parents' friends made one or two daring innovations. There were all-day picnics in the woods, there were candy-pulls and oyster-bakes, and even a debating society. The young life refused to be quieted to the old standard, and the boys and girls required, and secured, opportunities of meeting and laughing together. Their parents shook their heads; things had not been so frivolous and worldly in their day; but the young people persisted, and the sober dissipation went its way.

In due time both Sarah and Anna were sought in marriage, one by Thomas Sonning, the charming, persuasive, open-handed son of their father's partner, the other by a silent young doctor ten years older than herself. With hesitation

and reluctance, and yet with the utmost delight, both girls received their suitors, and for a brief season the house was filled with worldliness. In vain the parents spoke of God and of Divine Guidance. In vain the minister waited upon the young people with prayer and good advice. Submissively as all four bowed their heads, the whirlwind of their love affairs swept through their souls, and life seemed all hope and joy. They could thank God, but they could not be afraid.

Sarah's suitor, Thomas, was very, very attentive. He brought many presents, and paid compliments which delighted and embarrassed her. He was ardent, too, and demonstrative, and Sarah was swept quite off her feet.

Anna's young man, James Whitebread, was not nearly so expressive, but there was an intensity about him which suited her better than the easy sympathy of Thomas Sonning. His very moderation of phrase enhanced all he said, and he had a way of listening to Anna's sallies, and suddenly laughing irresistibly at them, which she found wonderfully agreeable. There was something obviously reliable about James. He was the sort of man who was certain as he grew older to find himself the executor of wills and the guardian of orphan children. Men in trouble confided in him, and many secrets were trusted to his care. Already he was successful as a doctor, as much for his reassuring personality as for his skill.

In his early manhood James had studied in Germany. He had learnt other things in Germany besides his medicine, things he was always unwilling to speak of, but which had left some very definite mark on his mind. To the close little city of Delaville he passed for a wonderfully learned man, for he could speak foreign tongues, and he read books and followed movements of which others had never heard.

On religious matters no one knew quite what he felt. He went regularly, indeed, to the Church which Anna attended, but no one could say that he was a real member, and his reticence upon the subject of his faith was the only objection Anna's parents found to the match. They suspected him of believing too much—or too little—of getting ideas out of books, and of being somehow obscurely unsound in his opinions. But no one could deny that he was a good and honest man, and devotedly attached to Anna.

And so the two matches had been made, and the two sisters, eighteen and nineteen years old, had been married on the same day.

CHAPTER II

THE PERFECTIONIST PREACHER

ALL MEMORY OF the visit to the Shaker village had long since faded away. Sarah and Thomas had been married six years, and a multitude of other impressions had crowded upon them. Edmund, their son, had been born and was already five years old. Thomas was in the family business and Sarah was active in good works. They had not realized all their dreams, they had indeed fallen rather rapidly out of love, but they were nevertheless a contented and successful couple, neither of whom wished to change their lot.

There was one matter, however, in which they were not satisfied, and that was their religion. Both of them, from their different standpoints, had grown uneasy in the quiet humdrum of their Congregational Church, and both together they had wandered out into the bewildering mazes of religious experiment. To Thomas the chief attraction had been the excitement of a new emotion, the rapture of Conversion and Reconversion, the pleasant sense of being the centre of the stage. He was always an excellent penitent. To Sarah's more genuine soul the driving force had been her longing to understand more of the ways of God. She was forever seeking for something which she had not yet found, and hoping for a real and reliable guidance. She had followed Thomas gladly in all his new theories, never feeling so secure as to be unwilling to move on, and yet, with each experience storing up more devotion and more true piety in her heart. There was something to be learnt from every group of earnest believers, she felt. "Where ever two or three are gathered together in My name——" And though as yet she had not been able to find absolute satisfaction, she believed it to lie somewhere on earth. It was the great business of life to seek it. Once she thought she had found it; that was in the period when she had joined the Methodists, and the belief had only been strengthened by the indignation of their more conservative friends. The actual faith had faded away, but the experience had given Sarah a freedom from religious convention which was very precious to her. This stage had really been broken off because both Sarah and Thomas had found the shouting and the groaning somewhat distasteful, but it had left behind it a great fervour for Sunday Schools and Bible Classes which had lasted longer. This, in its turn, had moderated, and then had come the anxiety as to Baptism, which had culminated in the immersion of both of them in the cold little tank under the floor of the Baptist Chapel.

Anna and James, on the other hand, had made no religious experiments at all. As time went on, indeed, they seemed to settle down into coldness, and although Anna, at any rate, remained as true a believer as ever, she seemed somehow to have lost her sense of the excitement of doctrinal affairs. "It will be all right whatever we do," she once said to her sister. "God doesn't mind much what we say. He knows we're only children." It was a soothing thought, and satisfied her conscience, but it did nothing to quiet Sarah.

"I can't believe in that kind of a distant God," she said; "one who doesn't know or think enough about us to signify. You know, Anna, the Bible says He counts the hairs on our heads. And what are we in the world for, if not to find Him out?" And when Anna only smiled and shook her head, her sister grieved, and prayed for her, and suspected that it was James who was leading her astray.

While Sarah and Thomas were in the Baptist stage the great Revival of 1831 came their way. It had begun in New York with the rise of the Millerites, foretelling the date of the Second Coming; and, spreading in different forms, it swept over the Northern States. Connecticut was known as a "burnt district," in which hardly a village escaped the conflagration, and the power of the Lord was plainly manifest. The full blast of the Revival had spent its force before it came towards Pennsylvania, but curious side winds of the movement were still blowing at that time, and one of these, the Perfect or Pauline teaching, found its way into Delaville township.

The missionary who brought the gospel was a young man of the name of John Andrew Norris, an eager, lean, young man, with a look of hard thinking and obvious ability about him. He came into the city with a letter of introduction to Thomas Sonning, and as a matter of course he was invited to stay at his house. And the natural consequence of this was that before many days had passed he had entirely converted his hosts.

In a very short time the religious circles of the city were in a whirl. Preaching was held daily, and then almost hourly. John Andrew Norris was in great demand, and earnest souls from the surrounding villages poured into the town. The Sonnings' house, which sheltered the chief missionary, became crowded with guests, and the ordering and buying of food for such a concourse of people put a great strain on Sarah's household resources. Everything mundane, however, faded out before the great light of the new Revelation, and Sarah, drinking in the Perfectionist doctrine, thought nothing of being overworked. If sinless perfection was, as Norris maintained, a gift from God, and easily attainable in this life, then she, Sarah Sonning, was going to have it. Housekeeping should not stand in the way of so infinitely important an offer.

One of the remarkable things which the young preacher said was that he himself had become perfect, and that he could do no wrong. Curiously enough

this claim, which would have seemed fantastic at any other time, passed unquestioned amid the revival fervour. It was not only Norris, but any one of them who could attain that blessed state. They had but to stretch out their hands! What wonder that converts were made?

After a short time, however, it became clear that these Perfectionist doctrines, remarkable as they were, were not the whole of the new faith. There was, it seemed, a still newer and more sacred revelation, which was the very kernel of it all. This secret doctrine could only be unfolded to the initiated, it was said, and many were the speculations which went about. There were reported to be but six of the initiated in Delaville, but many were full of hope. Two young girls, Dorcas and Flavilla, who lodged at the Sonnings' house, were said to be among the six, and both Sarah and Thomas believed that their own call was at hand. They longed impatiently for its coming, and little knew in what a strange fashion it was to be made plain.

It was dark in the upper corridor of the Sonnings' house, and only a very faint gleam of light came up the stairs from the hall below. The two girls who stood barefooted outside their bedroom door were frightened of the darkness; the inner light which was guiding them was not sufficient to dispel it. Not that either of them doubted for an instant the necessity for pushing on. Had they not received word from the Lord that they must do this thing? Did not they know that it was their duty to run the risk of misunderstanding, of scandal even, in the service of their Master? But all the same it was awesome, out there in the silent house—what was that creaking?

With whispers of fear and of encouragement, and with intense excitement they shut their door behind them, and stepped softly along the corridor. Their host and hostess slept in there—past the quiet room they went, and on, round the corner, towards the room where HE lodged; HE, the teacher, the man who had been chosen, marked out for their experiment.

It was a week now that they had been in this hospitable house. How long it seemed! The two girls had had time to forget their homes, and all the traditions in which they had been brought up; or, if not to forget, at least to discard them. In the wonder of these new doctrines how should they not? For they were in the inmost circle of disciples, and to-night they would be able to put their faith to the test.

As they slipped along in the dark they did not really think of anything. It was the cold touch of the floor, the fright, the pang of excitement, and the horrid feeling that it was too late to turn back which engrossed them. Flavilla's heart was pumping so hard that she could feel its motion. Dorcas was uncomfortably dry at the throat, and yet she did not dare to swallow; they were

both dreadfully alarmed. The door was just before them; an out-stretched hand feeling along the wall had touched its handle. All was dark and silent within.

They crept into the young man's room, and then Flavilla made a light. The sudden flare showed the square room, the large bed, the young man sleeping upon it, and—oh, how terrible—his clothes, actually his trousers, crumpled and lying anyhow across a chair.

In the next instant the light went down, burning dim, as candles do when first lighted, and all the shadows bounded out again from the corners of the room, and the dark corridor outside was filled with terrors. The girls clutched each other again, and the candle slanted perilously in Flavilla's shaking hand. But the flame burned up, and the candle was righted. It would not do to turn back now, especially as with the increased light things looked better. How innocently handsome John Andrew looked in his sleep!

With solemn faces the two girls advanced to the bed and sat down upon it. They were there to prove their freedom from carnal sin and carnal thoughts, and to establish once and for all the spiritual nature of the bond which united the brothers and sisters of the Lord. It was midnight, and this was the way it was done.

Half an hour later Thomas woke, wondering what noise it could be which disturbed him. Between the room he occupied and that of his principal guest there was a communicating door, shut and locked indeed, and with a heavy wardrobe before it, but still a door, with a crack at the top. Through this crack came a faint yellow light, and also, as Thomas soon realized, a faint unmistakable sound. People were moving and talking in the preacher's room.

Thomas did not care to do things alone; he roused Sarah, and the two of them went out together into the same quiet corridor along which the girls had passed. There was no darkness for them, for Thomas carried a candle, but there was a sense of strangeness and uneasiness, even of alarm. They thought their guest must have been taken ill, and Sarah's practical mind flew to hot water, mustard plasters and the like. She had thought him looking worn and pale; poor fellow, he worked too hard.

It was not illness, however, which seemed to be the matter. The opening door displayed a wholly unexpected scene, and indeed revealed the young man in the act of kissing Flavilla upon the cheek, his arm meanwhile encircling Dorcas as she sat upon his pillow. The two girls were fully wrapped up in dressing gowns, though their feet were bare. The young man was sitting up in his bed, his nightshirt imperfectly covered over with his jacket. The faces of all three were shining with a holy joy.

Thomas and Sarah were amazed at the sight. For an appreciable time they

stared, not knowing what to do. Then Thomas, the fluent, began to speak. And Thomas was very angry. It was a scandal, he said, a monstrosity. "I can't have such goings on in my house." He would make it all known to the brethren, declare it on the housetops, publish it abroad. "A scandal, a shame and a disgrace."

The culprits were perfectly unashamed. "We are doing no wrong, and you should think none," they affirmed. "It is a trial of our chastity; we have been led thereto by the Lord." But the girls got off the bed as they spoke.

The young preacher, sitting in his bed where he was, confirmed their strange words. They had meant no harm, and had done none. If Thomas knew all he would understand. He begged them to sit down and listen to the truth.

They sat down. Sarah noticed that Flavilla hesitated before lifting the trousers off the chair nearest to her, but she did it in the end, and they all gathered round the bed. John Andrew still sat among his sheets and blankets. He had nothing on his legs, and must perforce keep them in bed. But Sarah was the only one who thought of this. There was so much to be said!

Strange as the scene was, it quickly ceased to be awkward. The three Perfectionists were so sure of their doctrine, so earnest-minded! To Sarah also there seemed to be much good reason in what they were urging. An old memory of the visit to the Shakers flashed into her mind. Sarah was half converted already.

The doctrine which John Andrew unfolded was this: that when the Lord granted sinlessness to any soul He granted at the same time the Great Reward. And this reward was the power of forming holy and purified spiritual affinities which should take the place of all wicked earthly sensuality. Everything which was according to the flesh was sinful, as the Chosen knew. Even the bonds of matrimony were accursed, but there was a holy, spiritual mating which the Lord loved. Just as of old the Apostles had worked and travelled with "sisters" who were not their wives, so now, in this newly apostolic age, the perfect men and women would find a sacred union. How blissful and satisfying to the soul it was, none but the Chosen could know; but indeed it was as a pearl above price.

When Sarah asked what was the sign of this companionship, and how it was to be known, the young man turned eagerly towards her. Familiarities, he explained, which in others would be carnal wickedness would feel innocent to the Brethren of the Lord. Indeed, the possibility of caresses without danger, of love without passion, was the mark and sign of these spiritual bridals. And it had been the search for this treasure which had led, and very properly led, the two girls to the preacher's room. They had not known which, if either of them, was his spiritual bride. But now they knew, without a doubt, that it was Flavilla. Henceforward he and she would be companions in innocence and in

labour for the Lord.

This, then, was the great secret, the special revelation of the new Pauline Church. Those to whom it was vouchsafed were henceforth workers in the Lord's vineyard. A few, as yet only a very few, had been enlightened, but the Lord was working fast. Chance, or rather the hand of the Lord, had opened it up before the eyes of Thomas and Sarah. They must now take or reject their opportunity.

These explanations unfolded slowly, and the dawn came to fade out the glimmer of their candles before all was properly said. They parted, agreed at any rate in the desire to conceal what had been going on from the servants. It was evidently a matter which needed much prayerful thought before it could be fully understood.

CHAPTER III

SARAH'S REVOLT

THE FIVE PEOPLE who knew about the midnight escapade dispersed at dawn, and four of them went back along the now dim corridor, while the fifth rose at last from his bed, and falling upon his bare knees upon the floor prayed ardently.

Flavilla and her friend went back to their own room and lay down side by side upon the bed they shared. They lay there as the light strengthened, and had no thought of sleeping, but whispered excitedly together.

Thomas and Sarah, too, returned to their bedroom, and lay down side by side. They talked too, at first, or at least Thomas did. But soon he turned sideways to sleep. His anger had been rather exhausting.

Sarah, however, was not sleepy. As she lay there waiting for the sounds of the stirring of the household she turned the new ideas over in her mind, and each moment they seemed more attractive. Some things she felt obscurely, others clearly enough, and what she wanted was to sort them out a little before they talked any more. The idea of celibate living, and of loving without sex attracted her immensely. She had never been able to get over a distaste, even a sort of disgust with everything connected with sex. It always seemed to her wrong, and rather shameful to think of men and women in terms of their bodies, and the new doctrine she had just heard made an instant appeal to the pruderies and inhibitions of her nature. Her married life with Thomas had by no means cured her of her dislikes; even at the first when she had loved him most she had shrunk from physical expression; kisses and innocent caresses would have satisfied her then, she believed; and now, when six years had passed, although she was well enough accustomed to her position, she was wearied beyond telling. How fine it would be if he and she could lead this new pure life henceforward! How she would work and pray!

Of the other side of the doctrine, with its promise of a substitute for bodily love, she thought less. It might be true that new spiritual affinities were open, that new spiritual matings were lawful. She was not interested in that. Thomas was her husband and little as she actually loved him she had not the faintest wish to seek for other affinities elsewhere; the weight of her respectable Puritan tradition held her still; and indeed she was as little interested in spiritual as in physical love-making. What she did care for, with all the passion and emotion of her being, was the approach to God. And perhaps this new way was a real short cut. It was an interesting, exciting thought.

At her side Thomas slept—and outside now the maids were beginning to sweep and clean, and she could hear the raking out of the kitchen fire below.

“Lord, show me Thy truths,” she murmured, and got out of bed to go and see to the proper waking and dressing of her son Edmund.

When Sarah returned to her own room Thomas was awake, and Thomas had a great deal to say to his wife. All this talk of carnal love being sinful in itself was nonsense, he maintained. The mere suggestion annoyed him deeply, and he grew hot and angry in combating Sarah’s silence. That the young girls had been doing nothing particularly wicked in the young preacher’s room he now reluctantly admitted; but that what they believed was true he absolutely denied. As he stamped to and fro in his dressing he paused frequently to emphasise his points, and only the enforced silence of shaving brought the tirade to a stop. However, he was going to take no public action about it, that much at least was an advantage, Sarah felt, though whether she was prepared to go all the way with the new doctrines she could not yet tell. All she knew was that suddenly Thomas’s opinion struck her as valueless. What he said had no weight, no real bearing on the case. She felt that he was arguing from an interested standpoint, that he had closed up his mind and arrayed his will against the new idea even before he had examined it. The queer tones of his voice showed it, the savage look on his face. There was an unrecognized something behind his arguments which moved him beyond reason, and vitiated his judgment. She knew all too well what it was.

There was constraint upon the conversation at breakfast, but the meal was barely over before Sarah found herself involved in a series of private conversations, first with the two young girls and then with Mr. Norris, and then with all three together. The more she saw of them and the more she heard the better she liked the doctrine, and though of course her husband’s attitude caused her uneasiness, she could not let that weigh against what might be a genuine revelation from the Lord. There was something increasingly attractive in the idea of purity and chastity of life.

Brought up, as Sarah had been, in severe Puritan modesty, shut off from all the literature of passion, and taught from her youth to distrust what was natural and pagan, the marriage relation had inevitably been a grave stumbling block to her. Her mind, therefore, was as prejudiced as her husband’s, her will as definitely predisposed to believe as his to reject the new doctrine. The opposition of their temperaments, which had been subconsciously known to them both, was now suddenly brought to light. Things never actually said between them were now on the tips of their tongues, and they knew that behind each spoken word lay a long series of troubled emotions. A chasm was opening in their apparently placid lives, and they were suddenly brought face to face with things they had most successfully hidden.

Commotion followed in the Sonning household, but not there alone. Thomas could not keep to his resolution of saying nothing of the doings he had brought to light. Enraged by the new development, and above all by the hold which he saw it was gaining upon his wife, he turned Norris and the others out of his house. The thing began to be talked of freely, and the Revival was eclipsed altogether by this new interest. Tongue-tied as the whole community was by its inability to use plain language, the people nevertheless managed to convey their meaning to each other. The men talked fairly freely together, and laughed; the women spoke in whispers, with omissions and paraphrases which yet made everything clear, and the whole place rocked with the debate. For a time there was a great tension in many families. Husbands were puzzled to know how to treat the new scruples of their wives; young men were at once dazzled and alarmed by the thought of spiritual affinities, and young girls, intoxicated by their imagination of sanctity, behaved in a way which scandalized their neighbours. "Bundling," as the thing came to be called, had a brief and exciting vogue. Several cases of midnight visits, such as the one to Mr. Norris, came to light, and it was not always clear that they were innocent visits, and parents began to be very strict and stern. The ringleaders among the girls were sent away to visit distant relatives; the Perfectionist preachers were asked to leave the town, and under protest they went. And when they were gone the thing died down, and Delaville settled back into respectable orthodoxy once more.

In the Sonning household, however, things were not so simple nor so soon ended. There was no one to impose parental authority upon husband and wife, no one, that is, but the Lord. And He seemed to speak with conflicting voices.

Night after night, in the square, solid safety of their bedroom, Sarah and Thomas argued the point, and the more they argued the more surely did they drift away from the possibility of understanding one another. Too much feeling choked their thoughts, too many primitive and instinctive emotions clutched them, and their words could not correspond to their meanings. Above all, since each was reinforced by the Lord, neither could so much as try to sympathise with the other. One must be right and one wrong, for that was the nature of morality. And both were wretched.

About a fortnight after their visitors had gone the crisis came, and Sarah left her husband's house. She could not live with him in physical intimacy now that she believed all such intercourse to be of Satan; and Thomas refused, and refused with bitterness, to be her spiritual husband. And so she felt she must leave him, and packing a few needful things in a small bag, and taking Edmund by the hand, she walked across the city to her sister's house. And Anna, without asking for any explanations, took her in.

The same evening Thomas came to fetch them away. They were all at

supper when he came, and although they had as yet had no talk upon the matter, James at once volunteered to go downstairs and see him on Sarah's behalf. He stayed about a quarter of an hour, and returned saying that Thomas was gone home. It was the only comment he volunteered. This silence, after all the fret and fury of her battle with Thomas, was very grateful to Sarah, and yet in a way it was disappointing. She felt lonely in her decision. That night, however, Sarah prayed long and earnestly by the side of the bed in the spare room, and was a little comforted.

The next day, of course, the inevitable explanation with Anna took place, and the two sisters talked and wept together. It was evident from the first that Anna both disagreed and yet sympathised with her sister. She thought her belief quite false, but her action quite right, and by the curious logic of affection she was ready to support while she condemned her. Although she did not openly say so, it was clear that Anna disliked Thomas heartily, and she persisted in taking a human rather than a theological view of the quarrel. This attitude troubled Sarah not a little. Was a base, human motive really at the bottom of her action after all? Was it just a failure in wifely duty, a sin, in short, upon her own soul? Hastily as Sarah repudiated the idea, she could not forget it. Away from the exasperation of Thomas's certainty of being right, Sarah was able to recognize that she herself was possibly wrong, and as the day went slowly by, lengthened out by the absence of her household duties, Sarah wondered more and more anxiously what her future would be. The dim plan she had had of becoming a preacher seemed impracticable now. The Lord Himself was not making things absolutely clear. She awaited James's homecoming with impatience, hoping he would find for her the solution of all her troubles.

They sat at it long that night, and at first it was Sarah who talked, explaining the doctrines, and her reasons for accepting them; explaining, too, Thomas's objection, and her reasons for rejecting his judgment. She brought out her Bible and read verse after verse to justify her position, and they did not attempt to contradict her. She had no feeling of being hurried, even misunderstood, and yet somehow the very freedom of her exposition took away some of her enthusiasm. It had been much easier to defend her belief against the rage and fury of Thomas than it was against this quiet attention, and as she went on her explanations grew a little apologetic, a little hesitating. She hoped still that the Lord was on her side, but she was not really quite sure that He was. When she came to the end she asked James, quite humbly, what he thought of it all, and whether he would advise her as to her future course.

James was reluctant to speak. He knew well enough what had to be said, but he was anxious to put it so as to make it acceptable to Sarah. He felt so sorry for her—for he, like his wife, disliked Thomas. It would be a hard fate to

go back to such a man, he well knew. And yet all this nonsense could only lead to a worse disaster.

“I am a medical man, Sarah, and you must pardon me if I speak as such,” he said at last. “To me the facts of human life cannot be repulsive, for they are all the works of God.” He paused on this and looked across at her kindly. “To me there is nothing virtuous in the single life,” he went on, “indeed I know it to be the source of much trouble of mind. Sex, you know, lies very deep in mankind, and half the madness, the frenzy, the trouble of the world springs from it. To starve it is as disastrous in its way as to indulge it. Your doctrine, Sarah, flies in the face of nature, and thereby, I believe, of God.”

The argument did not touch her, he could see. She was not angry, but she was not moved. He was merely talking according to this world. But he had not finished yet.

“If you examine the religions of the world,” he began, and by that he caught her full attention, “if you look at primitive races, at pagans and at the whole history of Christianity itself, you will see traces of this impulse to which you have yielded. Sex and religion being both such tremendous forces have been mingled, again and again; but always it has ended in ruin. Look at the worship of Isis, of Venus, of Dionysus——” but Sarah had heard of none of these gods. He saw that she was shocked. “You may say that Pagan rites have nothing to do with true doctrine,” he began again, trying to recover the lost ground, “but surely you will agree that the monks and nuns, the celibate priesthood and all the Orders of the Roman Church are founded on a theory such as yours?”

This, he could see, was a new and terrible idea to Sarah. She *had* heard of the Church of Rome; she thought it was the gateway of Hell.

“All through the ages, Sarah,” James went on, “men and women have tried to find holiness by denying the flesh. But none have found it by that road. It is a snare and a delusion.” He was sure of his ground, and at some length he worked it out, putting before her a mass of facts and instances of which she had no conception at all. The history of thought, of ritual, or dogma was all a sealed book, and Sarah was dumbfounded by the turn the conversation had taken. The range of thoughts James had revealed was altogether outside her experience, and for the moment her chief impression was terror. She had not known her brother to be so fully an infidel, and she was appalled.

“I thought you were a Christian, James,” was what she said.

“James is a Christian,” Anna interrupted. “He is only telling us facts, nothing more. There is no infidelity in knowing what has happened in the world, so long as you don’t believe in it. It may help us to avoid errors ourselves; it helps him.” Anna had thought this painfully out for herself, long ago when she had first become aware of her husband’s studies, and she

brought it out now with a fury of partisanship which made James smile.

“Yes, Sarah, I trust I am a Christian,” he said, “but do not let us discuss my beliefs. What I want you to see is that the intermixture of sex and religion, however it is turned about, whether as a positive orgy, or as a negative self-denial, is really a confusion of issues. Sex heightens emotions of every kind, even religious emotion. Just as your husband’s anger is greater than it need be because it is a sex question which is at issue between you, so the ecstasies of devotion of that young preacher appear greater than they really are for the same reason. It is not God who moves him to eloquence, Sarah, it is his own unsatisfied desires. I speak as a doctor, plainly.”

There was a silence upon this, for the sequence of James’s argument was clear. There might indeed be something in what he said. She must think it over. But there was a question to be answered first.

“Do you not believe in the revelation of the Bible, James?” she said.

At that he was sadly tempted. He was a truthful man, and the answer which came to his lips was the true one. But if he said it he well knew that his influence would be gone. And besides, even to Anna he had never made that plain. He therefore made no answer, but reaching out his hand for the Book he opened it and searched awhile through its pages.

“And the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone,’ he read; ‘I will make him an helpmeet for him.’”

“Yes,” said Sarah eagerly, “a helpmeet, not a wife!”

But James only turned the pages and read again. “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and wife, and were not ashamed.”

Sarah sighed profoundly and shook her head. It was so hard to know the truth.

There was a little pause of silence. Then Anna spoke.

“James has said his say,” she began, “but I think he has forgotten, and surely you, too, Sarah, have forgotten the greatest argument of all. To my mind there is one thing which makes your new theory quite impossible, and that is—*children*. If you want to leave your own husband because you can’t bear him, well, that’s one thing. But to pretend that you are doing so because God means there to be no more children, and that it is wicked to bring them into the world, I cannot and will not countenance.”

“Oh, Anna, I don’t——” began Sarah, and then stopped short, realizing that she did. She looked from one to the other, and her eyes filled with tears. “What am I to do?” she said piteously.

It was late, and James thought they had said enough.

“You must think it over, Sarah, and seek guidance within yourself,” he said

gravely.

“You must pray, sister, and ask the Lord,” said Anna, putting her hand upon her knee.

Sarah bowed her head. “I will,” she murmured, and began to cry outright.

James left at that and Anna stayed with her sister for awhile, kissing her and comforting her as best she could. She went with her to the spare room and stayed while she undressed.

Edmund was sleeping quietly in the corner, but while they were there he half woke and murmured something unintelligible in his sleepy child’s voice and turned upon his side. His mother, instead of going across to him, fell upon her knees by her own bed and buried her face against her arms. Anna took the candle with her and went out. There was nothing more to be done for Sarah that night.

Left alone in the darkness, Sarah wept for the illusion which she knew to be shattered. It was not the arguments of James, powerful though they were, which had opened her eyes, but those few plain words of Anna’s. She could not resist the thought of children; her own baby there in the corner who had murmured and moved only now—how could she have thought that God was against such as he? The whole fabric which had sustained her rebellion had crumbled away, and she was left face to face with the knowledge of her real situation. What was it that Anna had said? “If you want to leave your own husband because you can’t bear him, that’s one thing.” Surely that was not her case?

Sarah was not as a rule given to self-pity, but the full force of that demon fell upon her that night. In vain she told herself that now she saw her duty she would be able to return to it; something very seductive within her continued to repeat that it was hard, that she did not deserve to suffer, that she was meant for higher things than to be the wife of an uncongenial man. How could she progress in holiness if she was to be for ever fretted by the exactions of Thomas? Instead of praying, as she had meant to pray, Sarah let herself be swept off into wholesale criticism of the man she had lived quietly with for so long, and into fanciful scenes in which she would demonstrate his faults and her own virtues. She fell asleep in the enjoyment of this reverie, and woke some time later cold, cramped and ashamed. Everything was black around her, and Edmund’s light breathing was only just audible. She remembered with distaste the thoughts with which she had fallen asleep, but as she was climbing into bed the memory of God came into her mind, and the glow of joy which it carried banished remorse and every other consideration.

“Lord! Lord!” she cried in her heart; “save me, help me, comfort me!”

The bed was soft and pleasant, the covers grew warm around her, and Sarah recognized that her struggle was over. The Lord had come back again to

her soul. He had forgiven her, and He would make her life easy and clear. What did it matter if she found the outside world troublesome and wearying?

The Lord was the lover of her soul, and He would keep her safe. And with that comfortable knowledge came a new and secret thought, which brought her a thrill of such exquisite and human joy as she had never experienced before. Children! He would send her children to be her comfort. Not Edmund only, that dear child whom she had, but others, little soft creatures whom she would hold at her breast. On this rapturous thought she slept again. Her decision was taken.

The next day she returned to her husband.

CHAPTER IV

THE SAINTLY NEIGHBOURS

“WELL, SALLY, YOU will be glad to know that your house is to be occupied at last.”

“Have you let it? Oh, Thomas, I am glad. But I hope you haven’t been too soft-hearted about the rent?”

The speaker looked up over her coffee cups and breakfast things, and smiled a little anxiously at her husband. Thirteen years had gone by since the day when Sarah had returned to her duty, and in those years she had managed to build up her inner life independently of her husband. The Lord had helped her through her trouble in generous measure. He was at once the comfort and the romance of her life, and it was to Him rather than to any human love that she turned for companionship and intimate understanding. For the rest, motherhood had come to be almost infinitely important to her outward life. The three little girls who had been born to her after her return to Thomas had been an unmixed joy. In her love for them, and for young Edmund, Sarah had grown tolerant of their father, and her days were serene.

This matter of the house next door was important chiefly for the children’s sake. So many hopes and plans had been based upon the rent of it, and now perhaps they would all crash to the ground. Something in Thomas’s tone made his wife uneasy, and as he did not at once answer she repeated her question again.

“What rent did you agree on, Thomas? We are all interested to know.”

A slightly uneasy expression came over his face, and as she saw it Sarah’s heart sank. She knew that look so well! He had been generous again, and didn’t exactly know how to say so. And, as usual, the brunt of his generosity was going to fall on her, for the house next door was her property after all, now that her father was dead, so that it was not really his to be generous with. It was wonderful what a trial a good man could be to his family!

While Thomas delivered the preliminary discourse on Christian charity and on the motives which ought to animate those who possess this world’s goods, which was intended, she supposed, to lead up to the announcement that he had lent the house for nothing to some broken-down missionary, Sarah had time to suffer a familiar welling up of indignation against her husband’s inconsiderate ways. She had also time to endure the sharper pang of disappointment on her children’s behalf, and to catch a glance of sympathy from Edmund, which she

tried both to accept and to reprove. After that she was able to send a stray thought in the direction of economies by which, after all, some of the children's hopes might be realized, before her husband reached the real point of his explanation. For Thomas was a very eloquent man.

When Sarah's attention settled down to what her husband was saying it was to discover that he had lent her house without charge, and apparently for an indefinite period, to a "wonderful saint" and the two sisters with whom he lived, people who were exceedingly active in the Lord's work, and who had suffered much persecution because of their views. She would be, she was assured, edified and greatly advanced in her inner life by contact with them. In fact, it was in the nature of a Christian privilege to assist such people.

As the full import of all this came home to the children they turned disappointed eyes to their mother, and as soon as Thomas paused in his explanations, she hustled them off with reassuring words and glances. It would be easier to speak pleasantly to their father if they were not in sight.

"Trot off to school now, children; quick, or you'll be late. Leave it all to me; we'll manage somehow."

They behaved very well. Thomas, indeed, felt, as he so often did, a faintly uneasy suspicion that he was outside the real circle of his own home, and that secrets went on which he did not share; but it was only a passing feeling, for in a surprisingly short time there was Sarah back again, ready to listen to his talk. And Edmund, too, was attentive; and there was a great deal more to be said.

Thomas did not get quite such a clear run this time, however, for Sarah had many questions to ask. How and where had he met these people, and what were the opinions for which they had suffered? Had he taken it all entirely on trust, or were they known and introduced by any friends? Of the money aspect of the affair she said nothing; he had settled that and what was the use of complaining?

Thomas was not able to give fully satisfactory answers to his wife's questions about their new neighbours, not fully satisfactory to her, that is. For himself they were quite enough. He had met the man first only the day before, at a lunch-hour prayer-meeting down town. Mr. Rufus Hollins had been preaching (a wonderful discourse) and afterwards they had fallen into conversation. There was no reason to doubt anything he had said (why was Sarah always so suspicious?) He had been practically driven away from a church he had held in Corinth, New Jersey, because of his open-minded attitude towards the Second Coming. The two Miss Thrushes, who were with him, had left when he did. (It was a surprise to Sarah to learn that the two sisters with whom he lived were not his own sisters; but, after all, Thomas had not said they were.) They had a little money, the two Miss Thrushes, but Mr. Hollins had none at all, and the Lord had led him to Delaville by means of a

casual invitation to address one noon hour meeting. He had trusted that this would lead to some further call, and that the Lord would open out the way. And thus, as Thomas said, it was clearly providential that the house next door should be put at their disposal, since it was standing empty, and the Lord had thrown them all together so unmistakably.

Sarah Sonning accepted her husband's explanation, resolving inwardly to lay the matter before the Lord on her own account at the earliest opportunity, and abide by what He said. It was the only way to feel satisfied upon the matter.

It needed but a single visit to the strangers to secure Sarah's full and even enthusiastic approval of their coming. It must have been the Lord who led them, she decided; and indeed, if one looked deep enough one could see the hand of the Lord in every happening of life. She had been unworthy and unfaithful not to have trusted Him at once!

Before the first call Sarah had prepared her mind to bear the thanks and gratitude she did not deserve, but it had turned out quite differently from her expectations. Miss Silence and Miss Patience Thrush were at first sight rather formidable ladies. About forty years old, trim and neat, they did not seem to promise any great expansiveness. They were seated sewing in the front parlour when their landlady arrived, but as soon as they knew who she was they asked her to join them in prayer, and then and there plumped down upon their knees. Sarah, though a little surprised at this proceeding at a first encounter, was always willing for such occasions, and the ice was thus immediately broken. Miss Silence took the word, and gave emphatic and obviously genuine thanks on behalf of their visitor for holy man, Rufus Hollins. She rendered thanks, too, on behalf of herself and her sister, that they were allowed to administer to his bodily comfort day by day, and wound up with a petition that they might all three be enabled to take advantage of the great mercies which were being vouchsafed to them.

Sarah was a good deal surprised by the tone of this petition, and, with the downrightness which was her natural method of approach to strangers, she asked them, when they had all risen from their knees, what it was that led them to believe Mr. Hollins to be so important and holy a man.

The two sisters needed no other encouragement. They plunged at once into the tale of his virtues, and Sarah was delighted to believe it all. They told her of his saintly life, of his utter devotion and consecration; of the divine guidance with which he was favoured, and, what was most wonderful of all, of the direct intercourse which they knew him to have with the Powers above.

It was entrancing, and Sarah, by her eager interest, soon drew from them what they knew of the history of this holy man.

Miss Silence was the spokeswoman, for hers was clearly the leading spirit.

They had met Rufus first, she said, at a Revival meeting, even as Thomas Sonning himself had met him. Everything which happened to Brother Rufus was Providential. It had been five years ago, at a time when they had been labouring under a heavy conviction of sin, and his message had brought them healing. A little group of followers had gathered round him; for a time all had gone well. But the Lord had allowed troubles to arise, and there had been disagreements, misunderstandings. However, Brother Rufus was undismayed, and they had thrown in their lot with him, believing him to be a Prophet of God. They did not know, they would never ask, where he came from. It was enough that he was.

There was much common ground on which to build an intimacy, and day after day Sarah went into the house next door to enjoy the conversation of her new friends. As their intimacy increased they said yet more about the holiness of their leader, and gradually they revealed to Sarah's earnest questioning the fact that Mr. Hollins was in possession of a secret, too sacred to be casually revealed, too difficult, indeed, to be fully understood by many, but most wonderfully vivifying to the spiritual life. Once she got wind of the existence of this hidden doctrine there was no holding Sarah back. She begged hard to be admitted to their confidence, and used every effort in her power to establish her position as one of the initiated.

Although her intimacy with the ladies rapidly increased, she found herself as far off as ever from the leader and fount of it all. Indeed, as time went on, she perceived that he was actually avoiding her. It was curious, considering how their lives were linked together, how little Mr. Hollins and the Thrush sisters seemed to see of each other. Those homely, comfortable gatherings where they all met and prayed and discussed together, which would have seemed so natural, never actually took place, and Sarah, much as she wished to admire the man, had to confess that she was never quite at ease in his presence.

The reluctance which Mr. Hollins showed for all forms of social intercourse, even the most prayerful, troubled both Sarah and Thomas. It seemed strange, even unkind, that a man who had in his heart any of the Lord's secrets should keep them to himself; and Sarah finally broke out with this opinion to the elder Miss Thrush.

Instead of being annoyed by this criticism of their leader, as Sarah had feared, Silence seemed greatly pleased that the subject should be broached. She readily admitted that it must seem peculiar to one who did not know the circumstances, and fully agreed that their whole way of life must appear mysterious in the extreme.

"If you knew, Sarah, as I know, the terrible things our friend has had to go through; if you knew the powerful reasons which cause him to hold back from all confidences, and from public occasions, you would not wonder at his

present course.”

Hints such as these naturally led to more questionings, and, though neither of the sisters could speak openly, Sarah presently received a strong impression that they had all three suffered from a serious persecution, and that they were mistrustful even of their most intimate friends. Pointed as were her questions, Sarah was not able to get any very concrete information as to the origin and cause of the persecution. Scandals of some sort had arisen, due, she supposed, to the unorthodox beliefs Mr. Hollins had been preaching; but there had been something else, though what it was she could not fathom, which had been “gravely misunderstood” in the place from which they had come. It had taught them a lesson, and henceforward they would proceed very carefully, expounding and explaining slowly and always in secret. The thing was too difficult, too intimate for wholesale conversions. If ever Sarah came to know it fully, they hinted, she would understand.

Unsuccessful as Sarah was in getting into touch with Rufus Hollins, she was rejoiced to see that Thomas was more fortunate. The course of their religious lives had run smoothly during the last thirteen years. After the great commotion of the Perfectionist Revival, no other novelty had come to Delaville, and the storms and battles of conflicting creeds had seemed more or less remote. Neither Thomas nor Sarah had lost interest in religious exploration, but they had, as it were, paused in their own researches. They were thus all the more ready to be interested in the household next door, and when it grew clear that Thomas was to be admitted freely to the presence, it was felt to be a privilege indeed.

The two men presently came to be together whenever Thomas’s business set him free, and indeed also at times when he could ill be spared. The business began to suffer in consequence, but neither husband nor wife gave this a thought. Were not the concerns of the Lord the only true business there could be?

The talks of the two men were private, and it was in vain that Sarah tried to share them. Her husband told her she must be content to wait; the moment for her initiation was not yet. One slight concession she did secure, by dint of great perseverance, and that was the establishment of a small Bible Class on Monday evenings, to which she had permission to invite Anna and James, and a few of their intimate friends. It seemed a small enough thing, yet it was evident that Brother Rufus disliked it, and every week Sarah was afraid that he would not come. He always did, however, in the end, and his small congregation deeply appreciated his kindness.

Rufus Hollins was certainly a striking personality. Tall and rather bowed in figure, with a high forehead and hair as black as an Indian’s, it was his pale eyes which were the most noticeable thing in his face. When he stood with his

Bible before him, expounding in his low voice the things most important on earth, it was difficult to resist the impression that he was a prophet indeed. He did not say much, but every word appeared the result of deep thought, and the emphasis of his tone, together with the unmistakable reserve of the two ladies who knew most about him, did not fail to impress the little circle in which he moved.

Unlike Thomas, his discourse was interspersed with many silences. He seemed to be in no haste, to be always reserving something, and it was evidently a great privilege to be allowed to share his thought.

As time went on, Sarah became so much enamoured of her new friends and their mysterious hold on the unseen, that she set out to proselytize on their behalf. Little though Mr. Hollins and his companions wanted it, she spread their fame among all their circle, and attendance at the Monday evenings increased. The existence of this holy man became fairly well known in the town, but as the circle of his admirers increased, so did his seclusion. Only on the Monday evenings was he to be seen at all.

James and Anna, although invited, were not among those who took the advantage of the privilege of attending; but one day, two months after the series began, they both arrived at the consecrated hour. Sarah and Thomas were delighted to see them, and if Rufus was uneasy at the two strange faces, he gave no sign. The discourse was as moving as ever, the prayer as intense. It was impossible for anyone, even James, to remain unmoved.

Apparently Sarah was right in thinking this, for James's face was very grave, and as he bade her good night he held her hand for a long time in his.

"May I come and talk this over with you, Sarah?" he asked. "Could you see me to-morrow evening?" She was happy in the hope of another convert.

When he came, the next night, she led him into Thomas's study, and the two of them sat down beside the fire.

"Sarah," he began, when they were settled, "will you tell me all you know about your neighbours, and what doctrine it is they preach?"

She needed no second invitation, and gave at once a full and glowing account of her new friends and of their evident guiding from on high.

James listened silently, his eyes on the floor, and when she came to a stop he looked up at her with a grave and serious face.

"Sarah," he said, "I feel it is my duty to give you a warning."

"What do you mean, James; what warning?"

He pondered something before answering, and then he said:

"I know that you and Thomas do not consider me a Christian, Sarah, but I feel impelled to tell you something which I have told to no one in the world but Anna before."

Sarah stared at her brother-in-law, and suddenly there came over her the

memory of that conversation they had had so long ago. Was he going to talk to her again of all those heathen things?

“Before you say anything, James,” she said, “and before I get angry with you, as I daresay I shall if you speak against my friends, I want to thank you for your kind intention towards me.”

James smiled. He often found Sarah refreshing, and had much admiration for her good sense.

“Thank you, Sarah; I know you mean that,” he answered, “and I want you to believe that I wouldn’t speak against Mr. Hollins, or anyone you trusted, unless I felt a real concern on the subject.”

Sarah nodded a little brusquely. “Yes, yes, get on with it,” she seemed to say.

“I want to warn you against fanatics,” James began, “fanatics such as it is clear to me these people are. I have seen and heard this Rufus, as you know. You say he is led by the Lord, but believe me, he is very differently guided. When mystic signs and inner voices are part of a man’s creed, he is either insane, Sarah, or worse.”

“Do you really not believe in God, James?” was what Sarah answered.

“I do not say that, sister. You misunderstand me. What I do say, what indeed I know, both as a physician and as—as a sufferer, is that all secret doctrines and inward revelations are more dangerous than Rabies or Cholera.”

Sarah was utterly at a loss.

“How do you mean, *dangerous*?” she asked. “Isn’t it possible they may really be the teaching of the Lord?”

“No, Sarah, I don’t think it is possible; and I will tell you what makes me say it. When I was a young man, as you know, I went to Germany, and while I was there I fell in with a set of people who had, as your friends have, a special secret revelation from on High. They were more numerous, they formed a large body, and the wonder of it spread for miles around. They performed miracles, particularly healing the sick, and it was this which first drew me to them. Their leader was a man of apparently saintly life. He had wonderful powers, and was more eloquent than anyone I have ever encountered. He spoke with the tongue of angels, if ever a man did. Well, Sarah, I believed in what they taught. I gave up my studies, I followed them. And then I began to see how it was all done; I saw men and women falling into hysteria, and I was ensnared myself. And by degrees the raptures and the ecstasies in which I shared began to change. I saw them turn into excesses, plain sexual excesses of the grossest kind, still called by the most sacred names, still claiming to be the direct orders of God. And before I could free myself from it all I was involved in the trouble and the scandal of the crash.” He paused, much moved by the miserable, bitter memories he had evoked. Then, raising his head and looking

straight at Sarah, he completed his thought.

“It was a sham, Sarah, as every such thing must be. God doesn’t work in secret by such narrow, furtive means. His prophets do not need this mixture of quackery and charlatanism and mania. God is nature, sunlight, health—oh sister, believe what I say! If you touch this evil thing, above all if you let Edmund or any young person touch it, you will regret it all your life.”

James was distressed, unlike himself. The telling of that old story, even in such bare outline, was intensely painful to him, and his effort and emotion were plain to Sarah’s eyes. And yet, of course, she was wholly unconvinced. That one man, and he a German, had been a failure, or even a scandal, proved nothing. James meant well, but he was embittered. Poor James!

As gently as she could Sarah rejected his wisdom. The story had made it very clear that he was not a Christian, and thereafter he was often in her prayers.

CHAPTER V

LOTTIE

“WHEN IS LOTTIE coming home?”

It was Anna who asked, rocking her chair sociably to and fro in her sister's bedroom, where a great dressmaking turmoil was in progress.

“We miss Lottie more than ever when we are dressmaking, don't we?” Sarah answered, smiling. “She writes she'll be back the first of next month. Not that way, Miss Parker, it all humps up at the side if it's pinned like that! Do be still, Bessie; Miss Parker can't get it straight if you wriggle so.”

Anna watched the contest between her sister, the little girl and the dressmaker with a high degree of detachment.

“You are the worst person in the world to have to do with clothes, sister,” she observed after a time. “I doubt if you know the front of a gown from the back.”

Sarah laughed good-humouredly. “I don't set out to be much of a hand at it,” she confessed. “But I can see whether a thing hangs straight or not. Now look, Miss Parker, here, under the arm——”

The door burst open, and two more little girls ran in, their faces aglow with the jokes they had been enjoying and the game they had only just left.

“Oh, Aunt Anna! Aunt Anna!” they cried, and hurled themselves into her lap.

“Quietly, children, quietly,” said their mother, her own face taking on a reflection of their glowing looks of delight, while Bessie wriggled more than ever, and even the drab-coloured dressmaker felt a breath of refreshment.

Sally and Martha began talking both together, explaining something which none but themselves could possibly understand, and their laughter fluttered and eddied round them, and turned all the tedious business of clothes-making into irrelevance.

“Come now, children, you really must attend——” their mother began, but her voice was unconvincing, and Bessie wriggled right away from Miss Parker, and began dancing up and down in front of the rocking-chair on which Anna and the other children were balanced, her shrill little voice joining in the hubbub.

It was some time before either Sarah or Anna brought their own minds to the effort needed to stop the enchanting nonsense and to turn back to the business of the spring frocks. But as soon as the grown-ups seriously meant

order to be re-established it came about. The children were as good as possible, and of the pandemonium, only the irrepressible little giggles they contrived to exchange with each other remained. The frocks were tried on, the necessary instructions given, and Miss Parker took herself off with her mouth full of pins and her arms full of cloth; the three little girls dashed off, too, their eager voices and jumping footsteps dying away down the staircase. Sarah went over and sat down by her sister's side, and they fell to talking about the outward details of their lives in that disjointed way only possible between intimates.

“Do you think Edmund is attached to Lottie?” Anna asked suddenly, in the midst of talk of other matters. It was a question she had long been wanting to ask.

Yes, Sarah said, she did think so. It was very suitable and nice, and pleased Thomas exceedingly. Lottie was a dear child; they had missed her terribly during the six months she had been in Massachusetts, and it would be lovely to have her back. The little girls were looking forward to the first of the month, and, of course, Edmund was counting the days.

Sarah's genuine eyes smiled as she spoke, and for the thousandth time Anna admired her sister's equanimity, even as she turned the talk again to other things. She knew that she would not have treated the girl as Sarah did had she been in her place.

Lottie was a distant cousin of Thomas Sonning's. He had appeared with her one day, three years before, and told his wife that he had adopted her, and ever since then she had been part of the household. It had been one of his movements of generosity, one of those sudden impulses which gave him the pleasing reputation of being a very warm-hearted man; but it had led Anna to describe him as the most inconsiderate creature on earth. She had, indeed, been thoroughly indignant over the business, and had gone about among their friends pitying her sister for having a new full-fledged daughter thrust in, without her consent, upon a household already sufficiently complicated. Sarah herself, however, had silenced all such talk by taking the girl entirely as a matter of course. The strength of Anna's case went out of it, when Sarah seemed glad of the burden and found it only a comfort. But Anna, for all her astonished admiration for her sister's good sense, thought none the better of Thomas. He was a selfish, intolerable man, she said, whose wife was far too good for him.

As for Lottie herself, none of these things were apparent to her. All she realized was that from the sordid and narrow poverty of her motherless home she had been swept away into a land of plenty and good humour, where everyone was loving and kind. She attached herself in an absolutely natural way to the whole household, and stepped very quickly into her place in the family life.

She was as pretty as a picture, with the blue eyes and yellow hair of a story book, and Thomas took much pleasure in teasing her, just because of the lovely way she blushed. The two of them at once got on to terms of jocular banter, and Thomas as it were smiled all over when she ventured on one of her mildly impertinent sallies. Her presence at the family meal was an unexpected relief to Sarah, who in the long years she had lived with Thomas had grown a little too well accustomed to his conversation, and she often found herself sincerely amused at the duels which went on between the two.

Keeping Thomas in a good temper was not Lottie's only use, however. She was one of those people who love small children, and her devotion to the three little girls was soon complete. Hour after hour she would play with them, allowing herself to be victimized and tormented until even their mother would intervene to rescue her; she was indeed a thoroughly pleasant inmate.

With Edmund also Lottie was a success. He was a year older than she was, being sixteen when she came. At first he was very shy, but by degrees as he found her useful, this wore off. She mended his various contrivances, kept track of his books, and took a deep interest in all his doings, and before long he found himself slipping into real companionship. On her side a similar process went on. From shyness, through usefulness, to confidence, and always with a high sense of the privilege it was to be admitted to share any of the interests of this marvellous big boy cousin whom everyone so greatly admired.

With Sarah alone of all the family Lottie was not quite at ease. She admired her greatly, but in spite of all Sarah's real affection, the girl could not but be conscious of faint traces of fear and fright in her presence. There was something so unutterably grown up, to her eyes, about the mother of the family, something so imperturbably placid and serene; and Lottie, who in her secret motherless heart longed more for confidential relations with Sarah than with any of the others, was disappointed and troubled by what she thought her own failure. She tried very hard; she did all she could think of to be useful to the household, and she was, in fact, missed as much by Sarah as by anyone else when she went away on that six months' visit to her own brothers and sisters. But for all that she and Sarah were not, and were never likely to be, really intimate. And the hopeless part of it was that Sarah did not seem to notice or to care.

As time went on the inevitable happened, and Edmund and Lottie drifted into love. This, Anna had thought, would be the testing of Sarah's genuine feeling, for she saw the passionate love for her eldest son which Sarah tried so hard to regulate and keep within bounds. If Sarah were only pretending about Lottie, as Anna suspected, it would come out now; but on the contrary, nothing happened. Sarah was delighted, and Anna was forced to acknowledge that she had been wrong in her estimate of her sister's feelings.

“If it were any other woman on earth, James,” she said to her husband; “if it were anyone but Sarah, I’d say she was pleased because she will keep Edmund herself. If he settles down with that child he will never be swept away from his mother by any grand passion. Anyone can see that. But Sarah’s far too simple and unselfish for any feeling of that kind.”

James loved discussing things with his wife. “It may be influencing her without her knowing it,” he said. “Your sister is not so simple a character as you think, Anna. She isn’t stupid, you know.”

Anna laughed. “Lottie is,” she said uncharitably.

“No, no, Anna; you are unjust to the girl. She does not take hold of things by the practical end, and doesn’t like to use her mind; but she’s not really stupid, and she’s a sweet child.”

“She’s always very ready to be pleased,” Anna admitted, “and I daresay it’s a good arrangement for them all. But if Edmund were my son I’d want something a little more exciting for him.”

“If Edmund were your son, Anna,” her husband said, taking one of her hands in his, “he would want something more exciting for himself.” He smiled at her, and she did her best to smile back; their childlessness was very sore to them both.

Sarah, however, had no thoughts to spare for such criticisms. If Edmund married Lottie, as in course of time he would, his mother knew that his affections would be safe and secure, and a touch of playful lightness would be added to the seriousness of her precious boy. To her unworldliness the girl’s penniless state was no drawback. All was going well.

Between Lottie and Edmund, however, nothing had been said. The matchmaking was all on the part of their elders. They were content to let things drift. Neither of them was unaware of the state of their hearts, and Edmund had spoken of the matter to his mother. But they were so young, so much together, there was no need to change things yet. Life, for those two, was pleasant, and friendship and love shaded off into each other without any line of demarcation.

The six months’ separation had not been a worldly-wise plan of Edmund’s parents; it had just arisen naturally from the circumstances of Lottie’s own nearer relations. It had had the effect of making Edmund think a great deal about her, however, and by the end of the time he knew exactly what he wanted. He was prepared to make her an offer of marriage immediately on her return, and had already secured his father’s formal consent. It was understood that it was to be a long engagement; he was to go through college, and enter the business before there was any talk of marriage; but it would be comfortable to have it all definite and clear.

When Lottie actually returned, however, and when he saw her slip back into her familiar place, an unexpected hesitation came over Edmund. Without

reason or cause he began to think that she could not possibly love him, and in a state of painful humility he decided to wait still longer before he spoke. The new experiences she had been going through, the new people she must have been seeing, had surely, he thought, driven her away from him. He must set to work to win her afresh if he could.

All this was entirely without foundation, but Edmund was in no state to see clearly. His short and sheltered life had brought him nothing but admiration and praise so far, and it was but natural that an excess of humility should come upon him. It made his mother smile tenderly to watch the new diffidence of her tall son.

Lottie was, of course, at once introduced to the family next door and equally naturally she was taken into immediate favour. The Thrush sisters were charmed with her pretty face and pleasing manners, and constantly invited her to see them; and so, it was only a short time before she was at home in their house. This state of things was followed by a most surprising development, namely, the adoption of Lottie as the first disciple. The Master entered, so Silence told Sarah, into immediate religious sympathy with the girl, and from that conjunction much might be expected. The Lord had marked her out for fuller teaching, and she would be the first to whom the whole of the new Truths would be revealed.

When this announcement was made Thomas was greatly pleased. He had long been urging the need for more numerous and more fully instructed disciples. He could not altogether relish what was not widely shared, and he regarded this as a beginning of expansion. He spoke of it at the table in a triumphant tone, and did not notice that Sarah and Lottie were not as well pleased as himself.

As for Lottie, she was frightened. She did not feel equal to so high a mission, and had a private shrinking from Rufus for which she could not account. She wished this alarming thing had befallen Edmund, or someone better able to cope with it than herself.

Sarah, for her part, felt the same. Fond as she really was of Lottie, she could not think the child fit for the task, and she was conscious of a distinct and most unpleasant impulse to be aggrieved. She knew very well that there was more earnestness both in Edmund and in herself, and that as a disciple Lottie would be only too facile and impressionable. It seemed as if it were a waste to lay the Lord's secret before so simple a heart, when those others, burning so steadily with longing for the glad tidings, were passed by. And yet, of course, it was just this simplicity which caused Lottie to be chosen. Lottie was like a little child, and of such was the Kingdom of Heaven. By a deliberate mental effort Sarah drove the jealousy out of her mind, and replaced it by a humility which was none the less genuine for being a second thought. And

once this was done, she watched the progress of affairs most eagerly, trying hard to gather up any scraps from the table of revelation, and doing all she could to make things easy for the girl.

And thus it was that Lottie fell into the habit of spending every evening with the saintly household next door.

CHAPTER VI

GUIDANCE

LOTTIE SAT ON the sofa between Patience and Silence, holding a hand of each. Her eyes were shut, even though the room was almost completely dark. She was trembling a little, but she was trying to suppress her fears, and with little encouraging pats and gentle pressures the two ladies on either side strove to reassure her. All three were praying, though it was only occasionally that anything was heard.

Lottie was asking the Lord to give her strength not to break down and cry under the ordeal of His terrible Revelations. Her mind was filled with an impassioned cry for help, and her hands and her whole body shook with the dread of the coming of Mr. Hollins.

Silence and Patience were praying too; they were in a state of almost ecstatic rapture, feeling themselves to be the active servants of the Lord, engaged upon His secret mission. They asked for a quick outpouring of grace upon this innocent child, they longed to hurry the process of her enlightenment, and they, too, listened for the step of the Master outside. He was the source and the centre of all their trust.

He came, after all, very quietly, and it was the shining of the little light he always carried with him, rather than his footstep, which first revealed his presence. He was greeted with little murmurs: "He is come. Look up, child; he is here!" And Lottie trembled more than ever.

Carefully depositing his little lamp in a corner of the room Rufus Hollins came forward and stood for some time in front of the sofa on which the three women sat, saying nothing, but looking fixedly at Lottie. Then falling upon his knees he began to pray aloud. His deep emotional voice was intolerably disturbing. Lottie drew away her hands and buried her face in them; she felt she could not possibly resist the message of the Lord.

The things for which Mr. Hollins prayed were not in themselves very unusual. Had the setting been different, Lottie would hardly have been struck by the phrases he used. The idea of yielding all to Christ, and of full union with Him, were familiar enough, often to be heard at Chapel or at the evening Bible Class. Yet here, somehow, it seemed to have a different connotation, and Lottie was afraid. She longed for the praying to be over, and the instruction begun.

This evening her wish was granted sooner than usual, and it was not five

minutes before the teacher rose from his knees. The next event, up to that night, had been the oral teaching, conducted by means of question and answer between himself and one or other of the two sisters.

“How do you know the Lord?” he would ask.

“I feel Him,” she would answer.

“How do you feel Him?”

“With mind, soul and body.”

“What does He demand?”

“All.”

It was a sort of catechism, which Lottie now knew so well that she could have repeated it without fault, though as yet she had not been allowed to do so.

To-night, however, there came a difference.

The Master drew up a chair, as before, and asked the first questions, but he seemed absent-minded, and Lottie grew more uneasy than ever. He broke off suddenly.

“Sisters,” he said, for it was so he always addressed his two companions, “Sisters, the time has come for me to speak more plainly to this child. You had better leave us.”

“Oh, no, no, NO!” Lottie’s cry was very low, but desperately sincere. It was unheeded.

“Dear child,” said the elder sister, rising obedient to her Prophet’s wish, “what a holy moment this is. How greatly favoured you are.”

“Dear child,” murmured the other, with a trifle less alacrity in her movement, “dear child, how I envy you.”

They were gone, and Lottie was alone with the Master. Claspng her hands tightly together she tried to fix her attention on some plain external things; looking down, she searched anxiously through the dimness for the pattern of the carpet.

“Look up, child.” Rufus’s voice was very close at hand, and a moment later Lottie felt him take his seat upon the sofa beside her. “Why are you afraid of me?” he said, close at her ear.

Rufus had a lovely voice, and now, using its sweetest notes, he began to charm away her fears. The Lord had marked her out—over the old flattering ground he went, softly persuading her of her own importance, of the holiness which was wrapping them both round.

“Do you not feel the presence of the Lord?” he asked, and took both her hands in one of his own.

The girl trembled; a sensation which was part fear and part delight ran through all her nerves, and she took it for a sign from above.

“I feel——” she murmured. “I, I am frightened.”

He put an arm about her, and drew her to his side, still holding her hands

tightly.

“I will keep you safe,” he said softly. “The Lord has us both in His power. We are but instruments, and through us His strength and His spirit are flowing. Do you not feel them, child?”

She did indeed. The closeness of the man seemed to paralyze all her body with a delicious yet an awful stillness. Her hands lay powerless in his tight grasp, her head dropped till it lay upon his shoulder. A self-surrender such as she had never imagined seemed imperative. It was conversion; she was ready now—how wonderfully ready—to give all her existence, all her soul, mind and body. Let the Lord take them all.

The man beside her did not move, yet he seemed to come nearer and nearer. She felt the beating of his pulse, and her own leapt and quivered to meet it. Motionless they sat, and silent, yet everything seemed to Lottie to be whirling about her. It was, it must be, a miracle from above.

Then Rufus moved. It was just the very slightest movement, but it sent such a wild thrill of excitement through Lottie’s whole being that involuntarily she gave a little cry.

And then Rufus prayed, murmuring softly and gently, and stroking her hands and her hair as he did so.

The meaning of his prayer escaped Lottie. All that she was conscious of was the new and overmastering sensation which held her. And when at last Rufus ended, and rose from her side, Lottie was spent with emotion. It was as much as she could do to get up when the two ladies came into the room, and she could find no words at all with which to answer their affectionate solicitude.

Rufus took everything upon himself, however.

“She has had a wonderful baptism,” he said, and much more which Lottie did not fully follow. And then, at last, they let her go.

Even when she had left the Master’s presence, Lottie was not at peace, however, for Miss Silence walked back with her, repeating again and again on the stairs and during the few steps they took together in the street, how necessary it was to keep safe from all outside knowledge that precious secret of the Lord’s which she now shared with them. The elder woman stayed on at Lottie’s side, gave Sarah answers to the anxious questions prompted by the girl’s exhausted looks, and even went so far as to insist upon undressing her and sitting by her bed. It was not until Lottie fell asleep that she returned to the house next door.

The days and nights which followed were full of bewilderment for Lottie. As she grew more accustomed to the baptism of the spirit which she was now constantly receiving in the Master’s company, so its intensity and all-pervasiveness increased. By day and night these wonderful physical sensations

were in her mind, and she found that they would sometimes return to her in a fugitive, reminiscent thrill even when she was alone. In her bed at night she lay awake, praying for, and sometimes revelling in, this gift of grace; and at these moments it was pure joy. There was fear always, when Rufus was present, though what it was she was afraid of Lottie did not know.

In the face of this mighty preoccupation it was no wonder that mundane things lost all their former importance, and Lottie did not even know how absent-minded and forgetful she became. She was occupied with other things; she was learning heavenly secrets, and every evening the unparalleled experience of the felt presence of the Lord awaited her afresh.

Lottie's change of manner, and the fact that some new and powerful interest was filling her thoughts was, of course, immediately noticed at home, though nothing was said. It was with the greatest difficulty that Sarah refrained from questioning the girl, but she felt, as they all did, that Mr. Hollins' wishes must be strictly respected. Moreover, it was easy to see that Lottie did not wish to talk over her religious experiences, and, eager and impatient as she was, Sarah was obliged to leave it alone. But meanwhile Lottie was looking ill. She must see to it that the child took enough to eat.

Edmund, like his mother, was troubled by the change in Lottie. Of course it was a fine thing that she should be singled out to be the first fully instructed disciple; and of course if anyone in the world was worthy to know Divine secrets, it was Lottie. But still, the evenings were his only free time, and it was a great nuisance. He had counted on many walks in the summer twilight, and missing these, he grew a little careless in his studies and irritable towards the children. Of course it was wrong, and he struggled against it by prayer and good resolutions. But all the same it remained a stumbling block. And it was dreadful that Lottie should look ill.

In their different ways, Sarah, Edmund and Lottie were thus moved from their ordinary selves by the influence of the people next door; but of all the household the one to be most profoundly upset was Thomas. Although he was not admitted to discipleship at all resembling Lottie's, his constant intercourse with Rufus Hollins was having a serious effect on him, and was introducing a new principle into his life.

The chief note of the teaching, so far as Thomas or his wife could discover, was Divine Guidance. That there was more behind they clearly saw; but the outworks of the structure were evidently built upon the consciousness—so familiar to all mystics—of direct intercourse between the creature and the Deity. The Miss Thrushes claimed that their leader received from the Lord detailed instructions in regard to every step in his life, and Rufus did not deny it. It was not only guidance in a general way, or merely as regarded spiritual matters, but a concrete and literal ordering of his daily life that they attributed

to him; and Thomas, and many of the others who came under his influence, began to seek for a similar privilege. Does the Lord want us to rise at six, or at half-past? To eat meat or to fast? To give money to the poor, or to some Church? These problems arose without end, and among those who attended the Monday Bible Classes a regular crop of inner voices was to be heard.

The discovery that he could regulate his outer life by this method was a new and most acceptable idea to Thomas. Almost at once the Lord began to point out to him that it was his duty to preach and pray in public. And Thomas loved that work. His business, which he had always hated, ceased to seem a necessary duty, for the Lord was calling him away. His life took on a wonderful importance, and every day was holier than the one before.

As for Sarah, although the prospect of handing over her daily life into the Lord's keeping was entirely delightful, she could not manage to put aside difficulties and conflicts with her own common sense. The Lord's voice was none too plain; either it conflicted with her own judgment, in which case it was very hard to accept it; or it ran along with her wishes, in which case it was hard to believe it the Lord's. Try as she might, Sarah could not get past this dilemma, and the conduct of her fellow-disciples only made the problem worse.

It was her sister Anna who first made her notice the odd fact that the guidance ran in fashions. When one member of the circle felt led to discard the use of the umbrella (as happened to Ebenezer Dale, Thomas's cousin), there was a strangely similar leading among the others, and all their clothes began to suffer from the rain; and when Silence Thrush gave up the drinking of coffee, Sarah herself felt an inward urge in the same uncomfortable direction.

"It's catching," Anna said, "and I don't see that the Lord has much to do with it at all."

This general peculiarity of the leadings was disquieting enough, but Sarah found the character of those which came to her husband even more of a stumbling block. Thomas had inner calls only to do what she knew already that he wanted to do; and more than ever he neglected what in her judgment was his duty. He left all the tiresome things and all the boring people to his wife, and did it with an air of sanctity which was peculiarly trying. Truly though Sarah believed the doctrine, and honestly as she admired the holiness under which her neighbours' lives were passed, she could not feel any conviction that her husband had got hold of the truth. And as for herself, she knew that she walked in darkness.

The whole subject was naturally much in her mind, and in spite of her sister's rather sceptical attitude, she constantly talked of it when they were together.

"It's clear to me," she said one day, as they were both sewing in the

lamplight, while Edmund sat at the table with his books, “it stands to reason, Anna, that if the Lord really wants us to consecrate everything to Him, He’ll be willing to show us how to do it.”

But Anna was prepared to combat even that.

“I can’t think it matters to the Lord whether I stay here with you another hour, Sarah, or whether I go home right away.”

“I don’t say it does, Anna; but it matters to Him whether you are *willing* to go or stay as He directs.”

Anna shook her head.

“Do you remember Isaac Penny, sister?” and at the recollection the two of them went off into such hearty laughter that Edmund looked up from his studies and asked to share the joke.

Isaac Penny had been a young man of twenty-one or so when Sarah and Anna as small children had first been allowed to attend an Easter Celebration.

“You can imagine how it was, Edmund. We had our new spring bonnets, and were much excited; and some visiting preachers from Maryland were expected.”

There had been quite a crowd in the chapel, everyone turning up, and the elders and important people in the congregation had all been seated at the far end of the building. Several people had been moved by the spirit to give testimony.

“Do you remember Martha Evans, and her way of speaking? It always seemed to me as if it were the very voice of an angel.”

There had been a great deal of extempore praying that day, and then a commotion on the other side of the building. They hadn’t seen very clearly at first, but afterwards they had seen Isaac step out into the aisle looking very queer. He had his pantaloons turned inside out. His vest and his coat were in his hand, and these they had watched him turn too, and also his socks; while the whole gathering gazed in astonishment he had tried to turn his shoes also, but, this last not succeeding, he had left them on the floor, and padded softly up to the communion rails. There he had turned to face the whole chapel.

“His tapes, Sarah, his tapes! Do you remember? Oh, I can see it now.”

“But what did it all mean?” asked Edmund, rather shocked by their laughter.

His mother, making a great effort, caught at gravity for an instant.

“What he said was, ‘As I am turned inside out, so must your hearts be also,’” she said gravely; but a moment later she was back in her laughter again. “Oh, Anna, his sleeves. Don’t you remember how the lining stuck out?”

“I have always heard that Isaac Penny was a very saintly man,” observed Edmund. “I should not have thought it of him.”

His aunt sobered a little at his tone.

“I daresay Isaac is a good man, Edmund,” she said, “but you know even good people can be absurd sometimes. It was because the thing was so hard that he felt called upon to do it.”

Edmund was silent, pondering over the tale, and Anna had a suspicion that he was vexed with the frivolity of his mother, and inclined to think Isaac something of a hero.

“Don’t go doing the same, now, Edmund,” she cautioned. “It doesn’t follow that every silly thing is holy, just because a good man once did it.”

Edmund smiled. “No, I shan’t do that, Aunt Anna; but I don’t see anything very funny about it.”

“That’s because you didn’t see him, Edmund,” his mother said, her voice still weak from laughter. “Oh, Anna, how the minister looked! And how our dear mother reproved us for laughing!”

“You know, Sarah, this boy of yours is very like mother,” Anna observed: and Sarah, not noticing the implied criticism, looked fondly at her son.

She was not willing, however, to let the whole subject go off in this entertaining laughter into which Anna had beguiled her, and she tried to swing back to the more serious talk. But Anna was not willing, and made another of those jokes which Edmund thought such bad taste, as she got up to go home.

“I don’t know if it’s the Lord, or my husband calling me, sister, but I feel that I ought to be going.”

When she had left, the boy pushed away his books, and by a loving gesture invited his mother to settle down for one of those comfortable prayers they sometimes had together. After that, for a long time mother and son sat talking in the lamplight, intensely happy and serious. Edmund’s plans for his next year at college were discussed once more, and they brought in their train his wishes and hopes for the future, and his intention of marrying Lottie, and his annoyance at never getting a chance to see her. As they went over the familiar ground, Sarah was thinking very little of what Edmund actually said. She was listening after a fashion, but was more interested in watching the expressions of his face, and the vigorous way the hair grew off his forehead.

“This is *my* boy,” she thought to herself, “my dear, precious boy. How good he is, and how I love him.” Her maternal preoccupation did not actually interfere with the conversation for her own sentences were still coherent, and she knew what Edmund was saying. But all the same a sort of haze of affection came between her thoughts and the subject, which dulled the quality of the talk.

Edmund saw this look of his mother’s and knew that it meant that she was not really attending to him, but he did not resent this fact. He did not expect her to treat him as other people did, and he did not even want her to do so. Others might criticize his plans on their merits, might please or annoy him, but

not his mother. She was just the background, sure to approve of everything he said, sure to praise everything he did, inevitably and most reliably on his side. He brought his ideas to her so that he might clarify them by hearing them again from her lips, or at least that was what he supposed. For Edmund was unconscious of the immense influence his mother had over him, and did not realize that long before they came to the point of expression, she had shaped his thoughts.

Watching her son, and listening to his eager, youthful, self-centred plans, Sarah let the time slip by unnoticed, and both mother and son were surprised when Thomas burst in upon them, full of the glow and excitement of his evening's prayer-meeting.

"How hot it is in here! Do you know how late it is, Edmund? You ought to be in bed. Such a splendid meeting, Sally; there was a blessing on it. You can't imagine how edifying—and I took the text——"

Gathering together his books, Edmund left the room without a word. He felt somehow disinclined to hear his father's news just then. He went to the street door and looked out, in the absurd hope that Lottie might at that instant be leaving the house next door. But all was dark and quiet, and with a sudden access of depression the young man went up to bed. His mother's approval was very sweet, but would the world really be as kind to him as she seemed to expect?

Sarah, much though she might have wished to follow Edmund, stayed in the parlour with Thomas, as was her wifely duty, while he settled down with a splutter of talk to the milk and biscuits which had long been awaiting him. His conversation was no less eager and self-centred than Edmund's—but with what different preoccupations Sarah listened to him! Slightly inattentive, as before, as is so commonly the way with wives, she was not now watching the play of features, or admiring the tones of his voice. Instead, a horde of practical details came between her and his words. The cook, now, she must not forget to tell her to vary the breakfast dishes; and there was a button missing from Thomas's coat. Thinking of such things Sarah smiled absently as she listened to her husband's religious adventures.

It was evident that Thomas had been a great success. Indeed, as Sarah well knew, he was always very highly appreciated. His natural gift of eloquence, combined with the rapturous enthusiasm he was experiencing, could not fail to have an effect upon the earnest congregations, and Sarah saw clearly enough that he was coming to believe that preaching was his vocation. She did nothing to encourage him in this. In truth she was afraid of what he might do; and she was right to be afraid.

It was only a few days later that Thomas came to her with an air at once apologetic and triumphant to announce that he had that day completed the sale

of his business, and intended henceforward to devote himself wholly to the Lord's vineyard.

"What are we to do for a living?" was Sarah's first exclamation, to which the inevitable answer:

"The Lord will provide," was not at first sufficient.

Sarah could not conceal from herself, or from Thomas, that she was much alarmed by this step; and the fact that he had taken it beyond recall before he had told her, added enormously to her anxiety. In the course of nineteen years passed in his company she had come to recognize that precipitation was a sign of an uneasy conscience.

"You know, Thomas, we have Edmund's education to complete, besides the little girls. If it was only you and me——"

Thomas silenced these doubts by declaring that he had had a direct revelation from the Lord that this was the course he was to take. And since this was so, Sarah was forced to resign herself to it with as little delay as possible. But she did not take kindly to the prospect.

"One thing I do beg, then, Thomas," she stipulated, "and that is that you do not let us all become dependent on the bounty of any one individual. I could not bear it, and neither could you. Remember, we have both seen how badly such arrangements turn out."

Thomas answered that he had no such intention. Their house was their own, and he had sold his share of the family business for a fairly large sum; besides, there was often payment for preaching.

"Trust all to Him, Sarah; we need have no cares."

In spite of a faith as real as his, Sarah was not by any means reassured, and she worried over the future considerably. It was wrong of her, no doubt, but she could not find it in her heart to believe that Thomas could be the chosen instrument of the Lord. It was all very well to accept the singling out of Lottie; she, after all, was an innocent child, and if her nature seemed a little shallow and trivial, perhaps that was only because of her youth. Lottie, at any rate, was good, but Thomas——! How could Thomas, with his moods and impulses, his unconquerable indifference to his own responsibilities, and his blindness to his own faults, how could *he* be a genuine teacher of the Truth? Sarah had to do a lot of praying, and to make a habit of the ejaculation, "Thy will be done!" before she could grow at all reconciled to the new position. But she had to bear it in any case, reconciled or not. The business was sold, and the step taken, and Thomas Sonning became a free-lance preacher in the spring of the year 1843.

CHAPTER VII

THE FALL

JESSIE, SALLY, AND MARTHA were talking together in the room at the back of the house which was their special den. All three were pleasant, healthy children, with smooth, yellow heads and open, grey eyes, very much like each other at a first glance, but, of course, differing intensely from each other in their inmost selves.

Their mother knew well enough that Bessie's bright competence covered a good deal of slowness of comprehension and that Sally, for all her flow of quick, amusing words, cared very little for anything but herself. She knew, too, that quiet, lazy little Martha was the cleverest of them all, shrewd and sensitive, and with a depth of interest and understanding not even Edmund could equal.

The small talk of religion had, of course, surrounded all three from infancy. Bessie had "Come to Jesus" first, at the age of five as was proper, being the eldest; and Sally had quickly followed suit. In spite of the continually pious atmosphere, however, all the children were at heart unregenerate, as little children always are. The experiences of life, the inner conflicts of adolescence, the disguises of maturity were as yet before them, and the self-discipline of a sincere religion was as yet incomprehensible to them. They could be good; they were indeed good, almost up to the limit of their lights; but it was not because they understood or sought after goodness, but because their mother expected it, and their lives were likely to be easier in consequence. It was the goodness of well-trained little animals, and could have slipped off them easily.

That afternoon, as they sat in their den, they had been talking about the coming summer holidays. It was Martha who started it with the remark that, "now that father is a preacher" she supposed they wouldn't be able to go away to their farm at White Pastures as usual. Things were all so different now.

The other two violently rejected the idea, and into the midst of their rather agitated conclave came Edmund, who was at once appealed to on the matter. He gave them no answer, but said that Bessie was to go upstairs to Mother, who wanted help in the overhauling of the linen cupboard.

"Me too! Me too!" cried the others, but in spite of their cries he shut them resolutely in. Only Bessie was wanted.

Left alone the other two settled down to their idleness again, watching the rain pouring down the window, and wondering what on earth there was to do.

The appalling vista of boredom, which falls on children at a moment's notice, was upon them.

"Oh, Sally, what *shall* we do?"

"Oh, Marty, do-oo suggest something."

Upstairs at the same time Sarah was talking to Bessie.

"I want you to help me, daughter."

It was an opening which filled the child's heart with pride, even though at first she thought it referred only to linen. But Sarah meant more than that.

"You know we are not at all easy, financially, Bessie," she said, when they had got themselves surrounded with piles of snowy linen. "Your father has made great sacrifices for the Lord, and we must all do so too. I want you to be conformable about White Pastures."

"Do I put all the towels together?"

"Yes, child. You know we have sold the farm."

Bessie did not know it. In her consternation she mixed face and bath towels recklessly, looking round-eyed at her mother.

"So you see, going there is out of the question," Sarah went on, hurrying over a subject she herself found very painful.

"I have asked Aunt Libby to take you three in, and I'm sure that will be just as nice . . ."

She could not bring herself to complete the sentence, and the sight of the big tears gathering in Bessie's eyes made her ready to cry herself.

"Why, child," she said abruptly, "what are you doing with those towels?"

Between laughter and tears they sorted them out, and Bessie got used to the new notion.

"It's very nice at Aunt Libby's," Sarah said mendaciously. "You'll have to remember to be careful about your clothes, and not to do anything to frighten Grannie; but if you just keep that in mind, and help the others, I'm sure you'll manage all right, and get plenty of fun this summer after all."

How hard she did find it to make these speeches to the children! How bitterly she resented sacrifices which hurt them and shut off their pleasure! Put a good face on it as she might, Sarah well knew that the little girls would have an irksome time at her sister-in-law's house, and that their holiday would be far, far less happy than it ought to be. And yet, what could she do? Holidays were expensive, and she must be careful of what money they still had. She couldn't keep the children pining in the city all through the hot months, nor could she go away with them herself and leave Thomas, or Edmund, or, above all, Lottie, who was making her so indefinitely anxious. She was wretched over the whole business.

The children were not the only ones disappointed by the sale of White Pastures. Edmund, poor boy, had been counting upon a full month there, with

freedom from that holy influence of Rufus Hollins which he could not help regarding as sinister and hostile to himself. He had thought that there, at least, he would have seen Lottie, and he had counted on the ample opportunities of the summer holiday to put everything straight. And now the place was sold, and Lottie was to stay right on in the city, always at the side of Mr. Hollins. Edmund was miserable, and turned to his mother for comfort.

Sarah could not speak her whole mind on this subject to Edmund, any more than to Bessie. Not that he would not have understood; on the contrary. The anxieties she was feeling, and the troubles she expected in the future, were too heavy, she thought, for the boy to be burdened with. It was bad enough for him as it was; and so his mother tried, unconvincingly, to make him believe it was all for the best.

For once in his life, Edmund was impatient with her.

“I wish you would treat me as if I were grown up, Mother, and not talk to me as if I were Bessie or Sal.”

He flung away from her hastily, and the tears came to Sarah’s eyes. He had never spoken so before! But for all that she held to her resolution not to show Edmund how uneasy she was. Useless though she knew it would be, Sarah could not feel satisfied until she had called Thomas’s attention to her anxieties.

“Do you think, husband, that Lottie is right well?” was the way she opened the subject.

“Lottie, why yes, I don’t know what you mean. Brother Hollins was telling me only to-day what wonderful progress she is making. He says he thinks shortly it will be possible to have her give testimony. And oh, Sarah, you weren’t at the meeting to-night, were you? I must tell you how marvellously the Spirit worked in Theophilus. You know how much he used to be opposed to all the holiness doctrine . . .”

Sarah listened patiently enough. She was indeed interested in much that Thomas had to tell, knowing all the people so well, and she was amused by the religious gossip of which he was so full. But yet she remained doubtful of the validity of it all. The Lord was the Lord, of course, and His message the most important thing in the world. But could it really be that they were on the right path? There was such a strong admixture of self in this method of preaching and emotional conversion. There was so much vain-gloriousness, so much backbiting, such uncharitableness! And, Lottie, the chosen disciple, was in such a very unnatural state. Was it really the Lord’s will that the children should lose their summer holidays, and Lottie her looks, while Thomas enjoyed his personal triumphs and Brother Hollins lived free at their expense? If she could be *sure* that it was the Lord’s will of course she would accept it—or anything. But how to make sure?

“I wish, Thomas,” she broke abruptly into his talk, “I do wish I could *feel*,

as you do, the guiding of the Lord.”

“You are too self-willed, Sarah,” Thomas answered without hesitation, and he proceeded then and there to pray for humility to be granted to his wife. And with all her humble soul Sarah prayed for it too.

All this, however, did not remove the material difficulties of her life, nor help with the problem of Lottie. The girl was growing more and more nervous, and Sarah honestly thought she was entering upon a decline. She had the most unsatisfactory feeling about her, both physically and spiritually, and, what made it even worse, she had lost her confidence in the judgment and good sense of the Thrush sisters.

At first she had admired them without reservation, but gradually this had faded away, and by now she was more than a little uneasy in their presence. It was not only that they were bad housekeepers—or, at least, Sarah tried to think it was not that. She did not grudge the continual unrepaid loans of stores and supplies which passed from her house to theirs, for she well knew that lending to Mr. Hollins (or to anyone in need) was giving to the Lord. It was not that they had become so rude to her, for Sarah hardly noticed rudeness in her eagerness for truth. It was not that they were self-righteous, Sarah knew many good people who were. No, it was something more than this, something much less tangible, an uncomfortable impression that all was not what it seemed in the household next door.

In the early days of their intimacy the younger Miss Thrush had said things which Sarah could neither quite understand nor quite forget. She had talked of original sin, and the curse of Adam in a way that had startled Sarah. She, of course, believed in the perfectibility of the human being on earth, yet somehow she had been alarmed by Miss Patience’s references to the perfectibility of the human body. It all *sounded* so desirable, and yet it *felt* so wrong!

There had been one day in particular which had stuck in Sarah’s memory. They had been discussing the Fall, that absorbing topic, and she had been amazed and delighted by the original view of that momentous matter which had been laid before her. “A step up, not a fall,” they had called it. “Who could honestly say they preferred ignorant innocence to the risks and rewards of knowing good from evil? Who could suppose that God preferred stupid sheep who could not help but be good, to free human beings who were good from choice?” The idea commended itself to Sarah at once. They had got so far in the discussion when Miss Silence had been called away, and then Miss Patience, always the less reticent of the two, had developed the theory further. The only drawback of the so-called Fall, she said, had been the Curse which had been laid on man because of it. If we could but dismiss that curse we should be perfect.

Sarah, asking eagerly what that Curse was, had been told that it was that

false shame of their bodies which had come so suddenly upon the first pair, the shame which led them to make coverings of leaves, and to run abashed from the garden.

Sarah could not deny the truth of these statements, novel though they seemed; but the implications which were thereupon unfolded to her were rather bewildering.

Could they not, Miss Patience said, cure themselves of this shame and so escape the Curse? Ought they not, if they sought perfection, to seek for it for the body as well as for the soul? Was not this, in fact, the reason why the Fall had never as yet been recognized as a step up?

“In Corinth,” the other lady had whispered to Sarah, drawing closer her chair, “in Corinth we were setting out upon this path. It was one of the things for which we were so evilly calumniated.”

Sarah was at a loss.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “How could you set out upon this path?”

Miss Patience had looked cautiously round. Then she had bent down and removed one of her shoes, and then, to Sarah’s unbounded astonishment, one of her stockings also. She had extended her naked foot, and looked at Sarah with a blush burning in her cheeks.

“Thus, Sister Sarah, thus.”

Sarah gazed from the foot to the blushes, then back to the foot.

“What on earth do you mean?” she exclaimed.

Miss Patience said not a word, but began lifting her skirt, until the whole of the leg to her knee was exposed.

“Thus, Sister Sarah, thus,” she repeated; and her blushes were hotter than before.

Sarah rose to her feet in dismay, and began to walk up and down the room, as was her energetic custom in moments of excitement.

“Do you mean you all sat round and exposed your legs to each other?” she asked.

“It is necessary to get rid of shame,” the other answered, dropping her skirt again, and looking rather queerly at Sarah. “We found that by practice it was becoming easier. How can the soul be free if the body is not?”

Sarah paused in her walk and faced the other woman.

“It don’t seem to me a proper thing to do,” she said.

“That is because you have not even begun to wrestle with your shame,” the other answered, a fact which Sarah could not deny.

For all that, however, the whole notion made her uneasy. The more she thought of it the less she liked the idea of groups of elderly matrons exposing by degrees their legs—perhaps their whole bodies—to each other. It might be, as they said, a holy and a necessary thing to do; her own hanging back might

only be the consequence of her over-carnal mind. But all the same it was easy to see how it might be misunderstood. And the severe way in which Miss Silence on her return had greeted her sister's bare foot, and the furtive way in which both sisters had avoided any subsequent references to the Fall, had not made her mind any easier. It was a disturbing recollection altogether.

CHAPTER VIII

THE NEW BELIEVERS

BY THE SPRING following the providential loan of the house next door, Thomas Sonning was in the full tide of evangelistic work. Contrary to all his wife's expectations, everything prospered. Invitations to preach poured in from every side, and each day could have been filled ten times over. Religious papers published articles and appreciations, photographers paid large sums to be allowed to take his likeness, and souls in trouble rang perpetually at his door bell. Thomas had ample evidence that he was doing the Lord's work.

The chief reason for his success was that he was preaching a really welcome gospel, and the people were thirsty for words of comfort. The new-old doctrine of guidance satisfied a widespread human craving, and the existence of the hidden prophet gave an immense additional zest. "This much I know," Thomas would say, "so far I have myself experienced, but there is more behind. There are other riches, wider and deeper revelations and holier glimpses into the mind of the Lord. Seek, seek, ever seek, and you will find."

The hope which Rufus held out of throwing off the clogging yoke of sin, the chance he seemed to offer of immediate salvation for every soul, and above all the great corner stone of his doctrine, namely, the possibility of direct and unmistakable personal intercourse with the Almighty, all this was as water in a desert land. The barren teaching of Predestination, the unsatisfying rigours of Puritanism, sat uncomfortably upon emotional minds, and in 1843 and 1844 there was a rushing out from the sterner Churches towards a more cheerful, expressive religion. Many turned to Methodism, with its shoutings and its thoroughgoing fervours. But many more, repelled by its exaggerations, stayed dissatisfied in their colder creeds; and to these the new doctrine Thomas preached was as Manna from Heaven above.

Thomas, though enchanted by his success, did not become more vain than was to be expected. He was such a pleasant man, so easily in sympathy with his companions, so readily moved by every passing emotion, that self-importance had little time to grow. Besides, he was genuinely, sincerely convinced of the wonders of Rufus Hollins' new doctrine, and sensible of the honour of being the first of its preachers. His success made him easier, and not harder to live with, and in the Sonning household things went better than Sarah had hoped.

Eloquent as Thomas was, however, and ready as was his generation to hear

him, there was no mistaking the fact that the real success of the “New Believers” came from the hidden prophet who was so seldom seen. Rufus retired more and more into the seclusion of the house he dignified by inhabiting, and became a legend in the new sect. He was an invaluable asset to the preacher in his missionary labours, and Thomas knew it well. No jealousy entered his thoughts, no rivalry was possible between them. All was as harmonious as it could be.

The new movement took at first no definite shape. Rufus upheld, and Thomas preached, not a new religion, but rather a new spirit infused into the old dead forms. “New Believers” were not asked to come out of their churches, and thus Thomas gained access to many and many a pulpit. No rivalries sprang up, no partisan quarrels arose, and orthodox preachers welcomed a help which replenished their congregations and refilled their coffers.

Amid the rush of travelling and talking and writing and praying in which the new movement involved him, Thomas was supremely happy. His family, too, were proud of his growing fame, and Sarah, in spite of the heavy work it threw upon her, felt that all was well. She had always known Thomas to be eloquent. He moved even her emotions at times, and, as she said to her sister, when a man can do that to his own wife by preaching, he must be inspired indeed.

The flowing in of money, too, relieved Sarah of what had been a real anxiety, and, had it not been for her continued uneasiness about Lottie, to which of course, Edmund’s evident unhappiness was closely allied, Sarah would have been at peace. As it was she strove to be, and was too busy to do more than commit their future to the Lord.

The influx of “New Belief” among the churches of Delaville and its neighbourhood gave rise to many new religious and philanthropic activities. Meetings for prayer were organized in all sorts of unexpected places, and night schools as well as Sunday Schools opened in great numbers. The regular ministers of most of the sects were quickened to new efforts, and in the course of the winter a “Ministers’ Council” came into being for the organization of common effort. This Council, of course, like all human institutions, was the centre of much manœuvring, and quickly evolved internal politics of its own. It broke up after a few years, but that winter it was a thriving institution, aiming very high at Christian charity, and working very hard at the business of saving souls.

This Council arranged for a special Camp Meeting, to be held in the month of May, 1844, a Camp Meeting principally for ministers and their families, but to which professed New Believers of any creed were to be admitted. It was to be something quite special in the way of Camp Meetings, not the shouting, hysterical kind, nor a pious excuse for rowdyism and flirtation, but a meeting

for the serious study of the new beliefs. It was to open up a fresh era in religious thought.

To this Camp Meeting Sarah was eagerly looking forward. She had been rather overwhelmed of late with the endless entertaining which Thomas's work put upon her. It fell to her, as a rule, to bear the brunt of the seekers after consolation who came to see him. Thomas, in his rush of work, could seldom spare more than ten minutes for any one individual soul, and the custom had grown up for Sarah to see them first, and to extract, as it were, the gist of their trouble for him. Hour after hour she would listen to tales of spiritual suffering, told by people troubled with doubt, with sinful, sensual thoughts, or with that obstinate reluctance to "give in to God" which was so exceedingly common. Sitting in her own front parlour, Sarah heard a great many sad, and a great many silly tales, and by her quiet listening, and by saying little, she helped to heal many a real and many a fancied spiritual wound. The credit and the thanks were all for Thomas, whose ten minute talks and whose ready texts were delivered to people already soothed by confession, and eased by his wife's sympathy. And so almost all enquirers left the Sonnings' house with hearts at least temporarily relieved, and consciences at least temporarily calmed. And Sarah learned much of human nature.

This work made great demands on Sarah's time; the callers came at all hours and stayed unconscionably long. They would wait and wait and wait for Thomas, upon whose healing words their hearts were set, and Sarah had often to leave them to wait alone. For the seeing of callers was not by any means her only task. The letters, too, fell to her share, not merely the business arrangements and the planning of Thomas's time, which she carried out under his instructions, but also the letters of enquiry from people who could not call. At first Thomas had answered these himself, but as time went on and his correspondents multiplied, he was forced to leave them more and more to her, until at last he hardly read through the cries for guidance which reached him. Sarah knew by then, she thought, the sort of thing he would say in answer, and when he turned a heap of letters over to her in the morning, he went off with a free mind to his engagements.

Sarah did know what Thomas would have said in answer; but by degrees she realized that what he would have said, and what she was actually answering, were not quite the same things. The replies she had back again at times astonished her, and she was often glad that her husband did not read through these second letters.

"Your practical advice has done me good. To quit looking at my troubles is hard, but I recognize that it is wise. As you say, I do know friends who have ruined their health by overmuch inspection of their symptoms"—this sort of answer would never have come to a letter sent by Thomas!

As the rush of work increased, however, the likelihood of detection diminished; and Sarah, troubled at first in her own conscience for betraying her husband's trust, came to the conclusion that she was doing the best she could.

"The Lord knows what kind of advice I give," she said to her sister, the only person with whom she felt free to talk of these things. "If He lets Thomas give me the letters to answer, He knows what will happen. I cannot tell the poor souls to do anything but what I think the best for them. It's the Lord's affair."

The dealing with enquiries, vast though that task became, was only a part of the activity thrown upon Sarah by her husband's new vocation. In its way it was interesting, and very important, since each one was a soul waiting to be saved. But the other work frankly bothered Sarah very much indeed; and that work was the keeping of open house for all the preachers who visited the town.

Sarah was a good and careful housekeeper, who took a pride in "having things nice." They had always done a good deal of quiet entertaining, and Thomas had often landed distressed preachers and their families upon his household before; but now the volume of his invitations passed all bounds.

"He simply stands at the corner of the street and rings a dinner bell," Sarah said to Anna, "and every reputable and disreputable preacher in the place comes in."

There was a constant coming and going, and the spare bedrooms were always full. It made a lot of work, especially as the whole thing was irregular and unpremeditated, but what was harder to bear than the labour of it was the fact that Thomas left all the dull and boring members of every party upon his wife's hands.

"I have a message from the Lord for Brother So-and-so," he would say, and carry off all the amusing and agreeable guests to his study, leaving all the riff-raff to Sarah.

It would have been easier had Lottie been her normal self, but all that year she was preoccupied and unhappy. Although Sarah's help and advice were useful for all these outside "cases," the one in her own household was beyond her reach. The older woman could only look on in silence at the girl's distress.

Sarah became worried, as time went on, by the effect of this new way of life upon the three little girls. In the first place she felt that she was considerably neglecting them, and the fact that her care for other people's souls came between her and her daughters was a grave stumbling block. There was hardly a day when she could spare more than a few minutes with the children, and she grieved herself with the thought of all the precious intercourse she was missing.

"They will never be so young and innocent again," she said to Anna. "I feel that I am missing the best thing I have."

This would have been bearable if it had been only her loss, but she could not but see that the little girls themselves were suffering from the irregularities of the household. At times the visiting preachers made great pets of them, at others they were heavily snubbed and sent out of the way. Some nights Thomas insisted on keeping them up late for a special occasion of prayer, and very often their outdoor exercises were curtailed in the same way. On other days they were entirely neglected and left to their own devices. The house next door, too, seemed to attract them more than Sarah understood, and Miss Patience made great friends with them. Their mother, indeed, found it natural that Miss Patience, or anyone else, should admire her children, but she was oddly surprised that the children should like Miss Patience. Religious though their lives were, she could not think it quite healthy, and this preoccupation began to make an undercurrent of worry in her busy life.

In these circumstances the thought of the Camp Meeting was very welcome. They were all to go, children and all, and, as Sarah said to her sister, it would be a queer thing if she could not manage to smuggle them off into the woods for a real camping-out holiday, away from all that piousness. In any case it would be out of doors, and refreshing. They had decided, too, to summon Edmund away from college for those ten days; and there was much to talk over with him. His mother looked forward to seeing her boy more than she thought was quite right.

Edmund had gone away to college in the autumn, and they had only seen him for a few days at Christmas. It was hard to be parted from him, and this was the first time it had happened; but the boy was evidently enjoying himself, and developing, too, and Sarah had no doubt it was all for the best.

Edmund's letters were a great comfort. As was proper to all their ideas of correspondence, they were mainly of a religious nature, but in spite, or because of this, they were an unmixed pleasure in his mother's life.

At first he wrote of his shyness in the new surroundings. He was afraid, he said, to come out for the Lord as he should. Then by degrees, he had found one or two boys who joined him in prayer meetings, and things grew easier. But his conscience was very tender, his longings after sanctification very blessed, and the confidence which enabled him to pour out his ups and downs to his mother was very precious to her heart.

"I trust I am growing in grace some, but oh, Mother, how can I get the secret of continual victory?"

His mother loved these questions, and did her best to answer them soothingly, and to reassure the boy as to his own goodness. "You must trust all to the Lord," she would write in answer, and Edmund would be greatly comforted by the message.

Neither of them noticed the monotonous tone of their correspondence.

How should they? These problems were more real to them than anything else in the world besides, and what else was there so interesting to write about? It was true, of course, that in actual daily life religious scruples did not fill quite the whole stage. But they were always lurking in the mind, ready for use, and no sooner did the pen get into the hand than out they came.

“Don’t you think a cultivated, intellectual life is likely to endanger the spiritual?” Edmund would ask. “What ought I to do about reading books of literature, well written, standard works by infidel or sceptical authors, or by writers who are not in the least degree Christian? You know there are a great many of that kind who have printed books which are beautifully written, and which every cultivated man should know about. What shall I do about these?”

“I think the Holy Spirit is the best guide to your reading,” Sarah answered. “If He makes us feel uneasy about anything we *must* give it up, whatever it is.”

Such correspondence could not but be delightful to both parties, and it continued regularly twice a week. A little strain was put on it in the middle of the winter, however, when Edmund had to make up his mind to allow his father to come and preach in the college. The agonies he went through at the prospect did not seem to him quite suitable for communication to his mother, but she found no difficulty in discerning the cause of his sudden constraint.

“I can well understand that you don’t want your father to come, beloved boy, but indeed you need not feel afraid. He is a very successful preacher, and the boys are sure to admire him. Who knows he may be the means of a blessed revival?”

Even this encouragement did not fully reassure the young man. The prospect was agonizing, all the more because it was his plain duty to welcome it. But he was only a Freshman, and the college was so horribly critical!

Nothing of this stopped Thomas, however, who would have been cut to the heart had he suspected what his son felt. And after all, when he came he triumphed. Edmund wrote enthusiastically to his mother.

“It has been a wonderful series of meetings, after all, and every one seems stirred up. Mother, I have never in my life heard a sermon as eloquent, as really inspired as that sermon was.”

A week later the blessing seemed to be slipping away. “My principal point of difficulty is that I *cannot* give up my will. After that meeting of Father’s I got through the first day happily, but in the evening I joined in some mischief which was against the rules, and one thing and another, so I was put back somewhat. And then I was unfaithful in speaking to unconverted fellows. What do you think about that, Mother? I mean about arguing with unbelievers about the Bible doctrines? William does it continually, but I believe it is a drawback to his saving souls.”

“It has got out somehow that we pray for the fellows by name upstairs in

our meetings, and one fellow came up to me, as mad as could be and said, ‘Do you ever pray for me upstairs?’ I told him if he wanted to know to come up and see. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘if you pray for me, I’ll skin you alive.’ Rather strong language, wasn’t it!”

Week after week these precious letters came; the boy seemed to be achieving great spiritual progress.

“I am troubled that I do not make more efforts to work for Christ, only spasmodical ones, here and there. Why can’t I on my walks distribute tracts? I shrink somewhat from the idea, and yet I thought I was more given up than that. Of course I acknowledge I *would* feel a little disappointed if I should be called to go as a missionary to the South Sea Islands, but still I’m sure I would go.”

His mother’s heart contracted as she read. The dangers of cannibalism rushed into her mind. But the Lord was merciful: it would not be.

CHAPTER IX

THE CAMP MEETING

TO SARAH'S CHILDREN the Camp Meeting at Walnut Grove presented itself in advance as a glorified picnic spread out over ten days.

To Rufus Hollins, however, it bore quite another aspect; and it was Rufus who had the shaping of it in his hands. He thought of it, and, in his secret way, he determined to make it the turning point of his whole career. Always, until now, he had wandered somewhat sordidly over the face of the country, struggling without success to give expression to the great truths which were burning in his heart, and toiling in loneliness to overcome heavy human prejudice. Ever since he had left his home, all those long years ago, he had been poor and unsuccessful; and the only start he had ever really made had been broken up by those scandals at Corinth. He had come to Delaville a sadly discouraged man. But since then all was changed, without and within. Someone else had taken over the burden of financial maintenance, and also that other difficult, distasteful business of facing the outer world. Rufus had been free to rest, and had eagerly withdrawn into himself for that period of interior communion for which his soul had always longed.

Eighteen months now it had lasted, eighteen precious, quiet months, with hardly a worry. All the pettiness and paltriness of human effort shut away, and only the pure soul of a young girl to reflect the great mind of God.

Rufus had brooded all these months, deepening and driving inward his own convictions. No doubts ever assailed him, for was not the hand of the Lord clearly manifest? He had but to send for Lottie and the miracle of divine intercourse was set up. It was like an electric circuit, from God, through her, to him, and so back again to the fount of all purity, an ever renewed proof of the solid foundation of his belief.

So Rufus had prospered, and in prosperity his mind went deeper, intensifying his thought, and showing him ever new aspects of belief. His soul was aflame with the glory and excitement of it all, and towards the end he kept Lottie almost constantly at his side. It was so important not to lose contact with the Almighty.

While Rufus had been shut away with his spiritual excitements, Thomas had been advertising and attracting newcomers to the movement. It was an ideal arrangement; the hand of the Lord was plain to be seen, and it pointed now to a step forward.

Rufus, waiting in his devout quietness, looked to the Camp Meeting with great hope. One stage of his labours was over; the second was about to begin. He could no longer resist the calling of the Lord. He must go to the Meeting himself.

The home party spent two days at the Grove before any outsiders arrived, and during that time the ground was marked out, and the order of proceedings drawn up. Sarah had to make arrangements for provisioning the Camp, and there were many practical things to attend to. These, however, were of no importance compared with the spiritual preparations they were making, or at least supposed to be making. But they had hardly unpacked out of their wagons before Sarah judged that there were going to be some very unspiritual sentiments among them.

The Miss Thrushes were jealous of the place Lottie held, that was the first impression; and Thomas, while professing to be delighted to have Rufus come out in public, was determined not to become too much of a second fiddle. That also was clear from the first. The discussion of how the tents were to be placed revealed the one, and the first draft of the programme revealed the other. It was not going to be plain sailing at all.

Sarah disliked this sort of situation, and had absolutely no patience with people who could not say out what they meant. As soon as she saw the outline of what was to go on, and understood that they were all going to act by roundabout ways, she became discouraged. Of course, people were like that; she had had enough experience of movements and causes to know how it was. You couldn't expect anything different, but, all the same, it wasn't what she enjoyed. She withdrew most of her interest, therefore, and turned it to the children, without however in any way losing her belief that it would be a wonderful spiritual opportunity in the end. There was something so impressive about Rufus, something so sure, and, as it were, realized, about his talk, that Sarah fully thought herself a New Believer. All the pettiness of human beings could be discounted: the Lord was the great thing, and the Lord wasn't petty.

Not wishing to stay in the Camp till the meetings began, Sarah arranged a picnic expedition for herself and her children for the first day after Edmund's return. What happiness it would be to see him! What a lovely time they would have, just she and her children together.

The boy arrived. How manly he looked, how much older and more developed! His sisters crowded round him, his father took his arm; he was a boy to be proud of.

Sarah was content to let others monopolize him at first, thinking of the lovely long talks they would have the next day, and she was surprised and ashamed of her dismay when Edmund suggested that Lottie should join the party. Of course she ought to have thought of that. But for sure Lottie would

not be able to come.

Edmund himself went and asked her, however, right under the nose of Rufus, so bold was he now with his college experience; and Sarah's heart sank most unworthily when she learnt that Rufus had given permission. What a selfish woman she was, she chided herself! The new arrangement would be so much nicer for the young ones.

To comfort herself she asked her sister to join the party, and they all set off together very early the next morning. It was a lovely day, between late spring and early summer, one of those perfect moments when everything in nature is washed and shining clean, when the sky is transparent, and every leaf new green. The track through the woods was soft and springy, the bracken was uncurling its rolled-up fingers, and the birds, just fledged from their nests, flew rapturously about for the pleasure of flying.

Just so, too, the children ran and tumbled, scampering in and out among the trees; and even Lottie could not resist the beauty of the moment. The colour came back into her face, and she moved carelessly, as one who has forgotten trouble, listening to Edmund's talk.

These two soon drew ahead of the others, and Sarah and her sister followed slowly. Sarah said very little, except what was required to chime in with the foolishness of the little girls. She, too, was responding to the perfection of the weather, though in a less outward way. She was too old to want to jump or fly; she was too deeply embedded in the practical necessities of her life to whirl off like Edmund and Lottie into dreams of romance; and yet she, too, felt different in this lovely wood, freer, more vigorous, more fully at ease.

They halted by a little stream, among some birch trees which grew between outcropping rocks. The moss was just faintly warm to the touch, and the silver boughs of the birches flickered just a little in the fresh sunlight. They put their baskets down and made their camp.

With a rush and a whoop the children were in the stream, calling to Edmund to help them. They were going to make a dam. "Mother, Aunt Anna, you must come and look." They were going to have a lake behind it. The day was early yet, they would have time to cut down a tree, and hollow out a canoe, and go fishing in their lake. One after another they ran up, glowing with these absurd plans, their hands dripping with water, their bare legs coated with mud. Splash went the stones as they rolled them in, and their happy voices and continuous laughter mingled with the noises of the brook.

Sarah had brought some sewing, but she did not even unroll it. "So lovely, Anna," she murmured. "Don't you think Heavenly Father manages it beautifully?"

Anna watched her sister's face, more interested in that than in the perfection of her surroundings. She saw contentment and happiness there, and

that abiding peace which was, to her mind, her sister's greatest charm.

"How do you manage, Sally, to be so contented?"

Sarah smiled a little vaguely and did not answer. She was drawing in refreshment with every instant, and did not want to think.

"Oh, Mother, Mother, look, quick! The water's beginning to rise!"

Even as she answered the child, even when she rose and walked with her and looked smilingly at the leaky, incompetent dam, Sarah did not rouse herself; and Anna, loving her, left her undisturbed.

Edmund and Lottie disappeared. The loveliness of the day, and the exquisite solitude of the wood, drew them, too, into a happy mood, and they forgot the difficulties which surrounded them. Edmund talked eagerly, of God, and of himself; of his hopes and his failures, his love, his college and his plans. Her silent, sympathetic listening was that of the Lottie of former days, and in his joy and relief Edmund poured out his earnest young soul. He crowded a year's confidences into that one morning, and an offer of marriage too. For she, he said, was the true inspirer of all his efforts to do right.

Lottie's frame of mind was less happy, and yet in a way more simple. She shut out of it Rufus, and all things connected with him. She pretended to herself that he did not exist at all, and imagined that the last year was all a bad dream. At moments, with a sudden pang, the reality of things would come hovering on to the edge of her mind, but she pushed it away. It was Edmund's day, a day of freedom, and she took it with both hands.

Of course the young man could not be satisfied without an answer, a spoken promise, a pledge for the future; and as soon as he pressed her she saw the shadow drawing near.

"No, no, Edmund, I can say nothing, you don't know . . . the Lord wants me . . . no, no, I must not."

It was pitiful to see her fright.

"Lottie, Lottie, tell me, what is it? Are you in trouble, my darling? Tell me what it is."

It was of no avail. Lottie could not answer. As suddenly as it had lifted, her cloud came down again, and all the sunshine went out of her world. The Lottie Edmund knew slipped away altogether, and a timid, frightened creature was there in her place, silent, elusive, and infinitely pathetic. They forgot the woods and the singing of the birds, and noticed nothing but their own confusing and perplexing troubles. In a state of illimitable distress the two of them rejoined the others.

Edmund's miserable looks and Lottie's troubled air woke Sarah very effectually out of her contentment. There was bustle, and the talk which is made for the sake of gaiety. Both young people took shelter behind the children, and used them, in that way which children notice and resent, as a

cover for their own uneasiness.

Anna tried to lend a helping hand, and finally sent Sarah off for a stroll with her son. But there was no real comfort left in the party at all.

That talk with her firstborn, which Sarah had so eagerly anticipated, was very disappointing. He would say little about himself, nothing about his soul. It was all Lottie. What was the matter, couldn't his Mother tell him? What was frightening her? He could talk of this, and of his own disappointed hopes, but now he could not mention that precious substance of his thoughts which had been given to Lottie. Sarah knew herself shut out, and longed all the more to be able to give him comfort.

There was little definite she could tell him, however. Lottie was with the Thrush sisters continually, she said, and had long sessions with Rufus. She was known to be in receipt of special Manifestations of Grace; she didn't seem well, though, and, as he could see, she was worried. That was all Sarah could say. The thing was as intangible as a cobweb.

The whole party came back tired and depressed. Even the little girls, sensitive to their elders' atmosphere, and reluctant to be dragged away from their as yet unfinished lake, were rather subdued. It seemed that an age had passed since they all set forth.

Many new arrivals had reached the Camp in their absence and there was a great running to and fro, and the bustle of the setting up of tents. In greeting her friends, and answering the innumerable questions put to her, Sarah was forced to shake off her melancholy; and indeed, the pleasant novelty of the supper round the camp fire roused even Edmund from his brooding.

When all the company was assembled there were about three hundred souls. The method of selection had been such as to weed out all but the sincerely pious, but even among these there were many different types, and the inevitable clash and friction of human personalities was there from the first. The regular pastors looked with some doubtfulness at the free-lance preachers; the adherents of the different sects showed a tendency to hang together, and all the men wanted to preach. The women, for the most part, seemed always to be hanging round Rufus, and under all the pious talk there was an undercurrent of something else.

The leaders of the meeting were perhaps more conscious of this state of affairs than anyone else. They did not seem to see the great trees, nor the lovely distant sky; they did not seem to hear the rustling of the wind, nor to watch the shadows sweeping over the grass. Out of their mouths came words of piety, songs, aspirations, prayers; but these did not hold their real thoughts. The destinies of the human soul, the certainty of everlasting life, the mysteries of faith, touched them not. Was it Lottie or Silence Thrush who was to sit at the right hand of Rufus? Was Thomas or his teacher to preach first?

Rufus himself took, apparently, no part in all this. He let the women struggle over who was to have his company; he let Thomas outmanœuvre him, and he seemed to take no notice.

Sarah, watching it all, and for the first time seeing a good deal of Rufus, discovered that the vaguely uncomfortable feeling she associated with this man arose from a dislike which was almost distrust. It was dreadful to feel that way towards so holy and important a man, but there it was. She simply did not like him, and from the recognition of this fact to the questioning of his holiness was but a short step. Before the meetings were in full swing Sarah was aware that she had fallen quite away from the prevailing atmosphere of veneration, and had dropped out of the race to secure the company and attention of the great man. And Rufus was aware of it too.

In spite of all this, however, great religious fervour prevailed over the gathering. The assembled people were not the ignorant, untaught crowds who were so often swept away by the gusts of religious hysteria in country places. There was no shrieking, no falling on the ground in the throes of the conviction of sin. People wept, indeed, when their hearts were moved beyond endurance, and their faces shone with ecstasy when some aspect of the teaching came home to them with a special and personal conviction; but they were restrained even in the expression of their joy, and singing did not degenerate into shouting at Walnut Grove.

In spite of all the personal distractions and concealments it was an impressive time, and as the meetings got under way the contagion of their common feelings enhanced the earnestness of all. They felt themselves to be progressing in their knowledge of holy things, and the sermons and public prayers were but the outer framework of their devotion. In the tents in the afternoons earnest little gatherings were held, and at night private-experience meetings let light into their inmost hearts; on all sides there was a continual searching into the ways of God.

Thomas soon perceived that his own preaching, admirable though all declared it, was not going to be the central feature of the affair. There were too many preachers and active workers among the congregation for anyone, except of course Rufus himself, to stand out pre-eminent. They were willing to listen to Thomas for a little while without taking part, but not all day.

And yet, Thomas thought, it was he who had the eloquence and the gift of words; all these others had heavy tongues. Why should they cut him short? He could not see that the better he preached the less they would want to listen, and he was distinctly cross by the middle of the week, so that his children kept out of his way.

It was in this emergency that his own special revelation came to him. He had been praying and preaching all the morning, and had retired to his tent at

midday in a somewhat exhausted state. The springs of heavenly love seemed to have dried up, and he lay upon his camp bed and groaned from weariness. As he was lying there his wife and Patience Thrush came in. Thomas did not move, but groaned again; for he was always ready to make known his sufferings and he did not want anyone to under-estimate the burden of hard work he had to bear.

Sarah looked at him without any great anxiety. She knew his groans by heart, and could interpret them accurately. Just as she had understood the cries of her babies in their infancy, distinguishing the cry of hunger from that of rage, so now she detected the note of injured vanity in her husband's voice. She hoped it did him good to groan; she knew it did him harm for her to sympathize with him, and in consequence her glance was entirely calm.

Patience Thrush was more sympathetic, and went at once to his side with a face of great concern. She took his limp hand and gazed anxiously at him, asking the most comforting questions. Was it the Lord, working upon him, who took all his strength out of him thus? Was the burden too great to be borne?

Thomas answered very fully. The burden was too great. So much responsibility, so staggering an opportunity, so fearfully important a task! He felt unworthy to be the director of all those powerful, sincere Christians. And the Lord would give him no sign, no help, no comfort. He was in the valley of despair.

There are circumstances in which temptation does not bear its normal evil shape. Such a moment came upon Patience now. She was moved and excited out of her usual self by all the circumstances of the Camp Meeting, and she was ever the more impulsive of the sisters. So now, in sympathy for this handsome, suffering brother, she went down upon her knees beside his bed and began to talk earnestly to him in a low voice, revealing to him something which she was under oath to withhold.

Sarah busied herself with tidying the tent and did not hear what was said. A word now and then reached her ears, but she gave it no special attention; and the two heads drew close together in holy conference. Sarah was a little startled, and even turned sharply round at the sound of a kiss passing between them. But neither of them betrayed the faintest embarrassment, or even appeared to notice her movement. Thomas rose, and they left the tent together, and he no longer looked disposed to groan.

From the moment when Thomas and Patience whispered together in the tent, there was a change in Thomas Sonning. That very evening he prayed as even he had never prayed before. He seemed like one inspired, and the whole gathering woke to new life in consequence. The hope of some truly miraculous development sprang into every heart, and even poor melancholy Edmund was

aroused.

Thomas himself grew far less exacting. No longer did he trouble over the prominence of others, no longer did his children avoid him. Some work of grace had taken place within his own heart, and he let others preach as much as they chose. For his own part he entered upon a course of private exhortation within his tent, and held long, individual communings with one soul at a time.

Patience Thrush was generally at his elbow, and in the three next days, which were the last of the Meeting, they were often to be seen pacing side by side in holy converse under the trees, while others took up and carried forward the burden of the meetings. Both Thomas and Patience were removed from the conflict, and were plainly at peace.

Meanwhile, in spite of the new hope which had been born, the promised Revelation delayed. In vain they called out upon the Lord, in vain they begged Rufus to explain to them the secrets which he knew. The heavens opened not, and nothing happened; for hidden are the paths of the Lord.

On the very last day, however, even as they had given up hope, Rufus called them all together. The hour of Destiny, he said, had struck. There was a final announcement to make.

The Lord, it seemed, had revealed to Rufus four very precious secrets, and he was empowered from on High to pass them on to a chosen few, for the hour of their accomplishment was drawing near. Two of these secrets concerned mankind, he said, one concerned God, and one the relation between man and God. They must clearly understand, however, that if they desired to hear the word from his lips they must thereafter consecrate the whole of their lives and properties to the service of the new belief. It was not enough to believe; it was not enough to serve the Lord in one's spare time, for everything was demanded. Every cent of worldly goods, every hour of time, every tie of human love must be abandoned. Only to those who were ready for this sacrifice could the Truth be revealed.

Many of those present took fright at Rufus's words. A hubbub of talk arose, in the midst of which Rufus stood waiting. At last, holding up his hand for silence, he spoke again.

"Let everyone return to his own home," he said, "and ponder this call in his heart. No man can be saved on an impulse, nor give accidentally to the Lord. And once any one of you moves forward there will be no going back. Let everyone, therefore, return to his own life, and let us meet again on the first day of the tenth month. Remember, it is all or nothing, and there will be no turning back."

Sarah, who was among those alarmed at the prospect Rufus had held out, was bold enough to ask for further enlightenment.

"What do you mean, Friend, by abandoning every human tie?"

“Did not Jesus say, ‘You must forsake father and mother and follow Me’?” replied Rufus. “This is what I mean, and what the Lord means through me. Every man and woman who wishes to be saved must leave behind all the ties of earth. Each must surrender every affection, every bond, whether of marriage, or kinship, every friend and every worldly belonging into my keeping. The Lord, acting through me, will henceforth direct every hour of his life, and in holy obedience he shall live and be saved. To those who will make this renunciation I may reveal the four secret truths which the Lord has taught me; the truths of sinlessness, of immortality, of intercourse with God, and of His Second Coming. Ponder it well in your hearts, and choose the way of Salvation.”

Upon this note the Camp Meeting dispersed, and none knew what to think or believe.

CHAPTER X

THE LITTLE GIRLS

THOMAS AND SARAH and the whole party returned to Delaville to pass the five months of consideration before the day appointed by Rufus for the new revelation, and, in spite of the seriousness of the problem awaiting solution, it was impossible for any of them to escape the ordinary mundane sensation of happy familiarity in being home again. Sarah, indeed, made little effort to withstand it. An accumulation of household matters, and the calls upon her attention made by her children and her friends and all her accustomed occupations, at once engulfed her, and left little leisure for quiet thought. Edmund returned to his college, and life went on as before.

Sarah told the story of the Meeting many times, being asked for it first by James, and later by each in turn of her intimates; and at every telling the events of those ten days crystallized a little more definitely in her mind. She did not openly acknowledge—but she was aware of beginning to suspect—that Rufus was making too high a claim: in fact, her own decision as to what she would personally do on the first day of the tenth month was already reached.

It was impossible to deny, however, that Thomas was in a very remarkable state of holiness and rapture, and Sarah was greatly struck by this fact. Some very unusual blessing had come to him, and the Baptism of the Spirit which he claimed to have enjoyed at Walnut Grove was continually renewed in the succeeding weeks. He was a more constant visitor than ever at the house next door, and it was often midnight before he and Lottie returned from those sessions of prayer and edification from which Sarah was so signally shut out.

As was to be expected, the solemn pronouncement made by Rufus had caused a great stir in the religious world of Delaville. Some there were who were filled with hope; but for the most part the religious community hesitated, as Sarah did, before the complete sacrifice demanded by the new prophet. In vain Thomas argued, and proved, that this was what the Bible specifically required of the chosen; in vain he dilated upon the heavenly ecstasy he was himself enjoying from the partial foretaste of one of the four secrets. Something invincibly practical rose up in ordinary mortal minds which resisted his enthusiasm entirely. The Bible, people said, did not mean a literal giving up of all we have: a world in which this were practised would be inconceivable. The soul and its welfare was most important, of course, but still, common sense forbade.

All through May and June Thomas battled with this frame of mind, and by the end of the latter month he had weeded out the sheep from the goats fairly clearly. The faithful, who would follow Rufus, seemed to be about thirty in number: the unbelievers and the doubtful were more numerous. But, of course, there was always hope and prayer; and Thomas, reporting to Rufus how things were going, was preserved from disappointment by the absolute certainty of his leader's conviction of success.

Among those who had been at Walnut Grove and the others who had heard of the revelation there were as many men as women. It was noticeable, however, that of the number who had clearly decided to accept the conditions laid down by Rufus, by far the greater majority were women, and of these again most were unmarried. It was natural enough—since these had neither urgent family responsibilities nor heavy business calls to withhold them—but it was not quite what Thomas had expected. However, of course, every soul was of equal importance, and perhaps, in its way, it would be a convenience, in the beginning, not to have too many ministers of the Gospel to share in the new venture. Thomas said as much to Rufus when reporting upon the progress of conversions: but Rufus vouchsafed no answer.

There was one thing about which Rufus did speak, however. He required Thomas to give him an exact account of all those, of whose thoroughgoing conversions he was sure, and also of those of whom he was doubtful, and he obtained a list not only of their names, but of their positions in life, their age, business, family and wealth. After consulting the Lord in regard to this list, Rufus decided that he would, as far as might be, grant an interview to each of those inquirers, one at a time. Meanwhile, he counselled Thomas to spend no more efforts upon general evangelistic work, but rather to concentrate upon those who were already known to be anxious for salvation, and whose inclination towards the new movement was strong.

Acting upon this advice Thomas abandoned most of his public preaching and devoted his time to intensive exhortation among the band of the faithful, and particularly to wrestling, with the greatest perseverance, with two or three individual and recalcitrant souls.

Under the new régime Sarah's duties naturally changed. Since Thomas was no longer anxious to help all comers, there was much refusing of invitations and turning away of enquirers to be done. It was harrowing work, and Sarah disliked it heartily, and felt it so ill-judged and unkind that she was exceedingly unwilling to do it. Indeed, in so far as the actual callers went, she refused to carry out instructions, and herself received and offered to pray with many of those who were seeking her husband. Some few, however, Thomas still received, and these remained closeted with him for hours, one at a time.

It was a law of the household that the study door was not to be opened, or

even so much as knocked upon when Thomas and a would-be convert were within. And outside that closed door Sarah did the best she could with the throng.

Among those whose visits to Thomas now became of almost daily occurrence there were two ladies from the West, a Mrs. Carp, who was a widow, and her daughter, Caroline. The older lady was wealthy and in indifferent health: and although most anxious to be a Believer she was one of those rather elusive people who toyed with every creed. In spite of exhortations from Thomas, she was known to be visiting, simultaneously, a Healer from Detroit, and it was impossible to believe that anything ever remained fixed in her credulous, but inconstant mind.

The daughter, Carrie, seemed far more earnest-minded: and, indeed, it was only her influence which held her mother at all: for, up till now, in the other creeds she had sampled, a month had been the limit of her continuity.

Sarah could not but wonder why so much attention should be paid to these two women. In her eyes the elder was but a foolish, inconsequent creature, incapable of sustained impressions, and, therefore, not worth sustained effort. And the daughter, earnest and intense as she appeared, impressed Sarah somehow as not quite genuine.

Sarah had by now a wide experience of the various manifestations of religious anxiety in other women. She made up her mind about people quickly and was exceedingly positive about her judgments, and, even before the intensive cultivation of the Carps had begun, she was certain that they were not the stuff of which pioneer New Believers could be made.

Somehow or other Sarah worried over this waste of effort more than it seemed to deserve. She was really shocked to find that Rufus himself was giving instruction to Mrs. Carp, and she could not refrain from telling her sister of her astonishment.

“I don’t know why I should care, Anna,” she said, “but the fact is I can’t abide either of those two women.”

“Men have no judgment,” said Anna soothingly, and the sisters laughed together.

“No, but honestly,” Anna continued, “you know how easily men are taken in. That Carrie Carp has all the marks of a hypocrite, to me. And I shouldn’t be surprised if she was simply running after notoriety. I can’t help it if I am uncharitable.”

Sarah was delighted that her sister fell so quickly into her own way of thinking.

“It is a comfort to talk with you, Anna,” she said, and the sisters laughed again.

“It’s not only Thomas, you know,” Sarah went on. “I’m not greatly

surprised at Thomas, when I think of all the things you and I know about.” They smiled again. “But Brother Rufus himself is paying great attention to them. Mrs. Carp has been sent for three times already this week: and you know as well as I do that she’s only just short of half-witted. And yet there is dear sister Kate Taylor, who would give her eye teeth for an explanation from the fountain head—and she is a real earnest Bible Christian, as you know.”

Anna looked up from her sewing.

“Dear sister Kate is poor,” she said, in a perfectly expressionless voice.

This time the sisters did not laugh. On the contrary, Sarah began to protest vehemently against the implication of Anna’s words. There was no question, there could be no question, of the utter sincerity and consecration of Brother Rufus. She wasn’t herself prepared to give up her children, and everything else, into his guidance; but that didn’t mean that she didn’t believe, with all her heart, that he was a truly saintly man, who had a grasp of spiritual things quite out of her own reach. She rejected Anna’s hint with indignation.

For all that, however, it stuck in her mind, as such hints do, and it was impossible to dislodge it. For the Widow Carp was very rich, and the new Movement was as yet very poor.

It was not only in this form that the question of money troubled Sarah. With the cessation of public engagements, the greater part of Thomas’s income at once fell off, and Sarah not only had fears for the future, but difficulties in the present. In vain she thought of reducing her household expenses, the entertaining went on as freely as ever. Indeed, it seemed hardly worth while to make any serious changes, for on the first day of the tenth month everything would be upset in any case: and Thomas, she supposed, would then hand over every cent he possessed to the Lord. What would happen after that she had not the slightest idea, except for the knowledge of her own determination to resist any attempt to make her do likewise. But all the same it was distinctly worrying and troublesome to be so nearly running into debt.

In the midst of these difficulties a trouble which touched her far more closely fell upon Sarah, for her youngest child, Martha, fell ill of measles. Sarah at once threw everything else aside. The other two little girls were packed off to their Aunt Anna’s house. Lottie was allowed to move into the house next door, to be with the Thrush sisters, and Thomas was left to manage his callers as best he could.

For the first few days Martha was exceedingly ill. Her painful tossings and the feverish restlessness brought out in her mother a sort of determined calm, from which every troublesome thought was banished. Sarah felt that by concentrating her own will she might save the child, and she had no thought for anything else at all.

The effort necessary to turn her own health and strength to the service of

her daughter went all unnoticed by Sarah. It was as natural to her to feel with her children as it was to admire them; and when Martha began to recover Sarah was not conscious of the slackening of her effort. She was only aware of being a little more sleepy than usual.

As convalescence set in Sarah found that, for the first time for many years, she had time on her hands. Confined to the upper part of the house by the fear of infection, and cut off from all the busy habits of her life, Sarah had nothing to do. There were no books at hand but the Bible, and if there had been she would not have read them. There was nothing to pass the hours when Martha was asleep but solitary thought and prayer. The quiet of this convalescent period was a welcome change, and the first few days of it were given up to a somewhat miscellaneous sorting of ideas. The accumulated impressions of the household next door, the rather uncomfortable atmosphere of Walnut Grove, the uncertainty as to what Rufus meant by his four impending revelations, and her general uneasiness about Lottie and Edmund, and about what would follow the cleavage between herself and Thomas upon the first day of the tenth month—all this, together with an undefined feeling that something had gone wrong with them all, was what darted and jangled confusedly in Sarah's mind during her first days of leisure. She did not think in specific words or phrases, nor was it at all coherent or connected, but it ran through her head in something the following way:

Martha's pale cheeks—she had first noticed them months ago—from which grew a speculation as to illnesses, and whether measles lurked long in the body before it developed; and thus to the other two children—would they get it, had they already got it stored up in their little bodies? And so to Anna, with the question of how they were all getting on. The little notes Anna sent in daily said they were as good as gold, the dear children: but then, Anna would be bound to say that whether they were or not. But what an awful thing Anna had said about the wealth of Mrs. Carp! With a pang of distaste, which the approach of her thoughts to the subject of those Carps involved, Sarah began abruptly to visualize the dark face of Brother Rufus; and then the thought of poor pale Lottie came into her mind, and she began to wonder and wonder what it could be which ailed the girl. From this it was but a step to asking the Lord, "Oh, Lord, surely there is nothing dreadful, nothing wrong in Thy Revelations?" And with an urgency greater than she had known for a long time Sarah began to pray for guidance. It seemed as if all was confused and uncertain about her. She could not get rid of a sense that she was out of place, foreign and unwelcome in the inmost circle of the New Believers, and she knew that this was because she could not quite accept the doctrine that through Rufus lay the one path to Salvation. "Let me not be self-willed and obstinate, let me not stand out against Thy true revelations," she prayed: and then,

unexpectedly, “Oh, Lord, save my children from the toils of the Evil One.” She made no actual connection; she was not aware that she was coming to regard Rufus as a false prophet. But so it was.

Martha’s fever abated, and in all essentials she was well. But, rather to Sarah’s surprise, she showed no desire for the quarantine to be over, and did not seem to miss her sisters at all. To her mother’s repeated saying, “Wouldn’t it be nice if Bess and Sally could be here,” she gave no rapturous answer, but seemed instead to value being alone with her mother more than anything else.

Passionately as Sarah loved the child, and deeply as she was touched by this exclusive devotion, she could not think it was natural, and she began to worry a little over the continued laziness of her patient. She thought there must be something weighing upon the little girl’s mind and she decided to see if she could find out what it was by asking careful questions.

Sarah was not a good diplomat, however, and clever little Martha was not slow to see what her mother was doing; and thereupon, with a sudden burst of tears the little girl scrambled into her lap, and buried her face against her shoulder.

“Oh, Mother, Mother: I have so wanted to tell you!”

Even after this opening it was not an easy task to make out what the trouble was. It was only after a good deal of coaxing and comforting that Sarah succeeded; but gradually Martha took courage and the thing became clear.

What finally emerged was this: that Patience Thrush had made great friends with all three children, and they had gradually fallen into the habit of spending most of their spare afternoons in the house next door. She had played the piano to them; and music was a thing until then unknown in that sober Puritan household! All three had been enchanted with the music—especially Martha, it seemed; but, knowing it was not allowed to them, they had said nothing at home. Miss Patience, apparently, had encouraged this secrecy—which, in spite of all the enjoyment, had weighed heavily upon the children at first, though it had grown easier after a time. Martha had been the only one who liked to listen to the music in quiet. The others had begun, as she said, “to jump about” while it was going on. With what a pang Sarah recognized this as dancing. How treacherously her guests next door had behaved! But worse was to come. When they had come back from the Camp Meeting there had been a spell of very hot weather—Sarah remembered it well—and the “jumping about” had been exhausting. And it was then that Miss Patience had suggested that they would be more comfortable without their shoes and stockings. This had not seemed wrong—they had been allowed to paddle at White Pastures—and Sarah would have thought nothing much of it had she not remembered the tale Patience had told her about the overcoming of shame. She hugged her little daughter tighter when this part of the confession was reached, and did not trust

herself to make any comment at all.

From discarding those stockings they had gone on to discarding other things, and, the hot weather still holding, they had soon been dancing naked in Miss Patience's room. There was a charm about it, evidently, for though they knew it to be wrong they continued to go; and even when the warm spell passed they did not return to their garments. "It felt so nice; the tunes seemed to soak right in." Even now Martha had a pleasant memory of those afternoons. But, of course, it was horribly wicked. That was the thing which weighed on them all, and it was in vain that Miss Patience assured them that it was godly.

"We knew you wouldn't like it." Martha wept again as she admitted it. "But we had promised and promised Miss Patience not to tell, and we did not dare. Oh, Mother, I am so glad you know at last!"

In the midst of all this shocking business Sarah extracted one ray of comfort. No one but Miss Patience had ever been present at these orgies, and it seemed unlikely that anyone else even knew of them. The children had promised to tell no one, not even Miss Silence or Lottie, and they had kept their promise. So far as they were concerned, therefore, the thing could be forgotten. There need be no open scandal.

Long after the pitiful little story was ended Sarah sat nursing and comforting her youngest daughter and doing the best she could to remove the impression of guilt and shame from the child's conscience. Monstrous and abominable as she thought the whole thing, she did not want to frighten the little girl. The sooner she forgot it the less evil would its consequences be, and so she dwelt more on the discomfort and wrong of secrecy, of doing things one was ashamed for others to know, than on what really seemed to her the greater sin. And presently the child slept.

After an hour of reflection, which only seemed to augment her rage, Sarah threw aside all thought of spreading the infection and marched downstairs and straight into that fatal house next door. She was determined to have it out at once with Miss Patience, and, cutting short all the polite enquiries and ejaculations with which the two sisters began to greet her, she abruptly announced that she wanted to talk with Miss Patience alone.

In some surprise Miss Silence acquiesced, and the two withdrew to a bedroom which, from the presence of a piano, Sarah realized must be the very room where the wicked misleading of her daughters had taken place.

There was no beating about the bush. The door was hardly shut before Sarah had demanded an explanation and, without waiting for an answer, had let forth a flood of reproaches upon the other lady.

Her words were very plain, and the tone of voice in which she spoke was no less emphatic.

“Let me tell you you have committed a truly monstrous wickedness, Sister Patience. I can hardly understand how the Lord could have allowed you to think of such a thing.”

She spoke with the indignation of an outraged mother, combined with that of a disillusioned believer; and Sister Patience was unable to get in a word.

“He that scandalizeth one of those little ones, it were better that a millstone were hanged about his neck.”

In her indignation Sarah was marching to and fro, never looking at the other woman; but after a time, when the first flush of her rage had found expression, she glanced at her victim. It was with an almost staggering surprise that she perceived in Miss Patience no evidence either of shame or of agitation. The lady was seated upon a chair, smiling to herself, and with her hands loosely clasped in her lap.

“Have you quite finished, Sister?” she enquired, in a voice of exaggerated calm. And Sarah could only stare in amazement for an answer.

“If you really have finished,” the other went on, “and if your mind is quite relieved of its intemperate load, perhaps you will allow me to speak.”

It was then her turn. Without abandoning her attitude of calmness, or allowing her voice to vary at all from a low and level cadence, Miss Patience explained her point of view. She had done an immense kindness to those children; she had turned their feet towards the only path which led to eternal happiness. Sarah, no doubt, was not fit to understand such things, but that was no reason why her innocent children should not be allowed a better chance. The truth—which Sarah was clearly unfit to receive—set people free from the trammels of the body. “In Me all things are pure.”

This tone of certainty and of superiority was hard to tolerate, and the angry Sarah walked rapidly to and fro while the little sermon was delivered, and once or twice made as if to interrupt. It was what she might have expected, though it was far more boldly sustained than on that other time when there had first been talk of the Fall. Putting the theological aspect aside for the moment, therefore, as being one which required far more reasoned thinking than she was at present in the mood to attempt, Sarah concentrated her next attack upon the deceitfulness fostered in the children, and upon the manifest wrong of teaching and influencing them contrary to the wishes of the parents.

But at this point Patience interrupted again, saying in a soft and very gentle voice, “Are you sure, Sister Sarah, that it is contrary to the wishes of their father?”

Sarah stopped short in her walk, and wheeled round to face her antagonist.

“What do you mean?” she asked, and even as she said it a suspicion of the truth came creeping in upon her. Unwilling to face it, she repeated her question still more fiercely. “What do you mean? Do you mean that Thomas knew what

you were doing and approved it? I don't believe you, and I shall go straight and ask him."

Sarah had had a dim hope that this would bring Patience out of her exasperating calm and would lead to something. But no, Patience still smiled that intolerably superior smile.

"That is what I advise you to do, Sister Sarah. Good evening."

CHAPTER XI

CAROLINE CARP

SARAH SONNING WAS a healthy woman and a good sleeper, but that night she could not sleep at all. She did not even try, but hour after hour she marched to and fro in the top corridor of her own house, wrestling with the flood of frightful suspicions to which Miss Patience's insinuations had given rise. Much of the night she was praying, as she had never in all her endless prayings prayed before; not for guidance, or for her own soul, or for that intimate intercourse with God for which her soul longed, but rather the blind elementary praying of a child, asking for the moon. She wanted God to arrange it so that things might not be as they were.

For all her intercessions, however, Sarah knew in her heart that nothing was likely to change; and as the night wore on consciousness of disaster increased. She knew now, or thought she knew, the secret of the people next door. The mystery was explained—and how terribly! They had fallen into frightful error, and had drawn Thomas with them. At any rate, she vowed, she would save Edmund! And something too must be done about Lottie. It was abominable to think of all that might happen to her.

But perhaps it might not be quite so bad. Thomas might be able to reassure her. It might be a vagary of Miss Patience—it might have nothing to do with Rufus or Lottie. In vain Sarah tried to believe this. The scandal of Corinth must have had some foundation. Alas, for the evil day when they had opened to these strangers the house next door!

It was unexpectedly difficult for Sarah to secure an interview with her husband the next morning. When she declared the quarantine over, as she did as soon as the household was awake, a mass of details poured upon her. Martha had first to be given breakfast and settled for the day. Then the cook insisted upon a long interview; then Anna came to call, and the matter of the return of the other two little girls had to be discussed and a date decided. And by that time Thomas was immured in his study with an enquirer, and therefore not to be disturbed.

Sarah, however, was in no frame of mind to respect Thomas's prohibitions. She went boldly to the door and knocked upon it; then, receiving no answer, she turned the handle.

The door was locked.

For an instant or two Sarah did not attribute any special significance to

this. She merely rattled the handle and said, in a voice which was clearly audible within:

“Thomas, Thomas, open the door. I must speak with you at once.”

A rather long pause followed, and while she stood thus waiting outside the locked door the obvious inference to be drawn from it came into her mind. In the shock of that suspicion she half turned to run away, but then, driving down her panic, she turned back. She must have it out with Thomas, no matter what came.

A moment or two later the door opened, and Thomas, with a face of thunder, bade her come in.

The room looked as usual, except that Carrie Carp was lying upon the leather sofa, with her eyes shut and her hands folded on her breast. No sooner was Sarah inside and the door again shut than Thomas went to Carrie’s side and, kneeling down, he took up what was apparently an unfinished prayer for her soul. Without paying any attention to Sarah at all, the prayer went on and on; and Sarah was unable to interrupt it.

She stood and watched, and felt as if all was a dream.

At last Carrie gave signs of life, and, with a good deal of gasping and sighing she sat up, and then Thomas tenderly helped her to her feet. Neither of them took any notice of Sarah. They then took hands and knelt down together by the side of the sofa, while Thomas offered up a thanksgiving for the blessings the Lord had vouchsafed to them that morning. Then they rose and he led her to the door, and held it open for her. As she passed out he planted a fatherly kiss upon her forehead; and then she was gone.

It was with an expression very different from the benevolence of this last action that Thomas turned back to his wife. He was more angry than she had ever seen him, and he made no effort to conceal it, and under the torrent of reproaches he poured out upon her she did not find the inclination to say a word. Indeed, as he stormed and scolded, all hope of having any serious talk with him faded away.

In the rush and torrent of his eloquent anger Thomas forgot to ask his wife why she had rapped upon his door, and she did not trouble to remind him.

Sarah abandoned as useless her intention of speaking openly, not for that moment only, but for ever. What was the use, after all? She knew all his evasions so well; he hadn’t really the sort of mind which could face things clearly, or at any rate he hadn’t the desire to face them. Her consciousness of contempt for her husband began that morning and never afterwards left her.

Since there was nothing to be done with Thomas, Sarah now determined to go to Rufus himself. He, at any rate, was not a weak man, and she judged he would not be one to shirk any issue. From him she would get a clear statement of what this dangerous teaching was and what action it led to. And then, she

thought, she would tell him quite plainly that neither she nor her children—no, nor the little money they had either—would be under his control any more. So she planned, during luncheon, and then, feeling very sleepy after the storms of the last hours, she lay composedly down upon her bed and slept till evening. When she woke she calmly rose, washed her face and smoothed her hair, and set out to interview the prophet.

There was no difficulty in seeing Rufus.

Rather to Sarah's relief, Miss Patience was not in evidence, but Miss Silence, after going up to obtain permission, showed her at once into the dim upper room where Rufus was sitting. Lottie was there, as usual, seated upon the sofa; Rufus was standing up and, on Sarah's entry, Lottie quietly stole away.

It took Sarah several minutes to grow accustomed to the dim light, and this physical preoccupation prevented her from opening the attack as she had expected. Instead, she found herself on her knees beside Rufus, while he prayed for right guidance in dealing with "the difficulty from which our sister is suffering." It was not a propitious opening; but Sarah was not one of those for whom tactful approaches are necessary. The will which drove her was powerful enough to override the dim light, the prayerful atmosphere and all.

"Brother Hollins," she said, the moment he paused to draw breath and even before they had risen from their knees, "I did not come here to pray with you, nor to get spiritual help. I came to ask some plain questions."

Rufus said nothing, and they accomplished the change of position and sat down upon the sofa.

By now Sarah was accustomed to the light and could see, though indistinctly, the outline of his face.

"I want to know whether it is with your knowledge and approval that Sister Patience advocates going about naked?"

"Is that all that troubles you?" asked Rufus in a quiet voice.

"Not by any means," replied Sarah promptly. "I want to know whether I have got it right about the secret doctrine, and whether you really claim that the Lord means us to go to work to cure ourselves of modesty. And that He means us all, men and women, to be free to do anything we like with our bodies so long as we don't mind doing it?"

"Is that all?" asked Rufus again.

"I should think it was enough," answered Sarah, and waited for what he would say.

There was a moment or two of silence.

"The ways of the Lord are strange," said Rufus presently; and there was a tone in his voice which Sarah had never heard in any voice before, a tone of exaltation, almost of rapture.

“Strange are the ways of the Lord. Who can hope of himself to understand the meanings of Eternal Wisdom? And yet I will tell you, I KNOW, for the Lord has revealed it unto me.”

Sarah waited. If the Lord had revealed things to Rufus, perhaps Rufus would reveal them to her.

“Sister Sarah,” the prophet said, after a moment, in a voice full of gentleness and persuasion, “I know well that doubt and suspicion have long been in your heart. I have prayed and wrestled for your soul, and I will now for the last time hold out to you a chance of salvation. Take it, oh, my sister, I implore you.”

Sarah was disarmed by this appeal.

“I ask nothing better,” she said sincerely, “only show me the way.”

“The way is hard, my sister, and to such as you it is doubly difficult, for you have an obstinate, positive mind. The judgment of man is nothing; all must be surrendered to the Lord. I tell you, Sister Sarah, that until you hear the voice of Jehovah you are as blind and as dead as the dumb unborn. Listen! The Lord has revealed unto me that during the 24,000 years, before the submersion of the continent of Pau in the Pacific Ocean, and during the 55,000 years of the Kosmean era since that time, the law and the commandments have been misunderstood. But now, Sister Sarah, *now* His day is approaching, and the Second Coming of the Lord is at hand. On that day, doubt it not, those who have received the truth will be saved from death, but the rest of the world will perish.”

The prophet paused, and his voice fell away into silence.

“What are all these trivial questions you are asking?” he began presently, upon another note. “Do you doubt the need for overcoming and subduing the body? You need to be lifted to higher levels of faith, to take hold of unappropriated promises. Do you not know the principle of ascending fellowship? Can you not see that the old religion is wearing out and that we are the new-born, whose mould has been cast in the forges of Divine Providence? You hesitate and draw back before the sacrifice of your body, you are filled with carnal thoughts, but know that they are truly Satan’s doing in the flesh. ‘Naturally I shrink,’ says the Evangelist, ‘but I will be obedient.’ So must you be.”

As he went on his voice swung back again to the mysterious note upon which he had begun.

“All humanity is lost,” he cried, “save those who accept these teachings. Nothing is so clear to me as the moral uses of dark things, but the time of revelation is not yet. Until you see these things, yes, and feel them in your flesh, how can you taste the peace of the beloved disciple upon the bosom of Jesus? The guiding of the body: that is consecration, but you are in the outer

darkness. Only *believe*, and I will save you from all the snares which abound.”

The thrilling voice paused, and for a moment even the matter-of-fact Sarah felt a magic spell upon her. She saw a glimpse of the promised peace, she had a taste of the rapture of being one of the Chosen. Even she, hostile as she had been, was lifted out of herself in that dim room, by the moving sound of the dark threats and strange, incomprehensible promises of the prophet. Only to believe! How she wished she could.

But *what* was she to believe? Common sense came creeping back as the silence lasted, and the memory of that thrilling sound grew dim. He had said nothing, after all, nothing that she could catch hold of.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” she said at last, and then, to her own surprise, she added abruptly, “and I don’t think that you do either.”

A sigh was the first answer from Rufus. Then he murmured as if to himself:

“She is evil, she is false, Lord! Lord! deliver me from this scarlet woman. Yea, but I know Thou wilt give me the victory, for they that walk in darkness, the Lord shall destroy.”

A feeling of utter helplessness came over Sarah.

“Your room is none too light, Brother Rufus, and your words are perfectly dark. I will go back to the sunshine.”

Sarah emerged from the dim room upon that, her mind in a whirl of confusion. What did it all mean? The man was mad surely, if he was not worse than mad, possessed of the devil. And yet, thinking it over and over, as she did that night, she realized that there was much that was remarkable in his teaching, and perhaps some grain of truth. Furious and indignant as she was at the facts, and their inevitable consequences, Sarah still fully admitted the reality of Rufus’s devotion to his Master, and the sincerity of his belief in his Revelations. Apart from this error (which surely was of Satan) he was a holy man. Perhaps the error itself was but a proof of it, for it was well known that Satan employed his greatest arts to ensnare those most dear to the Almighty. It was not for her to judge.

Rufus might be sincere and even in his way saintly, however, and yet he might be terribly wrong: and no reasonings of the mind could prevent Sarah from being exceedingly angry about the matter of the children. The thing was a monstrous wickedness, and would lead to scandal, and worse. She would fight it with every weapon she had, and would save her young people from the scars of the burning. It must be open war, henceforth, between her and the prophet—and as a background to all her thoughts was the knowledge that it would be open war between herself and her husband too.

Thomas for his part was exceedingly angry with his wife. Her unwarranted intrusion into his study had upset him completely, and his rage against her

showed no signs of having abated by breakfast time on the following day. Not a word did he say, not a letter did he pass to her to read. He was determined to show his displeasure by aloofness.

Sarah did not mind this exhibition of ill-temper at all. She was, indeed, rather glad to be freed of the expected labour of dealing with the piles of unanswered letters which must have accumulated during the quarantine. She had plenty of other things to do; and as to the explanation with Thomas which was ahead of her, she bided her time. Talking was not much good. As soon as she saw the way clearly she would just tell him her decision and then act upon it. He might talk then till he was tired.

This intention, however, was frustrated by Thomas himself that same day. For after a brief visit he paid to the house next door he sought Sarah and opened the subject himself.

What did she mean by her insubordination and unbelief? he asked indignantly. Like Rufus, Thomas plunged into a haze of words, but, unlike Rufus, there seemed no corresponding exaltation. To Sarah, familiar even to weariness with all his turns of speech, what Thomas said in defence of the new doctrine seemed sheer nonsense. She told him so.

Upon that the centre of his discourse shifted, and it was now the sin of curiosity with which he reproached her. These new Revelations, he said, were only for the elect, for those whose souls were brought to humility by long prayer and wrestling. To pry out the secret, to bring to it a carnal and unregenerate mind, was little short of blasphemy. She must beware, for her immortal soul stood in great danger. Had she forgotten the Unforgivable Sin?

Sarah listened to all this with what patience she could. She was tempted, indeed, to blurt out her suspicions of his own conduct, to accuse him in return not only of a carnal mind, but of an all too carnal body. But she refrained. What was the use of arguing with a windbag? As the whirlpool of her husband's words eddied round her, Sarah deliberately turned her mind away. She recited to herself the 143rd Psalm.

And Thomas talked his fill and felt better, and Sarah kept her temper, and felt worse; it is a common human experience.

After these various scenes, attempts and explanations, life settled down again into an apparently quiet routine. The three little girls were sent away to the country—this time under the charge of dear Aunt Anna. Their mother had had a little quiet talk with Bessie and Sallie about the deceit they had practised, and they had both said they were sorry and would not act so again. Sarah had felt that Bessie had meant what she said, but about Sally she was more doubtful, and she had asked her sister to keep a special watch on that child. She had, indeed, been sorely tempted to tell Anna the whole tale, but after some reflection she had decided it was better not. If scandals came upon the

new movement, as she feared they would, she must at least have the comfort of knowing that she had done what lay in her power to keep her family clear of them. So she buried the whole trouble in her heart, and confided her anxieties to no one, except always the Lord.

Among these anxieties the problem of Lottie now loomed very large. Sarah could not but imagine the most dreadful things, and she felt it was her Christian duty to try to rescue the girl from what she now considered little better than a house of ill-fame. Protest to Thomas or Rufus being manifestly impossible, Sarah tried the expedient of an appeal to Lottie's father, and she wrote to him, not indeed quite plainly, but with sufficient vigour. "The child has gone to live with most unsuitable people; I am worried for her safety, and I think you should come and see for yourself." It was surely a clear warning enough, but the answer she received was baffling in the extreme.

"Your husband had already written me about dear Lottie, saying how highly he approved of her action. He regrets, as I do, that you have not approved of her leaving you, but he tells me she was sadly over-worked in his household. And I know the dear child is not strong. I am most grateful, as you know, for your kindness to the girl, but cannot feel that your judgment in this matter is right. My cousin Thomas has my full confidence, and it is to his care that Lottie is entrusted."

In the face of this, what could Sarah do? Thomas had cut the ground from under her feet, and the only hope left was to meet the child herself somewhere outside the fatal house. But Lottie never seemed to go out at all. Perhaps when Edmund came home he would rescue her; but Sarah did not want Edmund to run the risk of contamination himself. The Lord must settle it as He willed.

This was the state of affairs when Edmund wrote asking what he should do for the summer vacation. He himself suggested that he should join a camping party with some college friends, and in a private note, meant for his mother's eyes alone, he had added that unless Lottie was going to leave the house next door he did not think he could bear to be in Delaville. "You will advise me, Mother; I leave it in your hands."

Here was a difficult decision! If he came he might perhaps be the means of rescuing Lottie: and yet it was at best equally possible that he himself might be led astray. The longing to see the boy, too, was very strong; but then, it would be dreadful to see him unhappy!

What the Lord had to say in this matter was not at first very clear, but in the end, through an unexpected channel, He made His wishes plain. James arrived one evening to visit Sarah, and having heard of Edmund's proposal through his wife, he told Sarah without hesitation or beating about the bush that she ought to keep him away. So strongly was he convinced of this, he said, that he was prepared to undertake the expense of the boy's camping outfit and

travelling expenses, and this offer, after a little hesitation, Sarah and Thomas accepted. In their hearts both of them were glad that Edmund should have no opportunity to see their troubles.

July and August passed and nothing altered. The visits of Mrs. Carp to Rufus and of her daughter to Thomas continued, and the band of the faithful met and prayed often together. Sarah did not attend these meetings. Her time was spent in more commonplace worldly cares: she had rejected the Revelation.

During these two months Sarah made an effort to put her money affairs into order, so as to be ready for the impending separation from Thomas. She consulted a lawyer in the city, choosing one who knew nothing of her family or circumstances, and was appalled to find that in the eyes of the law the little accumulation of shares she possessed belonged entirely to her husband and could be disposed of only by him. Nothing but the house next door (that fatal possession) turned out to be really her own, but that had been left by her father to trustees for her benefit, and was at any rate not the property of Thomas.

This being the state of the law, Sarah began at once to save as much money as she could out of the household expenses, and, without the least scruple of conscience, she also sold for ready cash everything which she thought Thomas would not be likely to miss. Under the pretext of a grand house-cleaning she even took things out of the ground floor rooms, and thus realized a sum of \$500, which she wore in a bag tied round her neck. The first day of the tenth month was coming quickly upon them. She was not going to be caught napping!

One morning, early in September, as Sarah was sitting at her desk finishing her morning correspondence, she was surprised to see Carrie Carp entering the room. Her hatred of this young woman was so thoroughly unchristian that she felt it necessary to welcome her with special politeness, and hurried forward for this purpose. Even as she did so she perceived that something was wrong. Carrie's eyes were red, as with weeping, her hands were clasped together in an unnatural way, and there was something wild and distressing in her whole air.

Sarah saw in a moment that the girl was about to fling herself into her arms; and, in order to prevent this unwelcome occurrence, she quickly and decidedly pulled forward a rocking-chair, and drew her visitor into it.

She was not mistaken as to what was coming. Hardly were they seated before the young woman burst into sobs, trembling and shaking all over, and it was with the greatest difficulty that she managed to utter any words. She was, however, evidently trying to say something, and Sarah, who was by no means inexperienced in hysteria, tried by the adoption of a rather loud and bracing tone to break the current of the attack. It was, nevertheless, some considerable time before the girl controlled herself enough to speak plainly; and even then

her narrative was falteringly told, with many pauses to hide her head in her hands and groan.

The upshot of her confession was that she thought she was with child by Thomas Sonning. She had only that day—by chance—discovered the possibility, for in her complete ignorance of every physical process she had not known the meaning or the consequences of what they had been doing in the study with the locked door. It had seemed at first, so she told Sarah, a strange and rather terrible form of worship. She had believed—Thomas, it appeared, had told her—that the creature drew nearer to the Creator, by first coming as close as possible to another creature. And, indeed, it had seemed to be so! Even in the midst of her hysteria and her shame Carrie could not keep the thrill out of her voice as she spoke of those wonderful experiences. But now that she knew, what was she to believe? She came to Sarah because she was the only one who could tell her. Was it all horror and deception, and the betrayal of innocence—or could it not be true, after all, that to the pure all things were permitted? Thomas had said—her explanation grew incoherent and broken by bitter cryings, and in the midst of these, she began to exclaim, with a new terror. What of the baby which would presently be born? How could she explain the oddity of it all to her friends? She began hurriedly to ask Sarah questions about the physical side of life, betraying her utter ignorance. How long would it be before the baby came? Was it uncomfortable? What was she to do? Would her mother be angry? Sarah must help her through; she was her only resource. And off the girl went again into a paroxysm of weeping.

Sarah listened to all this without any very sharp emotion of her own. Her mind was busy with speculation as to how a public scandal could be avoided, and though she spoke more or less kindly to Carrie, her sympathy and even her attention were lacking. Towards Thomas she felt only an intensified contempt. She could imagine him so well, with his holy sophistries and his self-righteous talk. There was no need to dwell on that. The thing was, how could this silly, terrified girl be quieted, and the thing be hushed up?

As the scene went on and Carrie showed more and more plainly the depth of her ignorance, the idea came into Sarah's head that there might be no baby in the case at all. Therefore she fell to questioning Carrie closely as to her symptoms, and was presently convinced that there was no cause for alarm. This she tried to impress upon the young woman, but found no response. Either Carrie was worn out and could take in no new idea, or she clung to her martyrdom and was unwilling to be deprived of it. Whichever it was, Sarah could make no impression upon her, and, though she used her plainest speech and demanded the clearest promises, she could feel no assurance that Carrie would not run straight on to some other person with her tale. She did, indeed, promise silence, and say that she would leave everything in dear, kind Sarah's

hands. But by the time this was extracted she had reached such a washed-out condition and was so little conscious of what she was doing that there was no reliance to be put upon her, and Sarah was most unwilling to let her go out of her sight. However, the mother called for her, and no pretext for keeping her seeming plausible, the two devotees went away together.

No sooner was Carrie gone than Sarah went to Thomas's study and, knocking once more upon the door, she waited to be let in.

Thomas was not alone; Sister Patience was with him, but Sarah was admitted without demur, and Patience took her departure. The two ladies did not exchange a word.

As soon as she was gone Sarah spoke to Thomas.

"Carrie Carp has been with me all the morning," she said, in a perfectly level and matter-of-fact tone: "she thinks she's going to have a baby."

It was impossible for Thomas to say a word.

"I don't know what you intend to do about it, Thomas," his wife went on, "but if I were you I'd move Heaven and Earth to stop her from blurting it all out to that silly mother of hers. As likely as not she's mistaken. And even if she isn't, it would be a good thing to have a little time to arrange yourself before everyone begins to talk. You'd better see her at once, I judge, for she's in no state to control her words at present."

It was incredible to Thomas that Sarah should take the discovery thus! A half impulse came to him to ask her what she was made of, not to be reproaching him, or weeping. But even he, amid all his self-delusions, had enough experience of his wife to recognize the tone in which she was speaking. He went out of the room, and out of the house without a word.

Left to herself, Sarah sat down upon the leather sofa upon which she had seen Carrie Carp extended. The memory of that scene coming back to her, she got up in disgust and went to her own room. There was a good deal of steady thinking for her to do and she wanted solitude and quiet. In her own room, however, memories equally unwelcome came into her mind. She could not think there. With a somewhat hurried step she ran up to the boxroom in the attic. She was no sooner safely locked in and seated upon the side of one of her boxes than she burst into a perfect passion of tears, such as she had not shed since childhood. Alone, in that dusty little chamber, the staid and placid-seeming matron rocked herself to and fro, weeping out her illusions, and the remnants of her youth. But as her tears abated her accustomed prayer made itself heard. Lord! Lord! forsake me not!

CHAPTER XII

THE SCANDAL

SCANDAL IS A nightmare in all narrow communities, but it is perhaps more deadly in sincerely religious circles than anywhere else. The very goodness of the people makes evil more outstanding, and the higher the professions of the backslider the greater the commotion of his fall.

Thomas Sonning had made very high professions. There were some who said he had claimed to have reached a state of sinless perfection, and there were many who had heard him preach. There was no one, however, who did not turn against him now, and the fame of his disaster echoed even into distant States.

At the first Thomas had turned to Rufus, hoping for his support. The new doctrine which had led him into those paths was part of the New Belief. It was Sister Patience herself who had first murmured to him of the Sanctification of the Body, and he had but gone in pursuit of this doctrine. Thomas indeed had hoped—at first—that by a right exposition of these mysteries the world might come to understand in its true meaning what had happened, and he might thus be saved. But Rufus had not been willing to admit the holy motives by which Thomas had been guided, or to make any public statement at all. He had cast him off. In a great scene of anger and reproaches, of which both sisters Patience and Silence had been witnesses, the Prophet had accused his disciple of perverting a single imperfect glimpse of the Truth to his own fleshly purposes. Then Rufus had called together the faithful, and had told them all, publicly, of the backsliding, and of the cause thereof. Brother Thomas was henceforward an outcast from the company of the saints.

It was not only for Thomas that this time was a period of trial. Sarah, in her own way, suffered as much as he. Towards all her friends, indeed, she turned a calm and unruffled face, but it was only accomplished by a considerable effort. People came, of course, in shoals to condone or pray with her, some because they loved her and others because their curiosity clamoured for satisfaction. To them all, even to her sister, Sarah maintained that the whole thing was exaggerated nonsense. Carrie, she claimed, was a hysterical goose: and in proof of it she pointed to the now established fact that she was not pregnant.

“There may have been some innocent familiarities,” she would say. “I have myself seen Thomas kiss her in a fatherly way. He may have put his arms round her during prayer, to encourage her, and all that sort of thing. But as for

anything else, it is out of the question.”

Her friends, even the most intimate, were obliged to be content with this. Some of them believed, not, indeed, that she was right, but that she really thought her husband innocent. Others, more perceptive, only loved and admired her the more. And they talked it all over among themselves.

It would have been natural to suppose that this scandal, with all the terrible things implied in it, would have turned Mrs. Carp and her daughter for ever from the New Prophet and his teachings. Curiously enough, however, the exact contrary took place, and the two of them were to be seen daily going into the house next door. How Rufus achieved it no one could tell, but their devotion seemed greater than ever. The widow, for all she talked so constantly, never said anything which had any meaning, and Carrie's explanations said too much. In the general excitement among Sarah's friends the attitude of these two ladies came often under discussion.

Anna never said it again to Sarah, of whom she was in these days very considerate, but to her other friends she frankly repeated her supposition that Rufus was after their money. She found it very widely accepted, especially by James and his men friends. They made no bones about it and spoke of Rufus as a plain swindler, and the Carps as his victims; and the tide of indignation threatened to rise high against him. It was only his imminent departure, and the fact that nothing whatever could be proved, which prevented a public prosecution for fraud—or so those steady-going citizens maintained. They considered the whole thing a disgrace to their city.

Into the midst of all this turmoil of backbiting and gossiping young Edmund returned. He ought, of course, to have been safely out of the sound of it, beginning his winter's work in the college, where his mother was so thankful to imagine him. But a rumour of the trouble reached his ears, and he came straight home. It was a natural impulse. How should he realize that his mere presence made matters infinitely worse for both his parents? Perhaps he would have come, even had he known how they felt: for the truth was that his main preoccupation was not with them. Deeply though he loved them, and earnestly as he believed in his father's innocence and longed to defend him in his troubles, the thing that really brought him back was the anxiety to know where Lottie stood in all this business, and how this undeserved family disgrace would react upon his own position in her eyes. It was the first thing he asked his mother when they were alone.

“You had better go and talk to her, Edmund,” was all that Sarah could say, and she sighed as she said it. She had not seen the girl since the trouble began. Her heart was sore that Lottie should have so utterly deserted them, and she feared that Edmund would find only more disappointment and more sorrow in that direction.

“If you could persuade her to leave them, Edmund,” she suggested, “you know how gladly I would welcome her. And I don’t doubt your father would arrange to put you into business straight away, so that you could marry at once. You know we should always want to help you.”

Edmund knew: but even so his hopes were not high. The thing did not depend upon his parents, but upon Lottie, and whether she would come. And how should she be willing now, when his name was all smirched, with this disgrace, if she had not agreed to come before? Remembering the day at Walnut Grove the young man was very much cast down, and yet his hopes would not quite fade away. Surely she must have been kept away from his mother by force? It was not like Lottie to take the wrong side. If only he could get to her, perhaps she would be relieved, would welcome him, would cling to him——?

Dreams, such as young lovers dream, filled his imagination, and his hopes would not be still. He must go to Lottie at once.

As Edmund waited upon the doorstep of the ill-fated house next door his excitement was almost unendurable. He did not even know whether he would be allowed to enter, and he could not decide with what words to ask for admission. If it was one of those Thrush sisters who came to the door he was half inclined to be furious and stand upon his dignity: and yet the tenderness he felt for Lottie cast a kind of glow even over these enemies of his family who surrounded her. How long they kept him waiting!

It was Miss Patience who came, and all that Edmund did actually do was to stammer out Lottie’s name and look confused; but it made no difference. He was admitted, without question, and taken to the parlour where Lottie presently joined him.

Edmund did not return. In vain Sarah waited and watched, in vain she prayed for her son. No sign came from that mysterious house, and the whole afternoon wore away. When it was nearly time for the evening meal Sarah began to wonder whether or not to follow the boy. The suspense was dreadful, and she had a foreboding of evil against which she struggled in vain. Why had he not come back long since? Could he really be there still? Perhaps he had come out long ago, while she had not been looking, and was gone to walk off his disappointment? Poor Edmund, why did he not come? It would be fatal in any case to go to the house herself; and yet she could bear the suspense no longer. “God! give me quietness,” she prayed, and “Lord, preserve my boy from evil.”

Thomas was very fretful at supper, and asked again and again where Edmund was and why he did not come. He said the boy was being turned against him: that even his own household was poisoned: and he looked blackly at Sarah as if she were guilty of some treachery in this connection. He

complained of the food, and then fell to describing the symptoms of his own failing health. All this trouble was destroying him, he said; his appetite was gone, his sleep, his nerves——Sarah knew his symptoms pretty thoroughly already, but sat patiently enough while he rehearsed them again, because she was not attending.

Where was the boy? What could have happened?

A knock at the front door brought her suddenly to her feet, regardless of the fact that Thomas was in the very middle of describing his indigestion. But it was not Edmund after all, only a note in the handwriting of Rufus Hollins. Sarah opened it in haste.

“I am directed by the Lord to inform you that He has this day revealed His truth to Edmund Sonning, who will henceforward follow and obey Him, in preference to his earthly father. ‘Except a man hate father and mother, wife and children, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.’ ”

Sarah sat down upon her chair, and bowed her head.

Thomas took the note which had dropped upon the table and read it, and then he, too, fell silent. What could they say? God’s will be done.

For the second time in her life Sarah passed a sleepless, miserable night, wondering what to do, praying for guidance. She was convinced from the bottom of her soul that Rufus Hollins and those who were with him were under terrible error. She believed them to be actually and literally led by Satan, and that all their works were evil. She believed, too, that they were inevitably bound for disaster according to this world, and that the trouble which had fallen upon Thomas was as nothing to what would ultimately overtake the New Believers. And into the toils of this frightful heresy not only Lottie but her precious son had fallen. Was there no way of deliverance? All night long she agonized and prayed, while Thomas, at her side, first lamented that no one believed in him, and then breathed out fury against the false prophet who had achieved this cunning revenge of perverting his own son, and finally, with a physical groan or two over his suffering, relapsed into slumber.

“Lord, give me strength to bear Thy trials,” prayed Sarah, and, when Thomas was at last still, she wept. “Edmund, oh Edmund, my son, my son!” It was a night of anguish.

Early in the morning she arose, and dressing herself fully she crept down to her sitting-room. There, taking pen and ink, she began a letter, and for a long time she laboured writing to the boy. Many times she turned back and began afresh; many times in distress of mind she paced to and fro. But at last, just before the household began to stir, the letter was finished. Stepping out into the chilly street, and leaving her own door open behind her, she pushed it into the letter box of that fatal house. God grant that they allow Edmund to read it!

All that day Sarah waited, watching from her window, and giving but scant

attention to the affairs of her household, or even to the three little girls. But it was not till after dark that an answer came. It was in Edmund's own handwriting, slipped in, without ringing, through the front door. She had not been able to see who brought it, but spared no thought for that in her eagerness for the letter.

"Precious Mother," it ran, "Your dear letter came into my hands safely, and no one has seen it. I trust I may be able to return this answer equally unseen. I will tell you what is in my heart, if I can, for I know you will tell no one else. First, I see that Lottie is in trouble. I know not what it is, but she has begged me to stay near her: and you know I must answer such a request. Second, I do believe that Brother Rufus has a Revelation which we have not as yet understood. He tells me that Father saw a glimpse of it, which he did not fully appreciate, and so went astray. Dear Mother, do not be hurt that I say this of Father. You know our Heavenly Father is of more authority still, and I do truly wish to do my duty to both. They say I must promise to be altogether with them, or to leave for ever. It is not what I would choose—for you must know how much I want to pray with you before taking this or any serious step. But if I must choose now I feel I can only choose as the Lord leads me. This you taught me yourself. And so, I am to go with this household, when they leave here next Wednesday. I do not know where we go. But wherever it is, Mother, I will be praying for you, and if I can, I will write to you. Brother Rufus says we must actually live out the text, 'Whoso loveth Father and Mother more than Me . . .' I have never thought closely on that text before.

"But oh, Mother dear, Lottie looks so pale and thin, and seems so eager to have me here. You will be glad to think of my helping her, will you not?"

"Do not tell Father what I have felt it necessary to write concerning him. And, if I am not allowed to see you again, dearest Mother, at any rate let us pray for each other. Do not seek to follow us, I beg of you. If I am ever in trouble in which you can help, I promise I will let you know. Kiss the little chicks for me: and for yourself, Mother, remember I cannot help but be

"Your most loving son,

"EDMUND.

"Do not send any answer. It might be read."

Sarah had hardly finished and hidden the letter before Thomas came into the room. His talking and his complaints began at once, and she had no time to

think or to pray for strength. Her attention was claimed by Thomas, and she felt that she must put aside the thought of her trouble until she was alone. It was, however, with a heavy heart that she listened to her husband's tale of his day's doings. He seemed to have forgotten all about Edmund, and was full of how Brother Barford had pretended not to see him and how even Asa, his own brother, had seemed embarrassed at meeting him in the street. Thomas had been that day to see if he could regain his position in the business he had left, and, since it was a family business, he had succeeded. But the reinstatement brought no comfort, for he could see that it was grudgingly granted. In his susceptible state of nerves he thought nothing of the material relief, but was all taken up with the snubbing. And his wife listened patiently to his talk.

Later on, however, he asked had any news come, and she answered yes, she had had a message saying that Edmund was going away with Rufus and his household next Wednesday.

Thomas uttered angry and bitter words: his son, too, had turned against him. God was unjust.

His wife paid him little attention. The one hope in her mind was James. He had warned her of all this, long before, and perhaps he would find a way of helping her now. Her own instinctive desire was to go boldly forth and rescue Edmund, by force if necessary, but she knew that this could not succeed. And so, without saying a word to Thomas, she went off to her sister's house.

James was not at home. He had been called away to an urgent case, Anna said, and might not be back for hours. Was it anything in which she could help?

This check was terribly distressing to Sarah. She paced up and down the room in a state of agitation which alarmed Anna, but she would say nothing. She must just wait for James, that was all.

When the doctor came in at last he was very tired. He had been assisting at a scene of painful physical distress, at the hard and bitter dying of a strong man, and he was longing for the familiar safety of his own fireside, and the sure sympathy of his dear wife. And he found Sarah, in the grip of some tempestuous trouble, demanding his help. It was a real effort to James to put his attention at her service.

Sarah noticed nothing of his state of mind. She was incapable just then of remarking anything outside her trouble, and she fell upon him at once with her story. He must help her, he must rescue the boy! He was the only one who could, her only and her last hope.

James was very kind, and when he understood what was in question he too was greatly disturbed. It was, he felt, an almost hopeless mission, but he undertook to see Edmund the next morning, and to try what could be done.

"You must not hope too much from my efforts, Sarah," he warned her.

“The boy is staying there chiefly because of Lottie, and I do not believe he will come away.”

“Take Lottie too. Oh, James, we cannot let them both go off to destruction! Bring that poor girl back to me, James, for God’s sake!”

It was the only time in her life that Sarah used such an expression, but she did not know that she had said it.

James walked home with his sister-in-law through the empty streets, and they said nothing as they went. Only, as they passed the fatal house, Sarah put her hand on her companion’s arm.

“You were right about it all, James,” she said; “how I wish I had believed you.”

And then he said a thing which surprised her greatly:

“We are all in God’s hands, Sarah, at all times. Never forget that.”

They parted without another word.

The next day James penetrated into the prophet’s house and had interviews with both Edmund and Lottie. No outward obstacle was put in his way, but he was aware of intangible difficulties which he could not surmount. The young people were inaccessible to his words, their minds as completely shut off from him as if he had been speaking an unknown tongue. Especially Lottie; he was really alarmed by Lottie’s state. Years before, in Europe, before he had been entangled in the fanaticisms, he had witnessed some of Mesmer’s experiments, and he had followed as best he could the theories which were beginning to be built upon them. If ever there was a case of the submerging of one personality in another here was one, he thought sadly. It was too late, he feared, to rescue Lottie.

And with Edmund what could he do? As he said to Sarah later, the boy was too old to be coerced. He was staying with Rufus of his own accord, and how could they keep him away? It would only make an estrangement between them if his parents took any legal steps, and short of that what power had they? He had used every argument which affection and anxiety could urge. He had begged the boy for his own sake and for his mother’s sake to come away; but Edmund had only answered that he must stand by Lottie. James thought there was nothing to be done.

Sarah was obliged to agree. In her own heart there was yet another fear, the fear of what might happen between father and son if the boy did come back to them now. Thomas might say fearful things from the depths of his wounded feelings. He had said things to her the night before which she did not like to remember. There might be perhaps even worse estrangements than this upon which they were entering. But it was very, very hard to bear.

PART II

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST REVELATION

IN THE LATE afternoon of the first day of the tenth month a little company of New Believers reached Foretaste. They were tired after a long day of travel. The wagons which had brought them and their boxes from the distant railway drove off, and in the failing light they made their way into the house which was in future to be their home, hoping for comfort and warmth and refreshment.

None of them but Rufus had seen the place before. It had been purchased by him with the money they had given to the Lord, and they were all eager to examine it.

The front door opened into a large square hall, empty as a barn, and its chilly dampness offered little improvement upon the drizzle outside. The house was empty, unwarmed and unlighted; and it was not until they had opened and rummaged into cases of stores that they procured even the rudiments of comfort.

Everyone was cast down, and even Sister Silence, who assumed the direction of affairs, shivered as she talked. Lottie sat listlessly upon an unopened case, and stared out into the twilight. Rufus disappeared into the upper rooms, and Edmund and the other men went out to gather firewood before the light entirely failed. It was a discouraging hour.

Later on things looked better. There was an open fireplace in the hall, in which a big fire was kindled. Lamps were lit, and there was hot soup and bread for everyone. Rufus came downstairs, and there was laughter and a general sense of excitement among them. The future was in their own hands.

When all were warmed and satisfied Rufus gathered them together for prayer, and kneeling in a semicircle round the fire they asked a blessing upon their new life. Long Rufus prayed, too long for some of them, who sat back wearily upon their heels; yet, even so, they were contented. For was not this the very thing they had come out for to seek, a life of work and prayer and dedication? Their souls rejoiced although their bodies ached.

At last Rufus rose to his feet.

“Sit,” he commanded, and they all obeyed him.

“Brethren, there is much to be done.” It was evident. “To-morrow we will allot the work, and plan out our days. For to-night you are tired, and must sleep. We have no beds, no comforts. But grumble not; the soul is the better

for the mortification of the body, and you will rest well. Unpack and portion out what rugs and pillows you need for the night, and let us retire at once. Tomorrow our life begins.”

So he said, and so it was done. By the dying fire Edmund and his companions stretched themselves on the floor. Above Lottie and the Thrushes, and the other women, made themselves as comfortable as they could. And Rufus, in some other room, slept alone.

The Colony of Foretaste was open.

The floor is an uncomfortable place on which to sleep. Rufus, alone in his upper chamber, may have passed the night in prayer, but below him his disciples tossed and turned. The women whispered to each other a good deal, as they shuffled and rearranged their improvised bedding; and, under cover of the darkness, Lottie wept.

Below them, in the warmer room, the men were quieter. Only Edmund, apparently, was wakeful, and the thoughts which chased through his head were as uneasy as his hard pillow. What was he doing in the colony? He was spiritually, as well as physically, uneasy. He could neither quite believe nor quite disbelieve the things they had told him. Amid all his doubts, of course, the fact of Lottie and of her need of him was positive. But how was he going to help her? In the three days he had already lived with the strange household he had been allowed no private talk with her at all, except at first, when she had urged him to come.

How agitated, how pathetic she had been! Thinking of this, and of the hopes and dreams to which his love gave rise, the young man fell asleep, only to waken later, stiff and aching, in the chilly darkness. What a horrid draught came in under the door! How impossible it was to cover both feet and shoulders with a great-coat! He hoped Lottie was better provided.

Everyone rose early, and by six o'clock the fire was going again and the stimulus of hot coffee gave everything a brighter look. The house had to be explored and cleaned, the stores and supplies unpacked, and the ground surveyed. Many new things were coming that day: farm implements, cows, horses, some furniture. All was hustle, within and without.

Rufus proved to have been a wise buyer for the Lord. The land was good, well timbered in some parts, and cleared for crops in others. There was a fair-sized stream, a saw mill, one barn in good condition and another which could be mended. All the elements for prosperity were there, if willing workers were forthcoming, and all were filled with hope.

Inside the house things were equally promising, although there, too, it was obvious that much needed to be done. It was a large brick building, most unusual for a country farmhouse, but which had, in fact, been used to shelter a community before. Rufus did not reveal this to his disciples, but he had

purchased it from a farmer who had had it from an enthusiast who had tried, and failed, ten years before to establish communistic life and a new order of the universe within its walls.

The ground floor of the building consisted of the big central hall, with two small rooms on one side and kitchens and offices behind. Above was another room, slightly smaller, with two little ones on each side; and above that again was a series of small rooms, almost like cells, opening off a corridor which ran the whole length of the house. The place was solidly built and weather proof, and, as Rufus pointed out, if additions were made at each end of it, it could easily be adapted to house in comfort a very much larger concourse of people.

Although the greater number of the Believers were women, there were among them a dozen men. Of these one, Rufus, was the prophet, six, including Ebenezer Dale, had been preachers, two were merchants, one was a farmer, one a carpenter, and Edmund, the youngest of them, had no trade at all.

With this outdoor force, augmented by the more enterprising of the women, the Community set to work to cut and haul trees and saw them into planks for making benches and tables, and for mending the barn. Firewood was cut and stacked, and some more of the ground cleared, ready for the spring. Everything was pushed on as rapidly as possible in expectation of the falling of the snow.

Within doors the organization of the household was set on foot. A laundry was fitted up, and a bakery and dairy improvised. Everyone worked with a will, and all were happy. The fresh country air, and the new work, and the freedom from all city restraints, acted like a tonic on the Believers, and they were perfectly harmonious. Rufus appointed to each his day's work and no disagreements arose. The first days of the experiment of Foretaste seemed to justify its name.

It was not until the snow came to put a natural drag upon their activity that Rufus thought it necessary to regularize the life of his followers. When the time came, however, he found them ready to listen and prompt to agree. Was not his leadership what they had sought?

He first laid down the rules of daily life. To rise at five, and pray, each in his own heart. Then the necessary work of the household, for some the lighting of fires, the cooking of breakfast; for others the carrying of water and cleaning rooms, and for others still the care of the animals. Within limits these duties were to be taken by all in turn, regardless of the convention of sex. Why should not a man sweep a room and a woman feed a horse? No one could answer.

Breakfast at 6.30, and each to wash his own plate and mug; dinner at 12, and the evening meal at 6. Plain living, no alcohol, very little meat; all this was fully accepted.

In the mornings, Rufus ordained, outdoor work was to be done as far as possible. The allotment of tasks for the day would be carried out by himself, and posted upon a notice board in the hall. All unnecessary conversation in the morning was to be avoided, for the daytime was for work. After dinner, however, there would be an hour for rest or talk, and then the renewal of labour.

At 6.30, after the evening meal, came prayers, the toils of the day being done. At 7.30 there would be an hour for reading, for study of the Scriptures, or for discussion. He, Rufus, would arrange what should be done in that hour, and this, too, would be posted on the board. At 8.30 all would retire, and there would be no talking after that hour. So their lives would be orderly, natural, primitive and pleasing to God.

The arrangement of the house was to be as follows: in the hall on the ground floor were the dining tables and the indoor workrooms. Ironing, sewing, spinning and so forth must be carried on there. One of the sheds outside would be the carpenter's shop, and others would serve for the dairy, the cows and the horses. One of the little rooms off the hall would be the counting-house, where all records and money dealings with the outside world would be conducted; the other was a room for stores.

Above, upon the first floor, the large room was to be known as the outer Sanctuary. No work of any kind was to be done in this room; it was the place for prayer. The two small rooms upon its eastern side were to be his own, for slumber and for worship. No one was to be admitted to them, or to seek admittance upon any pretext, unless he himself led them in. It was the inner Sanctuary. There were two corresponding rooms upon the western side, and of these one was to be occupied by Sisters Silence, Patience and Lottie, while the other was to be the room of punishment. He would explain its uses later on.

Above, of course, the other disciples were to sleep. There were still thirty-eight people to be placed—eleven men and twenty-seven women. And there were twelve small rooms. Four of the rooms at the east end of the corridor were to be for the men; the remaining eight for the women.

Each room was numbered, and each had beds within it. There was to be no free choice of room mates, as tending to exclusiveness; but each week the beds would be allotted afresh, and the names of their occupants posted in the hall. Beds 1 to 11 in the first four rooms would be divided among the men; beds 12 to 38 among the women. Thus there would be equality and impartiality for all.

A costume for the community to wear was also laid down; for the men thick tunics with leather belts, and wide, baggy trousers; for the women white caps, long, loose jackets and woollen skirts pleated heavily about the waist so as fully to disguise the figure. It was warm, healthy and practical, he said, and would obviate the vanities of the eye.

All this was purely practical. They acknowledged it as the rule of life, but they wanted something more, and Rufus was not long in giving it to them.

“Now you know the outline,” he said, “you may have until to-night to discuss with each other and to talk it over. After the evening meal I will hear your comments. And then, oh, my chosen people, then, I will explain to you the spirit which animates it all. Without the spirit all this life is a mere shell, a mere nothing. Ponder it well.”

On this announcement Rufus withdrew into his own apartments, leaving his people to their talk.

With the promise of the revelation to follow no one dared to offer much criticism, even though they were not all quite satisfied. Some there were who resented the special treatment of the three Sisters lodged below. Others thoroughly disliked the system of changing beds, and there were several to whom the notion of rising always at 5 a.m. was unwelcome. But what could they venture to say? These arrangements were doubtless worked out upon some heavenly plan. To criticize would be impious.

All day long, therefore, they went about their various tasks and each kept his thoughts in his heart. In the evening they would know.

Supper was cleared away and the whole Community hurried upstairs to the outer Sanctuary, eager to hear the first of the new Revelations. It was a moment of great importance.

Rufus kept them waiting, and while he lingered they gave way to talk. They were too much excited to keep quiet and their doubts came out. What was all this upon which they had entered? Were they really to eat no meat? They were likely to be hungry, said some, seeing that they had always been accustomed to it. And then this plan of changing beds! Sister Carp did not like that at all. But, as they all knew, the Master would be able to explain.

They did not know how they were intended to group themselves, but when Rufus came they all turned in his direction, and in a moment they had formed into rows, a congregation attentive to the priest. It was inevitable.

“Children,” he said, and even in that one word they heard the thrilling note which had been absent from his practical talk in the morning, “children, have you anything to say regarding the arrangements the Lord led me to propose to you?”

No one answered. Even the boldest felt a sense of awe.

“It is well,” said Rufus, “it is well. For now we can turn our souls to higher things, to the contemplation of the Kingdom of God, and of His marvellous manifestations. Listen, and have ears to hear.”

He paused, and raised his arms into the air, standing like Moses on the Mount.

“This is the first Revelation. The Kingdom of Christ is very, very near. His

Second Coming is at hand, and the date of it He has revealed unto me. Of all the myriads of the earth, only those who accept with their whole souls, who submit with their whole lives, who bow utterly before Him, only those will be saved. Terrible as is the thought, I KNOW that all humanity is lost, except ourselves.”

He paused upon this dreadful word, and then continued:

“Was it not always so? How many were sheltered in the Ark? How numerous were the Apostles? As it was before, so it is again, and in the new Millennial Dawn we shall be His only bodyguard.”

Was it something in the voice which moved them so, or was it really the approach of the Lord? Suspense, difficult to endure, seized upon them, and when Silence cried, “Lord, come, come quickly!” there were other cries as well. All were looking for a miracle.

“Be still!” came the voice of Rufus. “You have not fully heard the truth. Be still, and I will tell you more, even as it has been revealed unto me by the angel.”

They were still. Even their very breathing seemed to stop, for was not the angel of the Lord among them?

“The Day of Darkness cometh upon the earth, and the Babel Builders of all ecclesiastical structures will be confounded before the great Judgment Seat. Christianity, free from all Babylonian mixture, will thereafter rise afresh, and in the coming time, we, we shall be its Ministers! Listen and I will prove it to you.”

They listened, and for the time being all were dazed with the glorious notion that they, and they alone, were the chosen survivors of a world in ruins.

“This is the twentieth day of the tenth month of the year 1844.”

It was true, so it was.

“Seven months and seven days from this date, the year will be one whose numbers make 6 and 6 and 6. On that day the Lord will come.”

Rufus paused. One and eight and four and five made eighteen, and so did six and six and six. Several people were working this out, and those who had overlooked the fact that seven months would take them into 1845 were puzzled, when Rufus cried unexpectedly:

“Count the numbers of the Beasts!” Then, in a voice of triumph he added: “What saith the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Daniel? ‘Unto two thousand three hundred days: then shall the sanctuary be cleansed.’ And again what saith the Lord to Daniel? ‘From the time that the abomination that maketh desolate shall be set up, there shall be 1290 days. Blessed is he that waiteth, and cometh to the one thousand three hundred and five and thirty days.’ Thus,” Rufus added with an emphasis that was overwhelming, “thus we see clearly the time of the end of the things of this world, namely, two thousand three hundred, and

one thousand two hundred and ninety, and one thousand three hundred and thirty-five days.”

No one saw anything clearly, yet all were profoundly impressed. What Rufus was saying must be true, for his words were straight from the Bible. But what his words meant it was difficult to understand.

“Two thousand three hundred, and one thousand two hundred and ninety, and one thousand three hundred and thirty-five added together make four thousand nine hundred and twenty-five days,” Rufus announced, and nearly everyone of his audience began at once to do the sum in their heads. Only one or two achieved the addition correctly and in the rapture of achievement these believers were ready to accept everything which followed. They felt it was their own discovery, a private revelation to themselves, which was evidently true. Some, however, did not succeed, and others did not try to add at all. Mrs. Carp was among these; figures always confused her, she knew. Edmund made the mistake of turning each period of days into weeks, months and years before adding, and thus he quickly became confused and left behind. For Rufus did not wait for their calculations.

“Four thousand nine hundred and twenty-five days,” he said, “is thirteen years and half a year all but two and a half days. That, then, is the period the world will last after the abomination of desolation shall have been set up.”

He paused on the words, and his audience waited, some still struggling with the original addition, others busy dividing by three hundred and sixty-five; most of them just waited for the Revelation.

“What, oh Believers, was the Abomination of Desolation?”

No one dared even to imagine the answer to this question.

“Listen,” urged the Prophet again, though it was needless. “In what year was the Roman Catholic Temple opened?”

There was a pause. All the ex-preachers remembered quite clearly the commotion there had been in Delaville, and Ebenezer Dale remembered the strong sermon he had preached that day. He had himself called it the Abomination of Desolation! What a marvellous leading of the Spirit! In a voice which was hardly more than a whisper he said the words:

“November the 1st, 1831.”

Off again their minds flew to the calculating. To what date would thirteen years and a half all but two and a half days from November 1st, 1831, bring them? Edmund, frowning with concentration, used his fingers, curling them up to keep count. December, January, February, March, April, May—six months, and the two and a half days, April 28 or 29 he couldn't quite make out about the half day—and then on thirteen years, he was just getting there when he heard the gasping groan of his companions. Rufus had made it clear.

“Seven months and seven days from to-day, four thousand nine hundred

and twenty-five days will have elapsed since the opening of that Temple of Belial. On that day the Lord will come!”

How wonderful! How terrible! How true! How near the date! Did not one and eight and four and five make eighteen, even as six and six and six? How narrowly they were approaching the abyss, how merciful their escaping!

“Watch yourselves!” cried Rufus in his voice of power. “Watch yourselves, watch every footstep, every movement, every thought. The last day is at hand. Your chance, indeed, is here, your privilege high, but your responsibility is heavy. Let us vow together, here, to-night, that every moment of the little time remaining to us shall be consecrated and wholly given over to the Lord.”

With what fervour they made their vows! With what a glow of mystic happiness they uttered the words binding themselves to abandon everything to the service of the coming Lord! This was indeed the Revelation they had been promised, and one which did truly justify all the sacrifice they could make. In a mood of dedication they fell upon their knees.

“Lead us, oh Holy One, into the Promised Land.”

Edmund had vowed and prayed with the rest, carried along by the violent emotion which had moved them all. A couple of hours later, however, as he lay in bed staring into the darkness, he felt afraid. Had his prayers, his solemn vows been sincere? Or was there still lurking in his mind that poisonous half-doubt which would make his words a blasphemy? Scrupulous and over-scrupulous as he was, he searched his mind, doubting his own motives, and then doubting his doubts. It would be pure wickedness to stay on as a spy, or from any base, human motive, if the shadow of a doubt remained it was his duty to leave the place. He could not risk the damnation which awaits the hypocrite.

By one of those curious mental processes which are so common to obstinate mankind, Edmund, even while he was thinking these things, knew absolutely that he was going to stay. With a gush of the common sense his mother had taught him, he turned from the consideration of his own state of mind. “I believe,” he said to himself, “I must, and I will:” and with all his might and main the young man did it. For he was determined to stay.

After all, it was with chapter and verse, with positive assertion and biblical proof that Rufus had announced the Second Coming of the Lord. Once again, and all alone, Edmund deliberately promised to give up all he had. Body and soul he would be obedient to his leader, during the seven months and seven days yet remaining to this earth. And at the end of that time the Lord would come.

If by any chance He did not come, there would be time enough to think again. Edmund had thought this before he realized its implications; but an instant later he had chased it from his heart. The Coming of the Lord was very, very near, and the present was no time for doubt.

CHAPTER II

THE HOLY DANCING

LIFE AT FORETASTE quickly took on the regular form which Rufus had laid down for it. Shut away from the world outside, refusing, under his orders, to answer, or even to read the letters which came at the outset, the little colony laboured to prepare itself for the day of the Last Judgment.

What prayers, what longings went up from that strange household! Grotesque as it all was, and outlandish as were its manifestations, a real longing for salvation underlay the whole concern. Most of the followers of Rufus, even as their prophet himself, truly expected the coming of their Lord. It became the one interest of life.

Mixed motives human beings must always have, and it was easy for the critics left behind in Delaville to attribute the vocation of each one to some secondary cause. Ill-success, disappointment in love, hypnotic influence, or sheer desultory idleness doubtless played their parts; but even if the devotees were moved by these things, the call they answered had other and nobler notes besides. They had listened to the trumpets of the Lord, and they believed they knew His will. If the sacrifice of their normal lives was not so hard as they thought it, if the love of adventure played a larger part in their enterprise than they admitted, yet still these motives remained the lesser things. Their great and their real exaltation sprang from a genuine dedication to God. In their strange and ludicrous way these people felt the love of holiness in their hearts, and in the humility which abandoned reason and common sense they sought salvation. They were not the first to walk that road.

What magic is it which draws the human heart so irresistibly away from the things of this world? Even the hard and the harsh, even the proud and the successful soften, at times, to love that which is innocent and plain, and find an exquisite, if fleeting, joy in the contemplation of pure simplicity. Somehow, in spite of the very fabric of the world, in spite of its prizes for wickedness and its rich and evil rewards, mankind still loves saintliness with a love that never fades. Kings and tyrants reign, and each generation bows down before them; the crafty and the cruel gather riches into their hands, and the fruits of the earth are theirs; but always, in every age, there are also quiet souls, living in poverty and scorn, humble, despised and rejected, who yet outshine these rich and mighty men. The inner glory and the inner light, the peace which passeth understanding; the simplicity "as of a little child" these things the mind

despises and the heart adores. And these things lead the soul.

Again and again, as at Foretaste, the seekers follow a false path. The little glimmering light shines once, and is lost in the maze of false witnesses. The seeker becomes enmeshed, in church or doctrine, in sect or ritual. The longing and the hope persist, but the way is overgrown; and into the outer darkness the seeker goes, where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth.

With leadings true and false, with motives good and bad, the Colony of Foretaste came together, and Rufus, their leader, quickly took charge of their dreams. The longing which had moved each heart was distorted, and by queer and strained adjustments they made shift to be satisfied. For Rufus dominated them all.

Under the shadow of the prophet, however, many lesser emotions had their turn; for life is not all religion. Inevitably even among so few people, friendships and aversions sprang up; inevitably, too, differences of temperament or of character gave rise to incidents which contained, under their shadowy community forms, all the elements of the great clash of life in the free world outside. But Rufus, and still more Silence, his chief lieutenant, held these things in check, and by adroit adjustments of daily work and nightly quarters everything was kept in a state of quietness, if not of genuine harmony.

The evening gatherings were the brightest moments of the life, and these were diversified by Rufus so that each one held fresh excitement. There were evenings to suit every taste.

One night, for example, there would be discussion on a point of theological doctrine propounded by Rufus, in which the six ex-preachers took their more than proportionate share. On these nights the boldest speculation was allowed.

Another time there would be music, for there were several among them who loved it. Those who, like Edmund and Lottie, had hitherto believed music slightly wicked, or at any rate secular, had no sooner cast aside their scruples under obedience than they discovered how innocent and devotional it was. Sister Patience was an expert performer on the harmonium, and there was much competition in the writing of hymns.

The exercise to which Rufus attached the greatest importance, however, and the one which came most frequently, was Criticism. On these evenings anyone who felt a consciousness of sin (and who was there who did not feel it?) would voluntarily offer himself or herself as a subject for public debate. During the half-hour which followed other members were encouraged to say exactly what they thought concerning the victim, sparing neither habits nor character, and advancing, if possible, concrete and recent examples of what they blamed. The criticized one sat, inconspicuously, among the rest, and had no right of speech. Everything must be taken in silence, and pondered with a humble heart. Not even thanks could be returned.

When the others had said their say, the Master summed things up, and in him alone the right of praise was vested. If the attacks had been too sharp, the points too well directed, a few words of approval and encouragement from him had power to lessen their sting. And then, to close the proceedings, Rufus indicated the path of amendment. His word was law.

When all had thus freely relieved their hearts there invariably arose a feeling of peace and goodwill among them. Everyone was filled with kindness towards the victim, in whose own heart the grace of God was at work. It was a salutary process.

Of all the evening exercises, however, the nights of Revelation were the most absorbing. They came irregularly, no one knew when, just as the Spirit moved. And when they came, Rufus, in his long, white robe, held them spellbound.

“Thus and thus the Lord hath told me; thus and thus must we believe.”

In the ecstasy of faith and humiliation they bowed before him. By means of these Revelations the New Believers learnt, in the course of the first three months, a number of very strange things, which opened wide vistas to their imaginations. There was first the great new interpretation of the Fall. It was connected, of course, with that doctrine of purified bodies which had caused Sarah so much alarm. But Rufus did not frighten his people. These things, he said, were to be fulfilled when the Lord came again. They might *know* in advance that their bodies were to be without shame, they, the chosen ones; and when the time came they would experience all the joys and raptures of fulfilment; but as yet they must not practise, for their bodies were impure.

Next they heard how Rufus, their Teacher, obtained actual and tangible contact with the Divine. It was not, they learnt, just a matter of the soul and the mind, but it was with his actual senses that Rufus realized this bliss.

For a long time, he told them, he had prayed in vain for this blessing. “By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him but I found him not.” Then came the day when “my beloved putteth his hand by the hole of the door, but when the door was opened he had withdrawn himself, and was gone. My soul failed me when he spake: I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.”

After long waiting, Rufus told them, the Lord had come. With a look of joy, which was in itself intoxicating, Rufus cried out his triumph. “Now, brethren, the Lord is with me. ‘His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me.’ So it is, and no otherwise. Every night I am with the Lord.”

And so, he suggested, it might be with them. Not at once, of course, nor so fully; but they might venture and hope. Each in his own way, by meditation and striving, might perhaps anticipate by a few weeks the rapture which lay

before them when the Lord finally came. Even the palest glimmering of that satisfaction was bliss. When it was granted, as to him it had been, in the fulness, then death itself was cheated of its prey. Man reached Heaven at one bound, like Elijah, the holy prophet. Let them strive and pray.

The effect of a permission such as this upon people living in a state of emotional tension was tremendous. The dreams and fancies which beset them all took of a sudden a directly sensuous turn. Young and old alike awaited the physical thrill which was promised, and the men and women lay in their crowded sleeping rooms picturing in the darkness the glowing images of the Song of Solomon. There was much talking, much comparing of sensations. The Lord favoured several with the thrills, and Sister Carrie was convinced that she was actually the Bride of the Lamb. But no one gave credit to her tale.

This fascinating secret was not the only one which Rufus explained. Most of his Revelations of the New Belief were more strictly doctrinal in character, and of these some were more easily understood than others by the disciples. Everyone knew and could grasp the matter of the Second Coming, but the theory of actual personal deathlessness made an even more vivid appeal.

No one knows, no one can measure, the influence of death upon life. As generation after generation rises, as spring after spring returns, the same eternal problems face each human soul. "Do *I* live and shall *I* die? What am I? Where shall I go? And what, oh what is life?" No one has escaped the pang of these uncertainties, unanswerable save by faith, unintelligible even so. Quiet they lie, at times, overlaid by the materialism of the earth; and then, behold, the wind blows, the leaves fall, and they all break through with their remorseless searching. "What is this universe, and why? And what the human soul?"

To all these questions, of course, religion gives one simple, easy answer: "God knows; trust Him." Whatever the creed or the ritual, whatever the age or the race, the message is always the same; and in this tremendous, yet vague, hope the faithful rest content. The mysteries of birth and life, of good and evil all are solved. "God knows."

But death itself escapes at times from the cage of belief, and with a flutter of his dark wings he frightens the most devout. "What does it mean, this dying? Lord, save me, it is here!" Such panic-stricken moments come to all. At one time or another they had visited each member of the Foretaste Community, clothed in different images, but essentially the same. As the Believers listened to the new doctrine of their own deathlessness they remembered well enough their fears, and turned eagerly to the dazzling hope of escape.

The doctrine Rufus preached was plain enough. "We, and we alone, of all the human race, shall not die. That dark mystery will never surround us. As we are now, so shall we continue, with but the change to perfect health and glory. We shall pass straight into Heaven by the one and only narrow gate. All the

world besides will die the bodily death, and countless thousands will be damned. But we, the chosen, the new believers, *we* shall live forever.”

It was a truly reassuring thought, and, once admitted, it came to seem very easy to accept it. The strength they felt in their bodies, the new vigour induced by their healthy living and their frugal fare, easily transported hopes into firm beliefs. “*We* shall not die. The Lord is at hand with His Kingdom, and we, we alone, are the chosen people.”

With such hopes and such dreams the months slipped by. Alternating from humble toil to mystic exaltation, and living under a most pervasive discipline, the Colony at Foretaste was at peace. The weary and the disillusioned, the lazy and the weak found comfort and repose. In the strenuous work and quiet living all found health. Even Lottie was less pale.

One night in December a new ceremony was added to their worship and a new joy to their lives. They were all gathered together in the outer Sanctuary waiting for the Master. He kept them long, as was his habit, but there was little talking. The word had gone out that a Revelation was to be forthcoming, and all the faithful were anxiously expectant.

Tired as Edmund was with his long toiling in the fields, he was profoundly excited. Lottie was not yet among them, but she was coming, of course, with the Master. He watched the door, and the occasional bursts of prayer which Sister Silence started hardly broke through his preoccupation.

At one end of the room Sister Patience sat at the harmonium, on which from time to time she played a few chords. There was uneasiness all about the room.

At last they came, Lottie and the Master, he striding in front with his face rather grim, and she, white as always, her arms piled high with a great bundle of black cloth. He marched to the centre of the room and showed by a gesture that he wished them all to gather round him in a ring. And then he began to pray.

His words were solemn, as he asked the blessing of the Lord upon what they were about to do. A step in advance, he called it; a more utter consecrating of themselves to His service, a symbol of full submission to His will.

The disciples round about responded eagerly, with fervent amens. They asked for nothing better than an utter consecration. But still they did not know what they were to do.

Rufus explained. It was to be a holy dancing unto the Lord, as David had danced before the Ark, as the angels still danced before the Throne. It was not to be an ordinary dancing, nor, indeed, in ordinary garb. He pointed to the heap which Lottie had let fall upon the floor.

“Each one of you,” he said, “is to robe himself in the garment of sin, which

must, in the end, be shed off before the eyes of the Lord.”

Disentangled, the heap resolved itself into long, sleeveless black cloaks, full from the shoulders, buttoning under the chin and all down the front. Each member received and donned the garment, and, so robed, stood again in the circle about the Master. He was himself, as always, clad in a similar long white cloak; white, the symbol of sinlessness. It was fitting.

After another brief prayer, Sister Patience went to the harmonium and the holy movements began. At first, of course, an awkwardness held them, for no one knew how the thing should be done. The stately twirling of the Master, and the insistent droning of the harmonium, however, dissolved their shyness, and all were soon in motion, revolving irregularly about the room.

Rufus himself set the pace, and presently he varied his progress by seizing one or another of the black-robed figures and swinging it faster through the dance. The example spread, and now in couples, now alone, the holy dancers danced.

The signal for dispersing was not given until midnight.

“Let each one keep his robe. The time for discarding sin is not yet. Go in sorrow.”

After this first occasion, holy dances became a regular feature of the life, occurring at least twice a week. With custom the Community moved more freely, and before many weeks were over the nature of the dancing became clearly inspired. Song, sometimes wordless, sometimes formal, would often break from the dancers’ lips, and a sort of holy frenzy, which mounted ever higher, led to fallings and even rollings upon the floor. The Lord was working in a strange way; and Rufus was well pleased.

One Sunday night, when the company was, as usual on the Sabbath, waiting robed and all on fire to begin, Rufus unaccountably delayed. There were murmurs and restless movements; but he came not, and presently Sister Silence entered to tell them that another Revelation was at hand.

A curious and rather painful excitement took the place of their discontent, and in the long half-hour which followed expectation rose high. The Lord was coming very near to them. Glory be!

Rufus came at last, clad in his white cloak, but barefoot. Every eye turned upon him, and in the long silence in which he held them there was much meaning. The Lord had something very special for him to reveal.

“I told you, my children, that these dark cloaks were the robes of sin. All men are guilty, all men are sinful. The Lord requires you to dance before Him clad only in your wickedness.”

At first they did not understand, but soon the matter grew clear. Sister Silence stood forward, with a rapt look upon her face, and from under her long black cloak there dropped down the clothes she habitually wore. Skirts,

petticoats, bodices, the corset of whalebone, and finally, stockings and drawers tumbled out upon the floor. She stood before them clothed from head to foot only in her garment of sin.

At first they watched in awe; then, as the plan came home to them, they all became ashamed. Men and women alike blushed red, and looked confusedly away from each other. And then again, as they felt the Master's eye upon them, they put away their fears. The Lord wanted this thing; let it be accomplished.

Once the general undressing had begun it proceeded rapidly, and clothes, in an ever-increasing stream, slid down upon the floor. Under their all-covering cloaks laces were torn apart, and buttons broken asunder. The men, in doubt how to pull their shirts over their heads, ripped them open. It became a mad race, a turmoil.

And in the midst Rufus watched them, himself unmoved.

When the wreckage had been cleared away the dancing began. All was outwardly as before, save for the bare feet pattering upon the boards; but inwardly how different! The physical pleasure of nakedness combined with a burning physical shame, and produced confusion. Sensations hitherto untasted visited every heart. An access of spiritual fervour mingled with an acute bodily self-consciousness, and all felt a wickedness which was akin to holiness. Absorbed in their inner emotions, they danced to the Lord. And upon this night there was no whirling of partners, no rolling upon the floor.

Again came an interval in the Revelation. The scene of the shedding of garments was not repeated, for all came ready upon the dancing nights. The strangeness wore off a little, although the thrill persisted. Partners were taken again, clumsily and timidly at first, but with an increasing freedom; and the Spirit again rolled some upon the ground. An occasional glimpse of an ankle or leg heightened the strange excitement. The Lord had their bodies, as well as their souls, in the hollow of His hand.

In all this scheme of ordered life and progressive Revelation, Edmund Sonning had a very humble place. To him, more often than to any other, were the hard outdoor tasks allotted. There were many days when his orders were to work all day at some distance from the Community home, so far away that it was necessary for him to carry his midday meal with him and eat it in solitude. Never was he called upon to take part in a discussion, never marked out in any way for notice. His insignificance was complete, and it was evident that Rufus intended his discipline to be severe.

In his dreams, indeed, Edmund broke through the bonds, and was at Lottie's side; but in reality he was hardly ever in her presence. Sometimes, indeed, he could hold her for a moment in the dance, sometimes he could kneel by her side. But he never had speech with her alone, and it was only by the

exercise of his imagination that the young man was able to believe his presence helpful to the girl he loved; by that, and by a look which he thought he saw in her blue eyes, a look of gratitude and trust on which his fancy lived.

The comfort derived from this source was very slight, and for the first months of his stay at Foretaste Edmund was exceedingly unhappy. It was natural that he should think his adhesion to the Colony, involving as it did the sacrifice of his education and all his prospects, a matter of great moment. And yet he was treated as beneath contempt, over-worked, unnoticed. His pride was hurt, as perhaps Rufus intended, and in this state of mind the doubts which he had never really abandoned came again and again to torment him.

As if these troubles were not enough, moreover, Edmund was much beset by thoughts and imaginations which he felt to be wicked. Night after night, when the Community revelled in the sensuous poetry of the Song of Solomon, the young man went uneasy to his rest, and as the weeks went by the suggestive implications of the theory of purified bodies burnt into his mind. When the revelation of physical contact with the Lord was made, Edmund fell into a state of violent emotional excitement. Although he thought he had fully surrendered his will and his judgment, he could not quite banish from his conscience the marks of his Puritan training. He could not feel that it was right to dream as he did, nor to thrill and quiver at the thoughts which visited his mind. And yet no doubt, these imperative, compelling impulses were of the Lord! If so they should be encouraged, and not suppressed. There was no need, any more, to grow hot with shame at the remembrance of his passions; what a terrifying thought!

Try as he might, however, Edmund could not throw off the bonds of his early conventions. His father's explicit teaching—how well he remembered those frank talks they had had together—and still more his mother's overwhelming, if implicit, assumptions stuck in his mind. These things came between the young man and any real sense of physical freedom. Some things were wrong, let Rufus say what he might!

Tormented, and at times obsessed by these perplexities, Edmund tried his best to cover over with a maze of subtleties the plain meaning of what he was being taught. One after another he devised allegorical meanings through which the new doctrines could be harmonized with the old traditions; and by degrees he satisfied his mind. But the more success he achieved in this way, the worse his sufferings in another, and the greater his secret consciousness of guilt! For it was hard to live so close to the girl he loved, to watch her face during so many hours of talk of the mysteries of religious love, to see her blush and pale by turns, and not to long for the right to take her in his arms and talk of actual, solid, mortal love of the normal, human kind.

If Edmund, in the strength of his youth and innocence, could make barriers

between himself and the new doctrines, it was not so with all the Community at Foretaste. As time went on, and as the first novelty wore away, the growth of affinities between members of the household could no longer be suppressed. In the search for direct contact with the Almighty some of them found great help in each other's company, and, just as it had been with Thomas before the scandal, so it began to be again. Brothers and Sisters sought each other's sides to pray, they held hands, they kissed.

The thing spread fast, and even Sister Patience gave it countenance, for she was much seen with Brother Ebenezer. All the regulations and restrictions of Sister Silence were insufficient to check it. Either it must freely run the whole course, or it must be stopped at once. Half measures would not do.

Silence ventured to disturb Rufus himself with the tale; for her own part she had no sympathy with caressings between men and women. She was not like her sister. Such things offended her whole soul. Would the Master please say what was to be done?

In the opinion of the Prophet the time for these manifestations was not come. Acting upon Silence's information, he had a Revelation that same night which reduced them all to the most complete decorum. The Lord, it appeared, had told him that at the time of His Second Coming only those who had lived in perfect chastity and purity of thought for six months would escape the death, destruction and damnation of the end of all earthly things. The glory and the freedom which were to follow could not be granted to the impure. First the soul must be saved, before it would be the turn of the body. Let them beware, for the Last Judgment was very near at hand, and on that Day all secret things would be made known.

CHAPTER III

THE SECOND REVELATION

THREE WOMEN WERE sitting together sewing, and the murmur of talk was continuous. The room they sat in was bare, and the winter daylight brought in a sort of reflected coldness from the snow outside; the meagre, flitting brightness of the sun held no suggestion of warmth, and the white cloth they were hemming was blue in the shadow. Their expressions, too, were austere, and the nervous laugh with which one of them sprinkled her conversation had an acid, mirthless tone. They looked neither happy nor comfortable; and, indeed, their looks were not misleading. For Mrs. Carp was complaining to Patience Thrush, which Patience disliked, and Lottie was listening. Many mornings had been spent like that.

Mrs. Carp—Sister Lucy as she was now—was an indefatigable talker. She was one of those people whose frivolous peevishness flows on and on, but although she always had the air of expecting the most intimate sympathy, she never succeeded in really catching anyone's attention at all, even at those surprising moments when she said something genuine.

After the terrible scandal in which her daughter had been involved, she had, for a brief moment, held the centre of the stage. It was in keeping with her usual fate that almost at once the interest had shifted away to Thomas, and that even the excitement of a real baby for Carrie had been withheld. Her side of it had fizzled out to nothing; she still talked endlessly about the affair, indeed, and demanded interest and astonishment from people who had long since ceased to feel either sentiment. But even she had wearied of the thing at last, and what talking she still did was automatic.

In spite of the unkind things the world had said, it had been touch and go whether she would come to Foretaste at all. Nothing but the protracted daily interviews with Rufus could have tipped the scale; but when it once began to swing it had gone right down. Mrs. Carp had given every dollar of her fortune into his keeping, and offered her daughter with both hands to the Lord. The only thing was that she somehow expected special treatment in return for this sacrifice, and was astonished that it was not forthcoming. This was the real burden of her complaint.

“Why is it, Sister Patience, that this child Lottie is allowed to share the downstairs room? With my legs, you know, ever since the illness I had the winter my husband died—any stairs—and it is so cold under the roof—and

that odious Lavinia Harkness, week after week in my room, even when I am moved. I'm sure if you were to say a word, now, Lottie, or you either, Sister Patience, it would be remedied. For I never expected—and indeed, if I had had the slightest idea—always up those stairs, so bad for the legs. But I told Brother Rufus, when he asked me to be sure and join, 'Brother Rufus,' I said, 'there is nothing I wouldn't give to the Lord,' but I didn't know it was going to be up all those stairs."

The other two were silent, and the fluent, wavering voice went on. "Carrie, now, she doesn't mind, but then she's young, like you, Lottie. Though you do look ill, child, now I come to look at you. Are you sure there is nothing wrong? But that odious Lavinia Harkness now, *her* legs don't trouble her, she's not ill, fat as she is. But I'm sure I thought when I gave all my fortune over to the Community I'd get a room to myself, or at least a bed that stayed in the same room, and that not at the top of a mountain."

It was the middle of the morning, and every member of the Community was at work, and it was therefore more than surprising when the front door burst open and Edmund rushed in upon their monotonous sewing party.

"Quick! quick!" he cried, "the barn! Fire!"

The alarm spread at once, and a few moments later all the New Believers within reach had gathered outside in the snow, watching the conflagration. It was not much of a fire. Once the animals were safely out there was nothing to be done, for the water pipes were too solidly frozen to be of use, and all they could do was to stand and watch the beautiful flames.

There was no danger of the fire spreading, for the barn stood by itself; but no one thought of moving away. The fascination of the sight, the roar of the burning roof, and above all the deliciously unexpected break in their routine kept everyone entranced. There was no one who did not feel unusually happy and alive.

Edmund found his way to Lottie's side unnoticed in the excitement, and for the first time since they had reached Foretaste he could speak to her unheard. In the hurry and excitement of the moment he blurted out what was in his mind.

"Lottie, Lottie," he whispered, "are you well, Lottie? Are you happy? I can never see you, I know nothing; tell me quickly, Lottie, are you glad that I am here?"

The girl did not take her eyes from the flames; she did not speak, and at first he thought she had not heard what he said.

"Lottie," he urged, "do you hear me? Say something, tell me, do you want me to stay?"

At this she turned her blue eyes upon him, and spoke in a whisper.

"You must not stay only for me, Edmund, not if you don't believe. Oh,

Edmund, that would be wicked.”

The young man was staggered. What had he said?

“No, no, I don’t mean that,” he said quickly, “of course I don’t. But, Lottie, I must see you, I simply *must*. We can’t talk like this and I must talk to you. Do try and get away next time I’m sent to the hill woods, do come, Lottie, I’ll be looking for you.”

The girl shook her head, but Edmund thought he saw a look on her face which was not quite refusal, and with that he had to be content. It was quite clear she would say no more.

At dinner that day the Community was unusually talkative, and the story of the first discovery of the fire was repeated many times. Then, too, everyone wanted to tell of other fires they had seen, and even of fires they had heard of. Sister Lucy Carp had been in the great New York conflagration of 1801—she was careful to tell them she had been quite a child at the time—and she tried to make much of her experience. For a moment, indeed, people turned to her to listen; but with her fatal flow of words she drove all the spice out of her tale.

“My dear mother—how well I remember the night—and we went on to the roof, and my dear mother was afraid it would be so cold; and they all said that there never had been such a—millions of dollars—and my dear father’s business was in insurance, so he—and the people were all lodged away in the suburbs, and my dear mother said . . .”

There was no listening to it any longer.

Lottie alone sat quiet and silent as usual. Watching her out of the tail of his eye, Edmund, himself the centre of much attention as the original discoverer of the fire, was alarmed by her looks. It wasn’t natural, it wasn’t healthy to be so pale. She looked almost as if she might faint. Was she troubled and terrified, he wondered, by what he had said to her? The longing for a full, undisturbed talk, such as he had so often pictured to himself in his day-dreams, grew violent now that he had put it into words. The force of his own wish was so strong that it must, he felt, influence Lottie and compel her to come. And yet every time he looked at her he felt a pang of distress. She looked as if she would not come.

That night there was another Revelation. They were all together in the outer Sanctuary, as usual, and the harmonium was droning away when Rufus came. Everyone was a little moved out of his ordinary self, a little more aware than usual of the realities of external things, a little more unloosed from the mummy-case of self, and all were overjoyed when the glowing voice of the Master rang through the room.

“Even as the flames consumed the barn to-day under our eyes, so shall the everlasting flame lick up the unregenerate,” he cried. “But, in the day of the coming of the Lord, we who are chosen shall be without sin, spotless, white as

the Lamb.”

They loved the thought.

“How shall I put it to you so that you shall understand? Listen! Not only will the Lord come, in the day that we know, not only shall we meet Him, we alone out of all the world; not only shall we pass straight on in these our living bodies into the Kingdom of Heaven. There is more! For with the new dawn Sin will become impossible, and the struggle of human weakness will depart from us forever. Holiness, in that day, will be inevitable. This is the promise, the revelation of the Lord.”

Among the company who listened there were men and women to whom this was the greatest Revelation of all. They feared not bodily pain, nor even death, but their whole lives had been embittered and tormented by the sense of sin.

Such an one was Silence Thrush. All her earliest memories were of wickedness, of repentance, and of a cloud of guilt from which she could not escape. Far back into her childhood her depravity had become apparent to the little girl, and, ever since, the knowledge had pursued and paralyzed her nature. To what infant crimes it owed its origin she had long since forgotten, yet as far back as she could look the sense of guilt was her plainest memory. There had been that terrible period when her father fell ill, when she had been able to show him only a false, deceitful affection, and had lied implicitly, and even explicitly, by pretending to love him. Two crimes at once, cold-heartedness and deception! Her preoccupation with this had taken the place of all natural feelings on the poor man's death. Silence could not think of him, even now, without a pang of remorse; and it was complex remorse, extending to cover the lack of natural sorrow, as well as the original crimes. The whole thing was a black snowball, this sense of guilt, and as life went on Silence had rolled the ever-increasing monster before her until its sombre chill penetrated her whole existence. And then Rufus had come into her life, holding out new hopes, and miraculously willing to take upon his own shoulders the hideous burden of her guilt. In the first months of their acquaintance at Corinth, Silence had spread the carpet of her scruples under the preacher's feet, and he had trampled upon it. He had accepted the position of her spiritual director, he had assumed a holy authority, and Silence had devoted herself, and her sister, to his service. Long years had passed since then, and the rapture of the deliverance had departed. The old burden had come back upon Silence, the old sense of guilt had descended upon her; and Rufus had grown impatient of her scruples. But other ties of habit grew up, and a feeling which was almost adoration, which kept her by his side. Her faith in his revelations was the one positive thing in her life, and though she fell back into scruples and agonies on her own account, she never doubted his infallible insight. To her, then, this new hope which he

held out, this new certainty of losing her guilt, was a most brilliant prospect. She could not sleep for excitement.

Others besides Silence dwelt long upon the thought which Rufus had propounded, and even Edmund, full though his mind was of Lottie, and of the fire, struggled, as was his duty, to bring his attention to bear upon the meaning of what they had been told.

No sooner had he accomplished this than he began to be troubled with the wonder of what real immunity from sin would be like. A kind of mental uneasiness, which itself felt rather guilty, came over the boy. Like all the members of the Community, indeed like all human beings, Edmund had passed his childhood hedged round by very strong taboos. A thousand things, in themselves quite simple, had been invested with a dreadful wickedness. As he had grown older the manner of his upbringing, so far from widening these limits, had narrowed them still further. Not only were the common moral laws of civilized life, the respect for property, for truth, for outward decency, fastened upon him, but a swarm of special prohibitions flourished too. Anything enjoyable he had come to feel a little wrong, anything outspoken or unrestrained a little dangerous. Beauty was a snare, and worldliness lay all about, a trap for the unwary. One must not even love too much, for God liked best the solemn devotion of an empty heart; every natural impulse must be checked and watched, for was not Nature sinful, and the human soul spontaneously unregenerate?

Think as he might on the matter of eventual sinlessness, Edmund could not feel at home with the notion that his own actual nature was going to change, or that black was suddenly going to become white. Of course he believed the Revelation as much as ever, he said to himself, even though he couldn't see how it was going to work out. He must ask Rufus.

Summoning all his resolutions the following morning, Edmund placed a folded paper in the "Requests' Box" in the Hall, asking that the Revelation of the night before might be further discussed that evening; but he repented his courage later when he found that his request was granted. He was in for it, however, and obliged to stand up and explain what it was he wanted—for there was Rufus asking him, and all eyes turned his way. The young man suffered terribly, and thought it was going to be impossible to utter a word, but found he was saying something or other, though he was not fully conscious what it was,

"I wanted . . . I mean . . . do you mean . . . about this sinlessness. What I mean to say is, are we to understand that we shan't *want* to sin any more, or that things won't *be* sins any more, when the Lord has come?"

To his relief the question must have been intelligible, for it had been understood. He subsided into his place, and for some time he did not hear the

answer that was being given because of the rush of self-consciousness which succeeded his effort. He thought everyone was looking at him, that he was blushing, that his chair creaked. He was exultant and miserable both; and then his attention was caught by what Rufus was saying, and he forgot himself completely.

“... for in that day Nature will be reconciled to God, and all things will be lawful.”

So that was what it was! All things lawful—not only the straight and the narrow, the difficult path, but *all things*! As he sat on the creaky chair in the midst of the people, Edmund had a glimpse of the wide freedom this teaching involved, and the glimpse frightened him. It couldn't be true—wrong couldn't be right, and he, Edmund, couldn't be free from his conscience! What an opening out of the world it would be, what wide, free choices, what rapturous adventures! Edmund's mind checked itself as it were at the gate of this garden; all the moral training of his life forbade him to go further, even though Rufus commanded.

“... but beware of entering this Kingdom *before* the Lord cometh, for that way lies damnation.”

All were listening to the Master with rapt attention, and he developed his scheme.

“I will give you an example,” he said, “a plain matter of common trouble upon the earth, I mean the matter of sex.”

Everyone shifted upon their chairs, and sat up a little more eagerly. It was indeed a plain matter of common trouble—and it was more than that. It was the most interesting, thrilling, dangerous, delightful subject of anxiety in the world.

“Listen!”

How often they had heard Rufus say that magic word! How gladly they obeyed it!

“In the state of perfect holiness there will be no reason why sexual intercourse shall be restrained, any more than eating or drinking. There is as little occasion for shame in the one case as in the other. God placed the wall of partition between the sexes during the apostacy, for reasons which will be broken down in the resurrection; and then we, who live on into that holy day, will be free, widely free. But woe, I say, woe unto him who abolishes the law of apostacy before he stands in the holiness of resurrection. Woe! Woe! for he shall not see the Kingdom.”

So that was it, the saving clause, the chain upon the opening door! However disappointing it might be to others, Edmund was glad to feel the safety of postponement, and to be fully satisfied in his mind by the answer. And yet, when he looked again at the liberating, incredible phrase, “All things

lawful,” he felt again its wild attraction. His own world would crumble about his ears if it were true. But what of that? The adventures of the spirit would begin—yes, and of the body, too. The young man told himself that this last possibility, this plain example Rufus had given, was a temptation upon which he must not dwell, and he dragged his thoughts back to safer channels. But he had looked now into a free world, and he was never again to forget it. He was like a child who leaves his school, and suddenly perceives that all its arbitrary restrictions and rules have vanished. A new liberty, a new horizon opened up, and Edmund Sonning left his long-protracted childhood behind him. Bound he still was in the fetters of obedience and of faith in Rufus, but it was a voluntary bond. The boy was now full grown, with all the dangerous responsibilities of an adult human soul!

CHAPTER IV

EDMUND AND LOTTIE

FIVE OF THE months of waiting were over. Quite early in March the frosts began to be less severe, and the sunshine to have a touch of warmth. The snow began to melt in the open, though it still lay heavy in the woods. The streams broke out of their casing, and lapped noisily against the stones. The birds, too, suddenly appeared, and with a great deal of chattering and piping announced that they had come.

It was not yet spring; no flowers had pushed their way through the hard ground, and the darkness closed down almost as uncompromisingly as ever upon the frozen earth; but for all that it was not exactly winter, and there was a general feeling that change was on its way.

On the farm one of the busy months of the year was just ahead. All hands were turned on to preparations for the spring sowing. The plough was made ready, the tools sharpened, the seed fetched down and looked over, with much discussion of what was to be planted in each place. There had been at first a tendency to say that no work at all need be done, since the Lord would have come before the harvest. Ebenezer Dale had been very positive about this, and had had quite a following; but Rufus, hearing what they said, had made it clear that it was not to a barren earth that the Saviour could be welcomed.

“We know not what He will ordain,” the Prophet said. “It may well be that we shall stay on this earth forever, or it may be that we shall move to a distant star. We know not. But this is clear, the Lord loves not an idle hand, and while it is day we must labour.”

This explicit command had been accepted, but soon other differences of opinion arose about each of the near-by fields, where everyone wanted to work. The new spring feeling in the air was unsettling, and seemed to inspire independent judgments, and the Lord had to make quite a number of severely practical Revelations to Rufus before harmony was restored. Acting through the Prophet, however, He indicated which fields were to grow wheat and which oats, and which were to be held for potatoes.

This plan of settling disputes was so successful that it spread to all sorts of mundane things, and by the second week of March the allocation of all the work had been put under divine control. It was thus by the most august authority that Edmund was permanently allotted to the distant fields, where a good deal of clearing ground and burning rubbish was required; and he could

not but recognize that the Lord had made a fortunate decision. Every morning he set off with his little pail of food, only to return when it was dark; and every day he was content to go, because of his hope that Lottie would manage to come.

The long, solitary hours were welcome to Edmund, even in the turmoil and perplexity of his thoughts. He was one of those boys to whom speech was not a necessity, and he did not feel the loneliness. Indeed he found it easier to throw off his troubles when no one was by. The trees were perfectly good company, and he loved the clearing and cleaning of the earth to which he was set. The dark soil was friendly, somehow, just shaking out of the grip of winter, and it was delicious to loosen and work it while it was still crumbly from the frosts. And then the sun, striking down upon him as he worked! It was all clear and clean and living, this outdoor world, and the young man felt a renewal of strength from his part in it. When the Community was several miles away, its excitements and its peculiar atmosphere always slipped off him; it wasn't then possible to care much, even about the most tortuous twist of his overnight conscience. The Lord had made a very beautiful, healthy world, and He was sending a new spring upon it. Things must be all right.

The days went by, and little green buds appeared upon the trees and bushes. Fantastic early flowers crept up out of the ground, and blossomed with their air of strangeness among the leaves of the year before. A solitary cherry tree burst into exquisite whiteness, and some drowsy old bees began to hum to and fro. Edmund, swinging along the path to his domain, noticed these things one early morning, and whistled as he went. It was going to be a lovely day.

The fields he had been clearing had been ploughed the day before and now he was to do the sowing. He was greatly looking forward to the job, and in a way he was happy. Lottie had been near him as he washed his breakfast mug, and she had murmured something to him. He hadn't heard clearly; but what could it be but that she was coming at last? That was why he whistled as he went.

There were a great many birds about, Edmund thought, laughing to himself at the sight of the big, fat creatures. They would be after the seed, of course! What fun for them! And for him, too. He spent quite a long time in making a scarecrow, and laughed with pride as he stuck his hat upon its wobbly head. What a lovely day it was already!

The birds didn't much mind the scarecrow. Every time Edmund turned a row he saw them rise up from behind him and he liked to think of their fat-bellied enjoyment. How nice to be a bird on a day like this, with the earth all turned up open, wriggling with worms and scattered with seed. He had none of the conventional impulse to shoot them, on the contrary, he thought of them with affection. It would soon be time for nesting, little downy nests, so snug

and hidden. He would find some, and show them to Lottie.

There was a grand settling down of birds when Edmund paused for his dinner, and he amused himself by watching them as he himself munched the bread and cheese he had brought with him. It was their startled scattering up into the air which first gave him warning of the coming of a stranger.

He came from the side farthest from the Community House, and was not Lottie. Edmund's surprise was instantly mixed with concern. How troublesome to have a visitor on the one day Lottie was coming!

This was the thought with which he watched the stranger approach.

When the man was quite near, however, and began to address him, Edmund's attention shifted. He was an odd-looking, melancholy sort of man, dressed in the shabby black clothes of an itinerant preacher, and carrying a small carpet bag in his hand. With a shy greeting he sat down by Edmund's side.

"Can you tell me," he asked, "if the colony of Foretaste is anywhere near here?"

Unwelcome as was his appearance, Edmund was not able to be unfriendly, and it was with a thoroughly pleasant smile that he made answer. It didn't seem possible to be rude on such an exquisite day; and he would be sure to be gone before Lottie came. Edmund offered him some bread, which the other accepted, and in a moment or two he was explaining his errand.

His name was MacDonald, he said, and he was a student, "a student of religious life." He had visited all the Communities in existence, all he could hear of, and he was writing a book to show the wonderful workings of Providence. Would the leader of Foretaste let him come in, did Edmund think, and would he answer questions? What was it all like, anyway, did Edmund know?

On hearing the young man's answer the stranger was greatly excited.

"Capital, capital," he said, and fell to asking about it all. Did they believe in marriage? Was there community of goods? Did they have a Communion Service? What did they eat as a rule? The questions came one upon another, and Edmund hardly knew if he ought to answer.

"You must ask Brother Hollins to tell you."

MacDonald was disappointed, and obviously wanted to sit in the hedge in the sunshine and go on talking to the young man; but Edmund as obviously wanted him gone, and Edmund's wish was the stronger. Before ten minutes were over MacDonald went.

Edmund returned to his sowing, but before very long the birds flew up again and stopped him. It was Lottie this time.

She advanced no further than the edge of the copse, and Edmund ran as fast as he could towards her. The two young people met, and were quiet so

long that the birds, greedy and unobservant, returned to the furrows.

At last, however, Edmund let Lottie go, and they sat down together in the very same hedge that Edmund had sat in before. Or was it the very same hedge? Surely it was all glorified and transformed now, a perfect hedge!

For all he had so much to say, Edmund found it hard to begin, and it was actually Lottie who made the first sound. She began to weep, and from the pitiful little sob which came first she was, almost in a moment, in a passion of tears.

“Sinful . . . wicked . . . Edmund!” her words were incoherent, her distress terrible. There seemed nothing Edmund could do.

Lottie was very easily tired, however, and before long her violence stopped of itself, and she sat passive, with her head against his shoulder and her face hidden. She was unwilling to answer anything, and only shuddered a little when he pressed her to tell him what troubled her.

Edmund did not know what to do. The blissful moment of her coming had been quickly succeeded by all this misery, and he was absorbed in a blind effort to comfort her. In his own heart there was a blaze of joy. She needed him, she clung to him, his sacrifice was rewarded, his presence essential to her. But he could not attend to any of this, he must attend to her. And yet he could not avoid the springing up of comfort, and, like all people in all times of excitement, he carried the two streams of consciousness triumphantly together. He was madly happy and abjectly miserable, acutely conscious of his surroundings, and yet wholly unaware. The birds and the field and the hedge were nowhere, and time was standing still, and yet at the same instant he knew that time was slipping by, and that Lottie might be missed. She *must* explain herself, yet he must not disturb her.

“Oh, Lottie! Lottie!” It was all expressed in that.

She answered him in the same inarticulate fashion.

“Oh, Edmund! Edmund!” How much it meant.

He took her still further into his arms, her cheek was soft against his own.

“My darling! Oh, my dear!”

They could have spoken together for hours, and said no more than this, and both would have been content; and yet they knew that more must be said, and quickly. Understanding, love itself was not enough. The world was pressing on them, and all around was a frightful coil; and time was rushing by.

“I don’t know how to tell you, Edmund! I wish Aunt Sarah was here!”

“Lottie, darling, what is it?”

She hid her face again.

“The Master,” she murmured, and then, “Carrie, Edmund, you know how . . . and now I think . . .” She was weeping again.

Edmund did not understand.

“Dearest, dearest, what is it?”

Lottie spoke in a whisper.

“Your father and Carrie, Edmund . . . you remember what was said about them.”

A paralyzing, abominable thought sprang into the young man’s mind. His arms clutched her tightly, but he did not know what he was doing. Everything, including his own beating heart, was perfectly still for a long, long time. Between one of Lottie’s whispers and the next an age went by.

“It was a long time ago . . . just after the Camp Meeting . . . and he said the Lord . . . Oh, Edmund, if only I could be sure!”

How hard it was to speak. His heart had begun to work again, but so furiously that it was almost shaking them both. It wasn’t possible to bring out any gentle words—they would have been shouted, or somehow broken to bits.

“The Master says,” Lottie went on, a little bolder now, “that when the Lord comes He will be glad. He says I have been chosen, as Mary was, and that . . . but oh, Edmund, I am so afraid. . . . What am I to do?”

“When the Lord comes!” The words frightened Edmund. How utterly he had forgotten his beliefs, yielding to worldly emotions! With these last, halting, whispered words Lottie had wrapped the whole network of Foretaste about him again. “When the Lord comes!”

“I must think, Lottie,” he managed to say.

“I am so glad I have told you, Edmund,” she answered, sighing, as if the worst part of her burden had rolled off her.

“I was sure it was wrong to speak of it, you know, but now I’m sure it was right. Only, Edmund . . . you won’t tell anyone, will you, not the Master, nor anyone?”

Fear crept back into her voice, and she put a hand imploringly on the arm which encircled her.

“I knew it was wrong,” she added, and began to cry again. “Oh, what shall I do? Oh, Edmund, save me! I am not worthy! The Lord will punish me, and when He comes I shall be cast out!”

“No, no, NO, Lottie!” the young man cried, though what it was he was denying he scarcely knew. “I must think, I will help you . . . it is all right, Lottie, only you must not cry so! And oh, Lottie, you must go now, or they will be sure to find out . . .”

She started up, terrified, and for a moment she stood, fragile, looking down at him, pitiful with her tear-stained face, tragically pathetic. She leant forward suddenly.

“I am afraid of him, Edmund,” she whispered, and was gone.

CHAPTER V

THE PUNISHMENT ROOM

DONALD MACDONALD WAS not received with any enthusiasm at Foretaste, but neither was he turned away. Sister Silence saw him in her office, and answered most of his questions, and even went so far as to say she would try and arrange an interview for him with the Master. He was allowed to spend the night, and lots were drawn to determine which of the men should offer him the half of his bed; he was also invited to attend the evening worship, and had nothing, except perhaps a shade of reticence on the part of his instructress, to complain of.

Once he got among the other members, MacDonald met with no difficulties at all. Indeed, Brother Ebenezer at once took him under his charge; for it was a joy to this Brother to have a fresh person to talk to. Almost all the members were eager to have speech with the stranger, and more than one took him aside to ask, shamefacedly, for information about the outside world. Had he been to Delaville recently? Had he by good fortune seen So-and-so, or So-and-so? He was grieved to have no news to give them, but he judged from the asking that all were not quite so contented as Sister Silence would have had him believe.

A little judicious questioning on his side soon brought out a number of small grievances, and Ebenezer Dale, with whom he had a very long talk, voiced the more serious doubts of a whole section.

“It is not,” he said, “that we have not confidence in the Master. You must not go away with the impression that we are doubtful, or unbelieving. Far from it. But some of us cannot but feel that the messages of the Lord come but darkly, at times, through his medium. That we are the chosen people we know. But it is just there that the difficulty lies. For to those whom the Lord has selected He gives gifts of prophecy and praise. These things are our portion, and I myself have the inner certainty of election. We feel that the Master is neglecting the virtue which the Lord has vouchsafed to us, by his own exclusive ministration.”

“Does he never let any of you say a word?” asked MacDonald, his face betraying none of his inward amusement.

“Never a word,” Ebenezer answered him solemnly, “and we feel that it is wrong. But doubtless it will come, all in good time,” he added, becoming suddenly aware of what he was doing. “You will find none of us here who are not loyal, Mr. MacDonald, for it is through our Master that we have found the

Light.”

“What is allowed in the matter of human affections?” the stranger asked, turning to a subject which he knew to be likely to be revealing; and in the answers he got from one and another he found what he expected. There was tension and uneasiness among some of the Community, and also jealousy of the Master’s control, and by drawing it out into open speech MacDonald sensibly increased it. “When their Lord don’t come on the expected day,” he said to himself, “there will be trouble in this dovecot; I’m glad I came to look at it before it is too late.”

Towards dusk, Edmund came home with lagging feet, his work all neglected behind him. He was amazed to recognize the stranger seated at the supper table. What an age had passed since they had met and sat together under the hedge! It was unbelievable that he should still be hanging about.

Everything was unbelievable just then, above all the frightful trouble which had come on him and Lottie. A world of distorted shadows had encompassed the boy all the afternoon, and everything had turned to madness and horror and uncertainty. Had Lottie really said what he had heard, and did she really mean what he imagined? The sharpness of Edmund’s emotion overwhelmed all his reasoning powers, and during all those dragging hours it was only for the briefest moments that he could remember where he was, or what he was supposed to be doing. Wrapt in a kind of intense despair, Edmund had forgotten everything which had hitherto made up his life, and not once in the whole time did it occur to him to pray.

The shock which had fallen upon him obliterated everything else, and in his human passion he quite forgot that the Lord was on His way.

Habit and hunger combined to send him homewards at last; but how remote and far away all the community interests seemed in the midst of the turmoil of his heart! He forgot the stranger again as soon as he noticed him, and was busy only with wondering why Lottie did not appear.

The only thing which was clear to the boy was that something had got to be done. He did not know what it was, what it could possibly be; but there must be something! Things *could* not go on so; it was quite impossible. And yet the routine and the atmosphere of the place were so strong that he could find no way of acting. All the old habits caught hold of him, and he moved with the others, apparently as contented as they. All round him was the hum of community small talk; all about him were the community faces, wearing their usual expressions. It was impossible to break through this fence, to fall out of step, or to do anything but go the way. The pressure of Foretaste was too strong.

The worship that night was a criticism, the victim being Caroline Carp. MacDonald watched with eager interest every act of the strange performance,

but as for Edmund, what did he care? Carrie might have every sin in the world, but what was that to him? He heard, without attending, when Sister Silence brought forth her store of sharp criticisms, her list of unkind observations, and he did not notice the carefully restrained animosity of her voice. Caroline wept, and Silence accused her of enjoying her tears, and many others joined in—for the girl was no favourite—but the only thing that Edmund knew was that Lottie was absent from the room.

“Only yesterday, at milking time, she claimed a headache, and went to the hall, where all could see her, and sat there with her head in her hands, waiting for sympathy.”

“And I found her in the evening crying over a rotten apple because, she said, her own soul was like that, spoiled and bruised by a fall.”

“Two nights ago she came to me and said, might she sleep with me, because she was afraid of the darkness, and I knew it was only by way of attracting attention, because she sleeps better than any of us in room 12.”

The accusations were all in the same sense: false feelings, morbid vanity, disguised laziness. There was a perfect chorus from all sides, but particularly from the women.

The Widow Carp, in her heart of hearts, disliked her daughter; but she was none the less enraged by the outburst of abuse, which she felt was in some way an aspersion on herself. Nothing had as yet ever tamed the widow to discipline; she had no more idea of obeying the conventions of “Criticism” than she had of keeping silence while she worked. It was, therefore, a very short time before she broke out into indiscriminate abuse of her daughter’s accusers.

“And what about *you*, Sister Silence, who likes to crow it over everybody with your authority and your grand ways? Who told you you could sit about and boss us all, while poor Carrie has to work till her eyes ache, and my poor legs—they have been so bad.”

MacDonald was enjoying the scene, and when a confused outburst of cries and calls for silence arose he positively smiled. It all fitted in so well with what he was going to write in his book!

Rufus, however, stopped the confusion with a word; and the stranger could not but be impressed by the force of his authority. Carrie ceased her loud hysterical weeping. Silence dropped her head, and even Mrs. Carp was still—and all at one little phrase, spoken without emphasis, and barely loud enough to be heard.

“You forget that you are the chosen of the Lord!”

The order which was instantly restored was shamefaced. No one even ventured to look up until, after a somewhat lengthy pause, Rufus himself took up the word.

“Sister Caroline,” he said, “this has been a severe testing. You have been told, with a faithfulness which has, in some cases, run near to malice, that you are not always fully sincere in your emotions, and that you do not always bear your full share of the burdens of our daily life. As to the second charge, I cannot tell. Sister Silence is our steward, and her judgments on such points must be accepted. Henceforth you must see to it that you do a greater share of the work.

“As to the other, the more searching accusation, I have this to say. Look well into your own heart; and let each of your accusers do the same. The Lord, as we all know, speaks in a very compelling voice, and it may well be that you, Sister Carrie, have a sense of heavenly hearing which some others lack as yet. Beware, however, of making display of this gift. It is for your most inward soul, and not for ostentation. If I tell others not to mock, I tell you not to boast, for the gifts of the Lord are too holy. When the prayer is ended, come with me to the Punishment Room; we will talk further of this together.”

He paused, as if for prayer, but a moment later raised his head again.

“One word more! The unseemly conduct of this evening must never be repeated. Sister Lucy Carp, you are forbidden to take part in any of our sessions of criticism from now until the Lord gives you leave. And you others, all of you, remember! Though our mercies are great, our need for watchfulness is greater. How can We fail, or be undisciplined, WE, who are the chosen of the Lord?”

There was something very fine about the man, MacDonald admitted to himself. Amid all the chaos he had created, he seemed to keep his own head. Not to admit the sham nature of that silly girl’s affectations was a masterstroke, he said to himself. Of course, once you began to recognize the existence of hysteria and ostentation where would the whole thing be? Like Harmony and Zoar and Economy and even Icaria, this madhouse hangs together because of its head, he thought, and he looked forward with interest to the interview promised him for the morrow.

Edmund sat through the whole scene almost without attention. He heard a hubbub of some sort, and then the low and moving voice of Rufus; but he knew nothing of what had taken place. His eyes were fixed, indeed, upon Rufus, but with a blind and absent look. He saw the Master rise, and watched him walk slowly over towards the Punishment Room, and the thought which sprang into his mind was still, Lottie, Lottie! Was she in that forbidden room, which he himself had never entered? And if so, what did the Master want with her? A moment later he saw Carrie rise and creep humbly in the same direction. Her eyes were very red, her figure very drooping, but Edmund, unaware of what had been passing, flushed and shook with the thoughts which came unbidden to his mind. For what did the Master want with Carrie? Shut

away there in the Punishment Room, what things went on?

Somehow or other the evening broke up, and the boy found himself lying undressed and in his bed. With the darkness and the stillness, all his miserable uncertainties returned upon him again, and Edmund lay awake, a prey to the most agonizing fancies.

As the night wore on, and the normality which springs from human companionship faded, dreadful visions came before his tormented imagination.

He saw Lottie and the Prophet together; he saw Rufus enfolding her with his ghastly white cloak of righteousness, and he turned sick with imagining what followed. Lottie, his own pure, precious, childlike love, Lottie, who had wept only that very day upon his shoulder!

The mystery of childbirth, the wonderful tenderness of motherhood, all that dreamland of possibilities which might have been his own to explore with his love, all were shattered by the brutal facts. Had not Lottie told him plainly, face to face, that she was with child already, cruelly betrayed by an old and awful man, broken, ruined, destroyed? The train of his thoughts was frightful, it was sweeping him along to rage, to hatred of Rufus, and to the verge of violent action. And then there came into his memory the last words Lottie had had:

“I am afraid of him, Edmund!”

Good God! What might not be happening now, this moment, in the inner Sanctuary below?

The force of this notion roused Edmund to such a pitch of desperation that he sprang up in his bed, and was out of it, and on his way downstairs before he knew what he was about. The chill of the uncarpeted stair, though he did not consciously notice it, combined with the amazing strangeness of the familiar Sanctuary seen by the half-light to check Edmund upon the threshold. He was of a sudden aware of himself, and his passion and fright, and he paused in his headlong career.

“Where am I going? Good God, why am I here?”

The whole place was wrapped in quiet and darkness, save for the Punishment Room, from behind the curtains of whose doorway a little light streamed forth.

Nothing moved, and Edmund, peering nervously from the staircase, became aware that his own body was beginning to shake and sway under him. The sense of fear grew rapidly with his trembling, until he was in a panic, afraid of what lay unseen before him, still more of what lay behind. It was his unformulated fear, much more than his original intention, which finally drove him towards the Punishment Room, and he crept softly across the room until he could peer in through the curtained doorway.

The light which had shown through the cracks was rather dim; it came

from a couple of night-lights burning in saucers upon the floor, but their flame was enough to reveal to Edmund's fascinated gaze a strange and curious sight.

Rufus, wrapped in his white robe, was kneeling upon the floor; before him, in an armchair, sat Caroline Carp, and behind him knelt Silence and Patience Thrush. In front of Rufus and at Carrie's very feet was a basin, one of the sisters behind held a towel, the other an ivory box.

Edmund was utterly astounded, and gazed in astonishment at the scene which followed. He had come at the very moment when the prayer was over and the action about to begin.

He saw Rufus bow down until his forehead touched the floor; at this, as if it were a signal, Sister Patience came forward, and, kneeling a little to one side of the chair, she unbuttoned and drew off Sister Caroline's shoes. Sister Silence followed, and, kneeling on the other side, she pulled off the grey woollen stockings. It was then the turn of Rufus, who proceeded, still on his knees, to wash the penitent's feet, pouring over them water from an earthen jug.

Sister Patience then dried them, and Sister Silence, opening her ivory box, rubbed them reverently with something she took from it. All this while not a word was said; but Edmund thought that Carrie was weeping, for he could hear the irregular intake of her breath. She had her hands over her face.

The ablution finished, the two sisters stepped back to their previous place, and all was as before, save for Carrie's clean, bare feet upon the floor; but presently, into the silence broke the beautiful voice of Rufus.

"The punishment is at an end, Sister Carrie; you may go."

At this her sobs broke out. Still sitting in the chair, and twisting one bare foot against the other like an embarrassed child, the girl wept aloud, and gave no sign of moving. Rufus made a motion with his hand to the attendants behind him, and the two sisters came forward again and lifted Carrie to her feet. They were like policemen handling a street accident; every movement seemed studied, pre-arranged and often practised; and they marched her to the door.

Edmund had watched all this, and forgotten he was there. He did not realize himself in time to step out of the way, and the three women knocked right into him as they passed the threshold. An exclamation from Sister Patience roused Rufus, and a moment after Edmund found himself in the penitent's chair, with the Master standing before him.

Edmund had no explanation of his presence to give, and for a moment he sought in a blank mind for something he could answer to the Master's questions. But no questions came. Instead, Rufus knelt down upon the floor, and made as if to begin the ceremony of the washing of the feet all over again.

Edmund's whole being recoiled. He pushed back into the chair, as if trying

to escape backwards, and he gazed in bewildered fright at the bowl, the jug and the sponge.

Rufus did not seem to look at him, but he prayed in a low, monotonous voice. How long a time went by Edmund could not say; all he was aware of was that a twinge of a new feeling began to creep over him. From being strange and terrible, his presence in that chair grew inevitable, then, somehow, holy. Although Rufus had fallen silent, Edmund felt himself following his Master's thought. A sin, a great and awful sin, was on his soul, for he had for a whole day forgotten the Lord and allowed himself to dwell, with hatred and earthly passion, upon the things of the world. And now Rufus, and he alone, could save him and wash him clean. It grew clearer and clearer in the silence, and from the rapt, upturned eyes of Rufus power and certainty seemed to beam forth. Stronger and stronger grew the magic, deeper and deeper sank the boy, until his breath, like Carrie's, came in light, irregular gasps, and he knew not his own body.

The return of the Thrush sisters roused Rufus, but not Edmund, and in utter silence the scene was gone through again. It was exactly as before, save that the boy's feet were already bare. The little lights flickered, but the living souls were still. The mystery of Power lay over them all.

When it was done Rufus rose, and at last his lovely voice broke through the quiet of the room.

"It is done, Edmund; you are sealed."

The boy quivered and seemed to wake.

"Done, done . . . sealed?" What was it all? Where was he?

"The Lord has lifted for you another veil," Rufus said, looking fixedly at the young man. "Listen, listen!"

With his eyes upon Edmund's he began to talk, and everything but his personality slipped away into the shadows again.

What he said that night Edmund never clearly remembered, but the impression of it all was very strong. It was like a high wall built around them both, a wall of faith, studded with brilliant stones. The Master was close, close to the secrets of God. Into him, and through him, passed the life stream, and away from his shelter lay death. By surrender, by faith, by trust, all things would be made easy; and, indeed, as he talked, all was easy already. No matter how strange they seemed, no matter what the protests of the worldly mind, the secrets which Rufus knew explained it all. He was inescapable, for he was the Prophet of the Lord!

CHAPTER VI

APOSTACY

THE NEXT DAY dawned uneasily for Edmund Sonning. The strange midnight scene in which he had taken part had faded, towards morning, into a heavy sleep, and now, in his unrefreshed awakening, he forgot it all. He woke to the consciousness of some dreadful unhappiness; and Lottie and all the tangle about her came into his mind before anything else was distinct at all. Then, when at last he remembered Rufus and the things he had learnt in the night, he tried to make himself believe that the despair was all uncalled for, the misery unfounded. But somehow the effort was unsuccessful, and he found himself despairing and miserable still. It was a heavy load of distress, made all the harder because he ought not to be troubled now that he had been admitted to the truth. The young man's mind and body were very weary.

Of all his trouble, however, Edmund gave no outward sign. To-day, like other days, he breakfasted and washed his mug, and then, finding his usual orders on the board, he went off alone to his outlying field. "A day to think, quiet, solitude—I shall have time to regulate my mind." So he said to himself, excusing his apathy and grief.

The birds in the woods and clearings, and in the new-sown field, were as gay and greedy as they had been before. The sun shone out, the earth lay bare and open before the young man, and the little pussy willows danced to and fro in his face. But Edmund saw them not. Wrapped in his unhappy dream he passed the hours, building up wild and impossible schemes and crashing them down behind him.

Not much work was done in the outer fields that day, and, indeed, by the time the sun was high Edmund had given over all pretence of it, and was sitting in the hedge where he had talked with Lottie. It was there that Donald MacDonald found him as he passed back over the road he had come.

The stranger hailed Edmund cheerfully, and he replied automatically, inviting the other to join him without knowing what he said. They sat down together, and MacDonald drew out a pipe.

"It's safe here, isn't it?" he asked, and without waiting for Edmund's answer he filled and lit it, and lay back in evident enjoyment of the smoke.

"I've never seen one Community yet where they didn't cut off tobacco," he observed; "it's one reason why I've never wanted to stay."

Edmund said nothing, for his mind was far away.

"This place of yours, now," MacDonald proceeded. "I suppose you wouldn't believe how like it is to all the others?"

"No," said the boy absently, "I wouldn't believe it."

MacDonald laughed.

"You'd be surprised if you saw my notebook," he said, laying his hand against his breast pocket, and lovingly patting it.

Edmund was not attending. "Let me see it then," he murmured, like one in a dream.

MacDonald needed no further encouragement. What he wanted was to pour out his own impressions, to clarify them by speech, and to condense it all ready for writing down. He did not notice that his companion hardly knew what he was saying, but plunged into the subject at once.

"This is the fourteenth Community I've visited myself," he began, "and there are still several on my list. There was New Harmony first—a long time ago that was. It was what brought me over from the old country in the first place. Oh, but he was a grand man, was Robert Owen, for all that things went wrong! If only the others had been like him!"

He paused on his memory, and his face grew sad. After awhile, however, he sighed and went on.

"Well, well, that is long over; and there's no help for it; but I've been to a lot of queer places since. First there was the Rapp Settlement at Economy, and the Amana people, and the Perfectionists at Oneida, and all the Phalanxes. I've visited four of them personally, as well as Modern Times, and the One Mentians, and Icaria at Nauvoo, and, of course, the Shakers at Mount Lebanon, and the real original Garden of Eden down at Mountain Cave, Virginia. I know them all, I fancy, and I can tell you, young man, they're all as like each other as peas in a pod."

Edmund heard the string of names, and something in the sound of them roused him, although they meant nothing to him yet. Even the Phalanxes, even Brook Farm were unknown, so carefully selected had been his knowledge of the world. But now he was curious.

"What are all these places?" he asked.

"Communities, my son, like yours. Queer places, where queer people get together and believe queer things."

The idea that there were other places like Foretaste was so striking that Edmund's whole attention was caught.

"Tell me, tell me everything!"

"I can't tell you everything, my boy, or I'd never get to the railway to-night. But I can tell you this; whatever strange tale your Mr. Hollins tells, and whatever wild doings go on at your place, I can cap 'em with a stranger and a wilder one every time!"

What words he used! Strange, wild—it should be holy, consecrated, inspired. Edmund was troubled.

“Why do you say this?”

“Because it’s true, Gospel true, sonny. I’ve seen so much of prophets and prophetesses, I know ’em all by heart. There’s some as is Moses (I can’t think why they choose him, but they do), and there’s some as is Elijah; but most of ’em don’t stop short at being Christ Himself.”

Edmund gave a gasp. This was dreadful, what was the man saying! Surely there was some mistake!

“It’s all one in the end,” the Scotchman went on, “quarrels and troubles over love-making always smash it up. The times I’ve seen it happen! Moses, or whoever it is, gets to wanting all the pretty girls, and the others all run wild over that or something else, and they split up like rockets—all but the celibate ones, that is. They do seem to keep going somehow, if you can call it going at all.”

“But . . . what do you mean?”

“See here, young man, you follow my advice and quit. Take my word for it, there ain’t no good in rolling, or shouting, or starving, or burning, or anything else to the Lord. He don’t look on it with any favour. And as for Second Comings—do you know, it’s happened at least twice already, to believe some of my friends. There was Mother Lee in 1774, and Swedenborg, too, and now there’s Noyes says we’re right bang in the middle of the Millennium this minute.”

Edmund was listening with horrified attention.

“But surely——” he tried to interrupt.

“There’s no surely about it, for all that each one claims to be the mouthpiece of God Himself. Some roll, some jerk, some leap and dance, some write new Bibles and some speak new tongues, some try it on as Healers, too, and go in for the miracle tricks, some talk with the dead, till they come to believe they really do. Some have love feasts—you know—the old Agapae—and they give Seraphim kisses and all that, and they have queer sorts of Communion services, too, oranges, and all kinds. And some set out to forgive the unforgivable sin—in fact, there’s nothing in Heaven or Earth they won’t have a shot at. But there’s not one I’d trust with my purse round the next hedge, and if you think your King Rufus Hollins is going to lift you up into Heaven in any chariot of fire, let me tell you you’re mightily mistaken.”

Edmund had listened, fascinated and horrified by this extraordinary outburst, but now it came over him that what he was doing was a sin.

“You are tempting me to disbelieve!” he cried. “Go away, please!”

MacDonald smiled.

“You won’t find you can forget what I’ve told you in a hurry,” he said, and

then, more seriously, “Young man, I don’t know who you are, or why you’re in this mix-up, but if you’ve got a mother anywhere worrying about you, you’d do well to go back to her before it’s too late. By all the signs and symptoms, I can tell this place is going to break up very soon now. You clear out of it; for it’s all a pack of nonsense, after all.”

With this devastating advice MacDonald rose, and nodding to Edmund as cheerfully as if they had been talking of the weather, he made his way across the half-sown field. The birds fluttered up in front of him as he went; and then very soon they swooped down again, and all was as it was before.

What a change, what a difference, what a turmoil was left in Edmund’s mind! That parting shot about his mother! How it struck home! And then the substance of his talk, how incredible it was!

“It is not true,” the boy said to himself, trying to throw these new doubts from him, and at once in a sickening cloud they closed all round and shut out every vestige of belief. Rufus the Master, the Interpreter of Christ indeed! It was Rufus the deceiver, more likely; Rufus Satan, if one came to think of it! But oh, if this were so, where did Lottie stand? Either way lay disaster, only it was clear that the two important things, his love and his faith, were fatally bound up together. The reality of Foretaste was the only possible key to the tangle, and it was ruin not to believe.

Thinking, or, rather, trying to think, did Edmund no good at all; but he kept on hoping to unravel it, driven by a panic from within. If Rufus was what he claimed, then Lottie was all right, except that he, Edmund, had lost her forever. But it wouldn’t matter, of course, once the Lord had come. But how difficult it was now to believe that He was at hand! Quick, quick, to the other alternative . . . Rufus was a mad fanatic, and Foretaste was a delusion. But then, poor Lottie, what was she? It was unendurable that way—quick, quick, back to the other.

In the turmoil of these thoughts Edmund forgot the time, and it was only the closing in of darkness which finally reminded him that he must go home. Supper would be over—so much the better; he would still be undisturbed. But what was the good of that, when he couldn’t tell what to do, or even what to think? His mind swung to and fro, at one moment recognizing that his faith was dead, at the next praying with a desperate earnestness to keep it alive.

Sister Silence scolded Edmund when he came in; but her words did not reach his brain. Where was Lottie; he *must* see her!

That night was a dancing night, and under the sharp rebuke of Sister Silence, Edmund swallowed his meal, and, vesting himself in his black robe of sin, he hurried to the Sanctuary.

The music had already begun, and the solemn movement was on foot. No one was whirling yet, but with measured tread they were circling round and

round to the glory of the Lord.

Whether it was the sight or the sound, or the force of a strong habit, Edmund was soon revolving with the rest, and as he went his new-found scepticism fell from him. Whether it was the exhaustion of his suffering, or a revelation from the Lord, he cared not; for there came a rush of emotion so pure, so heavenly sweet, that it stole away his cares. He was plunged deep into the sacred atmosphere, and all was well. This strange magic worship must be inspired from above, nothing else could explain its force. All that frightful horror he had heard from Lottie, all that despair which had held him, was unworthy weakness, for this, THIS was the sacrifice demanded by the Lord, and so—so—round and round, faster and faster would he praise His Name.

Excitement always ran high on dance nights, but there was something special afoot to-night. Word presently went round that the Master himself was coming, and that he had another Revelation to make. This passed from one to another, at first joyously enough, till some ventured to whisper a hint of what the coming Revelation might be. It was Mrs. Carp, panting and flushed with revolving, but garrulous as ever, who first put it into words.

“He will tell us to dance naked,” she said, and she giggled as she said it.

Quick as fire the suggestion spread about. Of course, what could they expect? The order which the Master would give them was as plain as light—to cast sin aside. Were they ready to dance naked before the Lord, they asked themselves uneasily as they waited? And the women at any rate could not find it in their hearts to say that they were.

Rufus came in quietly, and Lottie crept in behind him; as always the dance stopped dead at his coming. He prayed in silence for some time, and they all shivered with expectation. They were in an agony, all the greater because they thought they knew what he would say, and dreaded yet longed to hear it.

At last into an intense silence he spoke.

“Your cloaks are the garments of sin.”

So far they had anticipated his words.

“Before you can come to the Lord you must cast them aside.”

They knew it—it was coming!

“The Lord has told me how it is to be done. Watch!”

He strode from the centre of the ring, and stood before Lottie. She looked up at him with trembling lips, and eyes wide with terror.

“Do not be afraid, child,” he said softly, “the Lord is very tender.”

As he spoke he came closer to her, until their cloaks brushed against each other. Then, deftly, but without a word, he undid his cloak, keeping its great folds about him, and threw it round the girl. A moment later his hands were round her, buttoning it again upon the other side.

A sort of sigh went round the watching circle. The Lord was not asking too

much of them after all!

The two figures stood, close together, wrapped in the great white cloak; and the black folds of Lottie's garment of sin fell in a heap at their feet. The Lord had accepted Lottie, and she had cast off her sins, and was covered now with the cloak of Redemption.

"Let us dance," cried Rufus, in a high, loud, exultant voice. "Let us dance to the Lord, for a sinner is saved this night."

They danced, and for awhile Lottie and the Master stood with their arms hidden, face to face, close together, in the centre of the Sanctuary.

The dancers whirled about them.

"Strange," the faithful whispered, "strange are the ways of the Lord!"

Even as he heard this, something in Edmund's mind seemed to slip from its accustomed place, and of a sudden the whole scene changed before him. No longer did magic holiness envelop it, no longer was it filled with the mysterious power and revelations of the chosen. It became just an ordinary room, filled with grotesque figures, in the centre of which Lottie, his own love, stood wrapped in the embrace of a terrible old man. Sharp and clear he saw it all—delusion, wickedness, lust—and the cry which broke from him startled even Rufus in his mystic preoccupation.

"Oh! My God! Stop him! Stop him! Lottie, Lottie, I am coming!"

As he cried he leapt forward. He must tear her away.

Stumbling over his own cloak, blinded by his new insight, desperate with despair, Edmund sprang at the Prophet. He struck violently with his open hand, and then he felt blows upon his back. There was a rush from behind, someone tore him away from Rufus, and an instant later he sprawled full length upon the floor, and feet were kicking and trampling upon him.

All was confusion in the Sanctuary. There were cries and shrieks, and people crowded round. They all talked together. Edmund heard the deadly voice of Rufus, penetrating through the haze which enveloped him, and he tried to open his eyes to see where Lottie was; someone struck him again in the face, and then they were carrying him, and it all melted off into bad, bad dreams and the helpless ravings and the delirium of weakness.

CHAPTER VII

THOMAS

“I BELIEVE,” SAID Sarah to her husband, “that if we were to go away to the country your health might improve; and I have heard of a farm which I think might suit you.”

Thomas received this suggestion, as he received everything, with distrust. Nothing pleased him, or ever could. No one cared for him, or ever had; his comfort, and above all his feelings were shamefully overlooked. Sarah was suggesting this because she wanted a holiday with the children; he was not going to fall into that trap.

His wife waited patiently while all this ill-humour expended itself, and, being by now well accustomed to his ways, she said nothing in answer. Even the weary sigh which would have relieved her was suppressed, and a still look and an abrupt turning of the conversation were all he had to exasperate him. However, they were quite enough, for Thomas was in that state in which everything drew together into a conspiracy against him, the head and fount of all troubles being his wife.

The five months which had passed since the house next door was left empty by its occupants had been a miserable time for the Sonnings. The family business to which Thomas had returned had not kept him long, his health being now too fragile, as he declared, his temper too trying, as his brother said; and for many weeks poor Sarah had borne the whole brunt of what was in fact a severe nervous breakdown.

It was a mental illness which took hold of Thomas after the fearful affair of the scandal, but it was not acknowledged as such. “A breakdown in health,” it was called, and of course that was what it was. But the knowledge of the day did not admit of any but bodily illnesses, and the aberrations of his mind were assumed to be still within his own control. This belief, which Sarah naturally shared, made his present attitude the more trying; for things it would have been hard enough to endure from one not responsible for them became wellnigh intolerable on this supposition.

Peevishness and emotional strain were bad enough, but for Sarah the very worst of all was his religious attitude, which carried not only daily trial, but sin along with it. For Thomas, in the shock of his outcasting, became of a sudden a full-fledged Atheist.

At his best Thomas had ever been a talkative man. At his worst he became

the most fearful bore, and the lack of occupation which followed his collapse left no hour of the day safe from his complainings. So little relaxation did Sarah get that even her sister Anna could never see her alone; and as for her other friends, they were so dreadfully wearied by the outpourings of her husband that they ceased to come to the house. By the middle of the winter Sarah was alone with her burden.

All the time, too, she was torn with distress and anxiety about Edmund, and, in a lesser degree, about Lottie. No news came, or could come out of Foretaste; but there were rumours in plenty, especially at first, and none of them were encouraging.

“They are undergoing terrible hardships.” “I hear they have all taken to sleeping in one room.” “No meat or milk are ever allowed in the community,” and so on; disquieting suggestions, which Sarah tried not to believe, but which filled her thoughts more than she admitted.

There were lots of other difficulties, too. Now that the supplies of money from the business and from the preaching were alike cut off, the Sonnings were poor. They had a small settled income, and Sarah still had the five hundred dollars she had saved for the expected emergency, but she lived in daily fear of having to make inroads upon it. She was able to carry on at all, indeed, only by the help of her brother-in-law, James, who, in the kindest possible manner, had persuaded her to take a regular weekly loan from him.

He had come one day with Anna, and while his wife held Thomas in conversation at one side of the room he had led Sarah to the other.

“You know, Sarah, what Anna and I feel for you,” had been his opening. “And you know we have no children of our own. Won’t you allow us to help your children now, when we know you are in trouble, by paying for their school and board?”

A question so put could have but one answer, and Sarah was touched.

“James, you are too kind.”

When they came to talk of details, it was Sarah who insisted that the thing must be regarded as a loan, and who fixed it at the smallest possible figure.

“I don’t want to be under obligation, even to you,” she had said, “and I feel sure the Lord will lead us out from under this shadow. If Thomas recovers his health, or if Edmund . . . No, James, I won’t take a dollar more, you may say what you like.” And James, being a truly kind man, left it at that.

Even with this relief, however, things were not easy with the Sonnings, and it was well that Thomas had thrown off his habits of promiscuous hospitality. Reductions in the household were made; their lack could be supplied by extra activity on Sarah’s part, but fruit and other delicacies could not be got without extra payment, and Sarah was hard put to it indeed to provide the dainty invalid diet which Thomas demanded.

“One step at a time,” Sarah said to herself, “and the Lord will provide.” But it was a weary winter.

The little girls were the only pleasure Sarah had, and they, of course, were a mixed comfort. It was so very hard to deny them what they wanted, and still more what their mother knew they ought to have. And it was cruelly hard to have to leave them to themselves, and sit forever in the parlour with Thomas.

Children recognize, but can never get used to illness, and even Martha, the considerate one, sometimes made noises which Thomas could hear. His ill-temper towards the little girls was a thing his wife could hardly tolerate, and when it broke out she thought that was the worst of all; but then at other times the worst seemed to be something else. It was useless to measure up her trials.

Within his sick and pitiful soul Thomas suffered, too. The scandal, the shock and the humiliation had come at the end of a long period of overstrain; in one moment all that had seemed precious had been turned to dust. The publicity of the disaster was what he minded most, for it had been impossible for him to throw up any defences, or to make any explanation which would serve to save his face. The whole thing was like a cloudburst from a clear sky, and he had been drenched and drowned in the flood.

He had done nothing, he knew, to deserve such treatment at the hands of his fellow-men; and surely, surely the Lord ought to have protected him! The conclusion that there was no Lord was the only possible solution, the only one by which he could reestablish in his own mind his private superiority to others. He disbelieved, therefore, at once; but it left a fearful blank in his life.

No one was willing to help him. There he was, with the bottom fallen out of everything, even his own son stolen away; and his own health shattered by the shock. It was a monstrous shame, but even Sarah, his own wife, did not care. The black ingratitude of all those for whose souls he had toiled so long during his ministry, the callous indifference of his own family, and, above all, the petty annoyances which his wife provided day by day, were more, he felt, than mortal man ought to be expected to endure. Why couldn't she remember that he could not drink coffee without cream, and that twice cooked meat always made him ill? And why couldn't she keep those children quiet, instead of letting them scream and jump just at the only moment when he felt he could go to sleep? She didn't love him, that was the truth of it; but she ought to love him. He would tell her so, for it was a cruel thing that no one loved him.

He was so really good a man himself—everyone had always said so—and if only they could see his heart they would see how full of good impulses it was. But he never got a chance now, with all the world combined against him. He must explain all this to Sarah, he was sure he could make her see and understand; but she must listen, and not turn a smoothly inattentive face towards him, as she had done last time. No one could make an impression on a

graven image. That was a good phrase, he must remember it!

In spite of the apparently insuperable difficulties in the way, Sarah managed to get Thomas to agree to her plan of going to the country, and they got off at last, and journeyed to Linton just as February was drawing to a close.

Thomas had been quite right when he surmised that Sarah had not given him her real reason for the move. Though she said, and thought, that his health was the prime object, the truth was that Linton was within fifteen miles of Foretaste; and Sarah could not live any longer without news of her son.

Fortunately for them all, the first impression of the place pleased Thomas. The farmer who was their host, and still more the farmer's wife, were of that simple old-fashioned sort who thought city folk must be important, and their respectful manner towards Thomas was full of balm to his lacerated self-esteem. He found the food good and the bed soft for the first time since his fall; and Sarah's hopes rose sky-high on the instant.

Things were not so satisfactory the next day, but still they were not so bad as at home. And a little incident happened in the first week of their stay which made more difference to Sarah than any other single thing could have done. For Thomas found something to do.

It came about accidentally (if, as Sarah said to herself, anything can be said to be accidental, when all is in the hands of the Lord). The farmer was not a great hand at writing and, seeing that Thomas was a city man, and had been a preacher, he made so bold as to ask if he would write a letter for him on a matter of business, which he had to transact. Something in the manner of the request made Thomas inclined to consent, and, once a pen got into his hand, a vista of new possibilities opened out. Why had he never thought of it before? He would express it all, his disbelief in God, his penetrating insight into the hollowness of human society, all, all that was in his heart he could put upon the written page!

The farmer's letter was, in the end, written by Sarah; but Thomas was almost happy, and for long hours at a time his wife was released from her attendance. It is true he read out to her every evening what he had composed in the day; but that was only to be expected. Letters to the papers, expostulations addressed to ministers of religion, and long and bitter tirades intended for his old friends were delivered with great emphasis night by night; but that was much better than talking all day long.

For the most part Sarah succeeded in concealing her condemnation of these epistles, which were venomous and wounding in their tone. Some she managed to abstract from the post, and when she could not do this she sent secret notes of apology to accompany them, and it was as well she did. Quarrels and law suits might easily have been the outcome of this activity of her husband's, but Sarah's piteous little letters softened nearly every heart, and no notice was

taken. It was a grave disappointment to Thomas that he received so few and such mild answers to his attacks.

The first thing that Sarah did, when they were settled at Linton, was to make inquiries about Foretaste. The farmer's wife knew nothing much, beyond the general countryside impression that they were queer folk; but she had a brother whose son lived quite near the place, so it would be easy to get news.

Sarah took the woman into her confidence, and explained her eagerness in the matter. She begged the woman not to speak of it, or to let anything get about, and impressed upon her that she didn't want the other children to be mixed up in the affair. As for her husband, he was so unaccountable that he might easily take it into his head to move away if he learnt that Rufus was near, and so the less fuss about it the better. But news she *must* have, as her hearer could understand.

The first reports which came were fairly reassuring. Quiet they lived, the nephew said, working their land in an amateurish sort of way, and keeping their own cows. They had had one fire, but not to amount to anything, and so far as he knew none of them had been ill. They kept themselves to themselves, and no one knew very much about them.

This was early in March; but a couple of weeks later there came further news, of a less comfortable kind. Someone or other had been to visit the place, and had told very queer stories about it at the farm where he had lodged the next night. He said they worshipped in a very peculiar way, and that Rufus claimed to be inspired by God, and that he thought the place was going to smash up somehow, from within. In vain Sarah asked who the man was, and exactly what he had said. Without nearer access she could get nothing definite, and so, leaving the children under the care of her landlady, and deserting Thomas without a word, she borrowed the spring cart and drove over to see for herself what the state of affairs might be.

How her heart beat as she set off! First with fear lest Thomas should see and stop her, and then with the freeing of all her pent-up longing for her son, Edmund! Every step brought them closer together.

Fifteen miles is a long drive, and as she jogged on her way Sarah had time for thought. It was her first considerable period of solitude since—she could hardly remember how far back the last one had been. But she was too much excited to think with any coherence, and the only thing she could really manage at first was to pray, which in itself was, of course, a kind of thinking.

She asked for strength and patience to bear her lot, but she did not want to dwell on herself; what she prayed for most urgently was that everything might go well in the interview in front of her, and that Edmund might welcome her coming. She was sure he would, she told the Lord, unless some terribly evil influence were allowed to control him. Dear Edmund, how she longed for a

sight of his handsome young face!

An hour passed in this way, and then into her thoughts the familiar anxieties began to creep back. What if the Community were in trouble, what if Edmund himself had been led astray? The dangers were so great—perhaps it had been true about their all sleeping promiscuously, perhaps her boy had been contaminated, had fallen into the errors of his father! Perhaps, in his innocence, he had not known what he was doing, and she might find some monstrous secret ceremony in progress. She knew now, as she had not known that day when James had tried to warn her, the deadly dangers of Fanaticism. Who could tell to what lengths they might not go? Edmund, and Lottie, too, might so easily be led into temptation. It seemed as if the last six miles would never pass.

Sarah had to ask her way more than once, and she thought people looked at her a little queerly when she mentioned Foretaste; but, after all, that was to be expected. No one volunteered any news, and she did not ask. She would soon know for herself now.

The house, when at last it came in sight, seemed ordinary enough. A group of farm buildings, with a substantial two-storey house in the middle and a somewhat untidy approach—there was nothing from the outside to mark it off from a thousand other such dwellings.

No sooner was the door unlatched to Sarah's knockings, however, than the atmosphere of strangeness enveloped her. An air of mystery seemed to float out of the little crack as the door swung back, and the foot she intended to insert over the threshold hovered an instant uncertainly at the command of the smooth voice from within.

“What do you want? Why do you come knocking at our door?”

“I want to come in, if you please. I want to visit Edmund Sonning, my son.”

Was this the right way to speak? Had she perhaps done harm by blurting out her purpose? Sarah was too anxious to be diplomatic.

There was a curious change in the voice which answered her.

“Edmund, you want to see Edmund? What have you heard of him that you come to-day, of all days?”

Sarah was alarmed.

“I must see him, I *must*,” she said urgently. “Let me in, I pray!” and she pushed against the door. It gave way, as if the keeper yielded reluctantly, and Sarah found herself in the hall, face to face with a little elderly woman who gazed uncertainly up at her face.

“I do not know whether it is right to let you in,” she observed, “but since you have come so opportunely perhaps the Lord has led you. Your son is ill.”

Sarah started forward to the staircase.

“Take me to him,” she cried. “Quickly, quickly; and tell me, what is the matter?”

“I know nothing,” the other answered without moving, “except that he was seized last night with a fit sent by the evil one, and that to-day he lies in the Punishment Room and has eaten nothing.”

“Take me to him,” said Sarah again, this time in so positive a tone that the other actually began to move, and with slow shuffling steps led the way up to the Sanctuary, and pointed to the rooms on the right.

Sarah followed with outward composure, but inwardly in a turmoil of haste. Her mind raced up the stairs, and the hurry of her spirit prevented her from noticing any outward thing except the slowness of her guide. Why, why was Edmund ill?

No one was about. Thick and heavy the community atmosphere lay over the rooms, and strongly did it weigh on the custodian of the door, who had been rushed into the terribly dangerous course of admitting a stranger without orders from Rufus. But Sarah knew nothing of this. Edmund, Edmund, that was all she thought; and when the curtain of his room was at last lifted she failed to notice that Silence Thrush was there. The bed and the young tousled head upon the pillow were all she saw, and with a cry she was at his side.

“Edmund, my darling, here is Mother come to make you well!”

CHAPTER VIII

EXORCISM

SARAH STOOD OVER Edmund like a tigress over her cub. The boy was suffering, and these people who had caused his hurt wanted to drive her, his own mother, away. A red-hot passion flamed up, and Sarah's whole being seemed concentrated into one flaming point of rage, behind which lay the whole force and power of her being. Nothing, nothing in Heaven or Earth could move her from that bedside.

Silence Thrush, facing her, was terrified by the vehemence of her opponent, and recognized her own defeat. This dreadful woman who had burst into their Sanctuary was too strong for her. Only the Master could deal with this situation; and Silence, after a very short bout, fairly scuttled out of the room to find him.

Sarah turned back from the battle to the boy upon the bed, and gazed at him with a sinking heart. He seemed terribly ill, and had not roused up at all at her coming. The heavy breathing, the uneasy moans, the hot, feverish flush frightened her. What *could* be the matter? If only someone would tell her what had been going on! There was a great bruise on one side of his face, and the mark of a cut, too; had it been an accident, she wondered, or what could it be? Horrible notions hovered in the back of her mind—for had not the little old woman spoken of the Punishment Room.

Sarah did not dare to leave Edmund's side lest something horrible should happen. She might never get back—he might be spirited away—and yet, in the empty quiet of the house she grew nervous. Were they bringing a doctor, medicines, clean linen, jelly—all those things with which the enemy is held at bay? Or were she and Edmund to be deserted and for ever left alone in a building filled with hostile, mysterious people who meant to do them harm?

She knelt by the boy's bed, stroking his hot hand, and gazing miserably at his flushed, distressed face; and time went slipping by, and no one came.

Outside, across the intervening Sanctuary, Rufus was in a rage. Never before, in all her long experience of him, had Silence Thrush seen the Master lose his self-control; but at the news of Sarah's intrusion into the building he had suddenly broken out, and a frightful storm had swept over him. Ever since the Camp Meeting Rufus had known Sarah to be his enemy; she was the Devil, and he, Rufus, could not abide in the same spot. She was the embodiment of all the opposition he had ever met with, and the whole atmosphere was

contaminated, vilified by her coming. In the passion of his rage he stamped to and fro, beating his head with his hands, and pouring out in a whisper more dreadful than shouts, his curses upon her sacrilegious head.

Silence was afraid; and stealing from the room she summoned all the inmates together in the hall below. She knew not what was going to happen, but in short, agitated words she gave the news. The Master was being attacked by an evil influence; he was even now wrestling with Satan in the Sanctuary. And in the Punishment Room Edmund, their treacherous, backsliding brother, was approaching death, with Satan, his mother, sitting by his side.

Silence spoke with absolute conviction, and with a force born of her own fear, and she convinced many of her hearers. But the beliefs of Sister Silence were not as compelling as those of the Master, and there were some who questioned her words. What did she actually mean, what was this evil influence? Brother Ebenezer wanted to know how it had crept in, and thought they ought all to be busy in driving it out, and not the Master alone. Sister Lavinia, too, dared to say that if Edmund were really dying it was right for his mother to be there, and the little old doorkeeper murmured that Sarah had not the look of Satan at all.

The hubbub of discussion rose high, but Rufus, coming down among them pale and wild, had no difficulty in restoring order. Troubled and moved by his recent rage, the Rufus who gave orders to his people was even more stern and compelling than the Master they had known before.

“No one is to go near the accursed room,” he said. “The outer Sanctuary is to be deserted. Not one of you may set foot upon its floor. I, and I alone, will wrestle for you with this evil. Trust to me! Let us pray here in silence, and let no one speak or stir till the evil is exorcised and the victory won. I will tell you when that time has come.”

Unwelcome as this order was, no one dared to question it. Ashamed and afraid, they all fell on their knees, while the Master stood rapt and silent before them. The afternoon wore on, and the whole house was still. Upstairs Sarah knelt in terrible anxiety by her son’s bed, and below the Community of Foretaste knelt silent in the hall, praying for it knew not what.

Outside the house the horse which had brought Sarah cropped the grass near the hitching-post, and away off at Linton the little girls played in the farm kitchen, brewing a cauldron of rubbish over the open fire. There, too, the house was cut in two, and Thomas sitting upstairs at his writing knew nothing of the life below. The same hours went by all over the world, and all the myriads of its people lived through them; and everywhere things were alike; the isolated, disjointed, incommunicable experience of mankind grew ever larger and larger, and the little tiny grain of knowledge was sifted out of the mass of it all, and laid by into the storehouse of the ages. But no one knew what was taken

and what was left. Alone with their joys and their troubles each human being lived, and the afternoon hours wore away.

Lottie was not one of those assembled in the hall that afternoon, for Lottie was ill. On that terrible night of the Dancing, when Edmund had hurled himself upon the Master, Lottie had fainted; and in the confusion which had followed Edmund's fall she had been wrapped again in her cloak of sin, and carried by Patience to her own room. And there she had lain ever since, very weak and very pale, and Sister Patience had looked after her. And there she lay on this strange afternoon, dazed still from the shock, but alive enough to realize that there had been some disturbance quite close at hand, and that the house was now unusually quiet.

The room Lottie shared with the Thrush sisters was next door to the Punishment Room, so that she was as close to Sarah and Edmund as she could well be. Neither her room, nor the opening between the two rooms had doors, and a curtain was all that interposed between her and the motherly comfort of which she was so much in need. But neither she nor Sarah knew that the other was near.

Lottie had been very unwilling to come back to consciousness, and was still reluctant to rouse herself at all. There was such uncertainty ahead and around her. She felt so guilty, so ill, and so terribly afraid! Death was the only solution, and yet that was impossible, too; for were they not all to live forever, when the Lord came?

Much as she wanted to die, moreover, Lottie was aware of feeling rather stronger, and she could not will herself into unconsciousness any more. She wished that Sister Patience would come, and then fell to reckoning dates, only to shudder back from the conclusion which faced her. Her child would be born, she knew it all too well, early in June, just at the same date when the Lord was to come. But of course, of course, the two things could not be one and the same. Her whole mind rejected the hints of Patience, the dark sayings of Rufus. Such a notion must be wicked, it could not possibly be so. "Lord, Lord, is it all a dream? Save me, oh, let me die," the poor child moaned, and wept from weakness and despair.

In the next room Sarah was growing desperate. There was no change in Edmund's condition, and still no sign of movement in the house. She must get a doctor, she must send out some message to Linton, something *must* be done. It was unendurable to be penned up, knowing nothing, and unable to get help. In desperation, therefore, Sarah rose to her feet and pulled aside the curtain of the first doorway she came to, and so came upon Lottie, who lay weeping into her pillow.

Sarah was always a practical woman. She made no outcry and asked no questions; she just took the girl in her arms, and to Lottie it seemed that

Heaven had suddenly come. As she leant her aching head against Sarah's familiar shoulder she forgot for the moment all that had gone before.

"Oh, Aunt Sarah, how I have wanted you."

The discovery of Lottie's presence, though it added something to her knowledge, did nothing to lessen Sarah's perplexities. The girl could tell her of her own troubles, though indeed after an instant Sarah did not need telling, but she knew nothing of what had happened to Edmund.

"I am afraid I fainted, Aunt Sarah. I saw nothing. I only know that there was violence, and that Edmund fell."

There was something a little reassuring in this, all the same. If it was a fall or a blow which had hurt Edmund, lying still was the best remedy. But all the same, a doctor must be got; he was wanted for both young people. Lottie, however, knew no more than Sarah how it was to be done. The girl had been so closely hedged in ever since she came to Foretaste that she knew nothing at all of the country round. She had not noticed or heard talk of any means of communication with the outer world. She had no suggestion to offer. The presence of Sarah seemed complete comfort, and she took it for granted that everything could be managed now that she had come.

This confidence in her powers was touching to Sarah, but it did not help her much. The need was doubled now, and help as far off as ever. And still Edmund lay motionless, and still the house was silent about them. Darkness began to creep in, and Sarah hovered uneasily between the two rooms.

A creaking of the back stairway was the first sound which came, and a little later the curtain of Lottie's doorway was pulled aside and Mrs. Carp stole in, looking very guilty, and bearing a glass of milk in her hand.

"I couldn't help thinking you'd be hungry, my dear," she began, "and my legs got so cramped on the hard floor, and nothing was happening at all, so I thought I'd come away and have a little chat with you, especially as I was right in the doorway, where no one could see me."

All this came out in a hurried rush, before Lottie could say a word, and Sarah, hearing the sound of a voice, came quickly to the room. As she caught sight of her, Mrs. Carp gave a start, and almost let the glass drop from her hand.

"Mercy's sakes alive, if it isn't Mrs. Sonning!" she cried.

The foolish widow was almost the last person Sarah would have chosen to see at that moment, but even a fool was better than no one. She was at her side in an instant, and held her by the arms.

"Mrs. Carp," she said, speaking very distinctly, though very quietly, "you are a woman of the world and a mother yourself. I beg you to help us."

It was months since the widow had been addressed as Mrs. Carp, and that, together with Sarah's flattery, was very pleasing.

“With pleasure. Anything I can do, Mrs. Sonning,” she answered, and her face took on a society look which was fantastically out of keeping with the situation.

“Well, listen. Both these children are ill, and they need a doctor at once. They need medicines, and nursing and many things which are lacking here. I dare not leave them myself, for, as you know, we are all prisoners. The horse and cart I came in are probably still in the yard. Will you go and drive to the village, and send back a doctor for us?”

Mrs. Carp was surprised, but on the whole pleased. Here was something happening at last.

“Do you know,” she asked, leaning forward mysteriously, “it must be you that Brother Rufus is praying about? He says the Devil is in the house, and he is trying to exorcise it downstairs.”

“I don’t care what he is doing, Mrs. Carp. What I want is a doctor for these children, and if you’ve a human heart you’ll fetch one.”

“Of course, of course. I always said . . . but then, perhaps, even if I did . . . would he be admitted?”

“Get the doctor to bring the Sheriff with him. He must be allowed in, and I rely implicitly on your success.”

The importance of the mission suddenly appealed to the widow, to whom the monotony of community life had long been tiresome, and though she indulged in many more words than Sarah thought necessary, and though she delayed until the other was in a fever of anxiety, she did undertake the task. Armed with money (for Sarah had brought the whole of her secret store), and armed, too, with a letter to the landlady at Linton, which she promised to post, the unlikely emissary set forth; and no one from below noticed her departure.

CHAPTER IX

THE CONFLICT

ABOUT AN HOUR after Mrs. Carp had set off, the Master brought the vigil of the Community to a close.

“You are dismissed!” he cried in a loud and startling voice; “go your ways, for the Lord has given me the victory. Any room, any place you may go to, save only the Sanctuary floor.”

What a stirring of weary bodies there was! It was back-aching work exorcising an evil spirit, and the hour for supper was long past. With a subdued murmur of relief the Believers got to their feet.

It was curious, all this which was going on. Brother Ebenezer collected round him quite a group of people, to whom in a low voice he said things he would not have wanted Rufus to hear.

“He ought not to keep us in ignorance; the ways of the Lord should be plainer than this. Does not the Lord trust His own people?”

At the other side of the room Lavinia Harkness was rubbing her knees and laughing ruefully.

“I’m too old and fat for this exercise, Sister Martha,” she remarked. “I guess if the Lord really meant me to kneel so long, He’d pull the rheumatics out of me.”

The old portress to whom she spoke rejoined, in a very low voice, that for her part she considered Sarah Sonning a pleasant-looking woman, not in the least resembling Satan.

The disagreeable impression of the long constraint wore off, however, and in the satisfaction of the delayed evening meal they more or less forgot the spiritual fight, and allowed their pent-up flow of conversation to break out, with all the wonted vigour of their time for speech.

The Master went alone up the staircase, waving away Silence, who tried to follow him, and casting such an unseeing glance on Carrie that she quickly abandoned her impulse to do the same. The Lord had given *him* the victory, and no one else. Alone he must encounter the fiend.

He found her seated calmly in the opening between the two rooms, her hands folded in her lap. She did not rise at his entrance, but the look she turned towards him was stiff-set and resolute.

“Sarah Sonning,” he began, “why are you here?”

That voice! How it came back to her memory! There was the touch of

intensity in it, the familiar, compelling sound, but this time Sarah braced herself to resist it.

“I am here to look after my son,” she answered, and their glances met and held for a time.

“You must go,” the Master said. “This is the Lord’s house; in it you have no place.”

Sarah made not the slightest movement; thus the battle was joined.

Rufus stepped further into the room, and going up to the bedside he looked down on the unconscious boy.

Sarah rose too, and was at the other side of the bed. It was dangerous that this man should be near to Edmund; she felt sure that he was mad.

Rufus gazed at the boy a little, and then his eyes were lifted again to those of his antagonist.

“He is a backslider, this Edmund,” he said, without a trace of feeling in the level tones. “He is paying the penalty of unbelief; presently he will die, and be damned.”

“You will have killed him,” Sarah said, and her tones were as quiet as his own. “If he does die, I shall prosecute you for murder.”

The Prophet made no answer. To him her threat was like the buzzing of a fly. Life, death, murder, and those pitiful, human arrangements of the law were all trifles. The great and only fact was that he, he . . . but this obstinate woman must leave. Her presence was an offence.

“I have already told you to go; why do you not obey?”

Sarah answered steadily as before. “I am here to look after my son,” but even as she said it, fear crept into her mind. At any moment the madness of her adversary might break out. God alone knew what he could do, and in her heart the prayer began, “Lord, send help quickly!”

Rufus received her answer without comment, and for a minute or two longer he stood by the bedside, gazing at Edmund. In his heart, too, was the murmur of what he called prayer, and he felt the surging up of that power within him which he took to be the mark of his special mission. The Lord was with him, in him. He was himself no more. The face which he presently turned upon Sarah was transformed by the burning light within. He began to speak, and the voice, even more than the words, carried terror. He moved, and his every gesture was a menace.

“Lord, Lord, send help quickly!”

Round the bed he came till he was beside her, his glowing eyes and his dark, dreadful brows close to her face. She did not catch the sense of what he was saying; indeed she felt, rather than thought, that it was nonsense. Her one conscious wish was to draw him away from the bed, and somehow to spin out the time.

“Lord, Lord, send help quickly!”

Rufus seemed to push her before him by the sheer force of his will. Step by step she retreated, he following, until she stood against the dividing wall between the two rooms, and he stood close before her. And all the time he was pouring forth invective in that new tone which made his lovely voice so dreadful.

Sarah’s fear was growing. It was by now a definite, physical sensation, of which she was aware in all parts of her body, but chiefly in her chest. It was as if she might break in two, as if she were becoming insubstantial and hollow, and could no longer hold out against the frightful pressure of her enemy. He made no attempt to touch her, yet she trembled, and was glad of the firmness of the wall behind her.

“Lord, Lord, send help quickly!”

It wasn’t so much what Rufus did, for, indeed, he had done nothing; nor was it what he said. It was something beyond all this which frightened Sarah. If he had done anything definite she would have been less terrified, and had he made any movement to touch Edmund she would have flown at him like a tigress. But he did nothing except to press his mad will against hers, and her imagination wavered and shook as she trembled against the wall.

How long this lasted Sarah could not tell. Like the beating of a wind his talk fell upon her unheeding ears, while his eyes seemed to bore deeper and deeper into her.

“Oh, Lord, Lord, send help quickly!”

At last there came a break in the tension; Sarah became aware that her enemy was thinking of something else. His voice stopped suddenly, his eyes were turned away and fastened upon something further along the wall, and though he still stood close before her, she felt somehow wholly relieved. And then, with a pang of fresh terror, she heard Lottie’s voice.

“No, no, NO!! I will not, oh, spare me!” the girl cried.

Sarah could not see Lottie from where she was standing, but she could see Rufus, for he was still almost touching her, though he had faced round so that Lottie was in his sight. Across a considerable space his will reached out to the girl, and she cried again in answer to his thoughts:

“No, no, NO!!”

Sarah was afraid to stir. The least movement of hers might, she felt, set Rufus going; and his violence to Edmund or Lottie was what she dreaded most of all. But it was frightful to hear the terror in the girl’s voice, and to do nothing to help her.

“Aunt Sarah! Help! Where are you?”

This appeal maddened Rufus, and with a cry that was almost bestial he rushed at Lottie.

In an instant Sarah followed him, and the physical struggle which she had all along been expecting began.

Sarah was a strong and a heavy woman, but Rufus was stronger still. Lottie could give no help, for she had fainted again, and in a very short space of time Sarah was lying on the floor, one arm doubled painfully under her, the other held down by the knee of the madman who bent over her. She felt sure that the end had come, and that he would kill her and both the others, and the prayer that had been on her lips was forgotten. Only primitive, human rage was in her heart, the rage of helplessness, of insufficient strength.

Rufus was panting as he knelt over her, and muttering now quite incoherently, and there was hatred in his face. Just for a single moment Sarah gazed up into it, appalled: then she sickened and shut her eyes. She had seen Evil.

To the end of her life Sarah remembered that sight. At any moment it might come, distinct as when she saw it first, to cut into the placid conventions of daily life. She knew now, and forever, the abyss over which human reason hangs balanced, and the black horror of the beast within mankind. She believed in Satan from that hour, for she knew that she had seen his face.

Rufus meant to kill. In his disordered brain Sarah had come to stand for all the hindrances and all the opposition he had ever met with, and the act which would clear her out of the way would enthrone him triumphant. His first intention was to choke her to death, right there on the floor. After that, the Kingdom of the Lord would begin.

But there was no hurry, he reflected. The victory was already his, and the scarlet woman was at his mercy. Let her be offered up with due rites, for the Lord had ever welcomed the public sacrifice. It would do for the evening worship! With a mingling of the practical and the crazy, Rufus remembered that he had his people to entertain, to keep satisfied that evening. Well, then, he would kill her before them all, and the Lord would be magnified for ever.

Rufus reached out and pulled the covers off the passive Edmund. Tearing them into strips with one hand and with his teeth, he soon had Sarah bound tightly, a mere bundle upon the floor. And Rufus laughed to see her so.

Then, rising to his feet, and looking neither to the right nor to the left, he went out into the Sanctuary and let the curtains fall to behind him. He had forgotten all about Lottie. He was going to his room to pray, and then he would summon the people to the ceremony.

Three captives lay in the Punishment Room: Edmund, moaning a little, and now growing cold without blankets; Lottie, crumpled against the wall where she had fallen, and Sarah, tied and trussed upon the floor. Of the three she was, of course, the least helpless, and by rolling and twisting she managed before long to free one of her hands. And then, in a moment Edmund was covered

warmly again, and Lottie laid upon the bed beside him.

“Easier so,” she thought; and feeling very weak now, and rather dizzy, she sat down herself and leant her head upon her hand. And now, once again, the prayer came back:

“Lord, Lord, send help quickly!”

Had Rufus had time to disclose his abominable plan to anyone the course of events might have been different. But this he never did, for the doctor Mrs. Carp had found and the Sheriff whom he in turn had routed out came thundering on the doors of Foretaste before Rufus had so much as mustered the evening meeting. And after that he became, of course, the quiet and dignified man whom outsiders had always seen, the last person in the world to connect with violence or crime.

After interviewing him, indeed, the Sheriff believed himself to have been brought on a fool’s errand, and prepared some sharp things to say to the doctor in private on the subject of feminine fancies and alarms.

The doctor was not quite of the same mind. The injuries he saw on Edmund’s body and the marks Sarah unintentionally showed him on her own wrists were very queer. And Lottie’s situation troubled the good man not a little. There was something very odd going on at that place, he felt sure.

To Sarah, of course, their arrival was overwhelming relief, and the verdict on Edmund, serious though it was, took away the worst of her distress.

“Concussion,” the doctor called it; “a bad case, but not really dangerous unless he is moved. With perfect quiet and a very low diet you may hope to see him recover in the course of a week or so.” He was shocked by the number of severe bruises, especially about the back and head, but he thought no bones were broken and no irreparable damage done. The coma might last for days, or it might break up at any time, he said. No one could tell; but he would need the best attention, and must on no account be allowed to talk or grow excited.

How difficult such a treatment would be in that abode! Sarah tried her best to make the doctor understand, but how could she do so with Rufus solicitously listening to all that was said, and offering the help of the whole Community in the nursing? A private conference was essential, if these fake arrangements were not to be concluded, and at last Sarah was driven to ask for it outright.

“If you will stay here with Mr. Hollins, Sheriff, I should like to speak to the doctor apart.”

How Rufus scowled! But Sarah had her way.

Once in the other room, Sarah began her tale, but so fantastic was it that the doctor did not know how to believe it, in spite of all his suspicion that something was wrong. Sarah plainly saw his scepticism, which, indeed, she had expected.

“You don’t believe me, doctor,” she said at last. “You think I’m crazy, and indeed it certainly is a crazy tale. Well, either I’m mad, or he is. It don’t really matter which of us it is, for the moment; only, you see, you can’t leave these children to be looked after in a madhouse without some safeguard, can you? I beg, I entreat you, stay here until another woman can come to help me.”

She looked sane enough, if a little drawn and anxious.

“Can you pay for a nurse?” the doctor asked.

For answer Sarah took out a roll of bills.

“I will give you fifty dollars at once, doctor, if you will stay here to-night.”

That settled it, and the doctor stayed, the Sheriff going off alone, in a very bad temper, bearing a note which was to procure a substitute attendant in the morning.

On the Sanctuary floor all was still. No evening prayers were said, no human sacrifice offered. Rufus gave out that Edmund was too ill to risk the disturbance, and the inmates crept quietly to bed.

Patience and Silence betook themselves to one of the rooms upstairs, and Rufus, in his inner sanctuary, bided his time.

Everything at Foretaste was at rest.

CHAPTER X

EDMUND'S RECOVERY

THE WOMAN WHO arrived in the morning was a slow-moving, stupid creature, but she was indescribably welcome to Sarah all the same.

Now that they were two she felt safe; food could be fetched without leaving the sick-room unguarded, and even sleep for the attendants would be possible. She felt that they two could hold out indefinitely, and she thanked the doctor with a fervour which left a curiously uncomfortable impression in his mind.

Edmund's condition was still the same, so the doctor promised to come again in the evening, and meanwhile all was plain sailing. No further trouble would arise.

The doctor carried off with him another letter from Sarah to her hostess at Linton, and also notes to Thomas and each of the children, which he promised to send over without delay. The thought of what must be going on there, and of the fearful commotion Thomas was no doubt causing, was present in Sarah's mind quite distinctly, but very, very small, as if it were a picture seen through the wrong end of a telescope. There was nothing she could do about it. Her duty, as well as her inclination, lay at Foretaste with Edmund and Lottie. The others must take care of themselves. Still, she wrote a careful note to her husband, breathing no hint of the real facts, but saying that Edmund was grievously ill and needed her. To the little girls she sent loving messages, and one urgent plea to each to be as good as they possibly could, and not to worry their father. And then, dismissing that anxiety with a sigh, she turned to the task of waiting and nursing, with the stupid, good-natured country woman as her ally.

Inside the Community house things soon settled down into a routine, and all traces of extravagance utterly disappeared. Rufus seemed to have passed out of his abnormal state of mind, and nothing could be kinder or more helpful than his behaviour. Looking at his quiet face, and hearing his even voice, Sarah almost doubted the evidence of her own memory, and, except for her arm, which was much swollen, she might have thought it all a bad dream.

The Widow Carp did not return. Her absence excited comment among the Believers, but as it was an unmistakable relief, no one troubled much. After all, she had always been unsuitable to be one of the Chosen. It was a good thing she was gone.

Silence and Patience were friendly to Sarah, under their Master's orders. There was nothing obviously amiss in the household and it did not require the stupidity of Mrs. Abraham, the nurse, to fail to understand the cause of Sarah's stringent rules and cautions. It seemed a very pleasant abode, full of saintly and unselfish people, who knew how to bake excellent bread, and who were all very pious and devout.

Of the two invalids, Lottie mended first, and in a couple of days she was up and about. Her confinement, the doctor thought, was a little more than two months off; and meanwhile, though she must be careful not to over-exert herself, she had better lead a normal life. Normal! Sarah's face was impassive when she heard the word, for she knew that Silence Thrush was watching her; but her feelings were uneasy enough.

"As soon as we can move Edmund," she said, "you must come away with me, Lottie. You must have your baby at home."

Very piteous was Lottie's face as she heard this, and Sarah could not be sure what she was feeling. She had said the thing purposely before both Silence and the doctor, so as to shut off the possibility of discussion, and trusted to have made a beginning. But the only result was to put an end to any opportunity of private conversation between herself and Lottie. Very unobtrusively, but most effectively, was Lottie guarded, and from that moment not another real talk was achieved.

Edmund, after hovering in a critical state for many days, began to recover, and in proportion as he did, so did his mother's spirits rise. The exertion of her courage and strength of will, which had been an effort to her while she was anxious, were almost an enjoyment now that he was better, and she liked to imagine herself overcoming and out-manœuvring Rufus.

Talking was forbidden to Edmund long after he came back to consciousness, but this did not seem to worry him as much as Sarah expected. Whether he had forgotten everything, and was just resting in the familiar security of his mother's care, or whether he remembered dimly, but wished to put off the realization of his troubles, she did not know. She was just glad of every symptom of returning health, and was in no haste for the scenes and explanations which she expected would do him so much harm. So far as she could tell, all was well with Thomas and the children outside; if that was so, Sarah could almost enjoy the rest and the quiet of her son's slow convalescence. Except for the brief moment after Martha's illness, it was years since she had had such an uneventful time! No housekeeping, no family plans to adjust, no correspondence even. After the strain of the last few months with Thomas, the restfulness of Edmund's quiet passivity was very comfortable, and Sarah found herself almost enjoying her strange situation. There was a thin crust of safety in the presence of the nurse, between her and the madness of

Rufus, and so long as the margin was there, why need she worry? Lottie was the only really dreadful thing, poor miserable child! When she thought of Lottie, Sarah loathed and hated Rufus; but she tried to keep the subject out of her thoughts. It did no good to rage, and she must just leave the whole thing to the Lord. When the time came He would help her to extricate her charges, and meanwhile He had them all in His keeping.

Outside Foretaste, however, things were not so quiet as Sarah supposed, and both at Linton and at the nearer village of Foreshore an agitation was brewing up. In the former, Thomas, not at all deceived by Sarah's daily bulletins, was raging and storming, and getting beyond the control of the farmer or his wife. In his determination to have someone to talk to, Thomas wandered about the village, and in a short time astonishing tales had begun to circulate concerning Foretaste, and in particular Patience Thrush and Rufus Hollins. These people, Thomas said, had kidnapped several of his family; they were devil worshippers, and he knew for a fact that Patience was a woman of evil life. The more he said, the more he believed his own tales, and he got an increasing satisfaction from slandering Patience. She was the one who had first revealed to him the secret doctrine which had led to his downfall; and, though he no longer dwelt consciously upon the fact, his queer, uneasy brain was aware of a special guilt attaching to this particular woman. He built up for her a positively diabolical character, which was eagerly credited in Linton.

Over-excited as Thomas obviously was, and hard as his host had tried to suppress his stories, it was inevitable that the rumours should spread. Things were not right in the Community evidently; and everyone knew for a fact that the Sheriff had been called in in the middle of the night, though no one knew why.

Once started, of course, the stories grew of their own accord, and presently they met another wave of reports pushing out from Foreshore, and the two joining forces at once swelled into a flood.

The Foreshore scandals emanated from the Widow Carp, and who, if not a real ex-inmate, could be expected to know the truth? The thing assumed serious proportions.

Mrs. Carp was at no time a quiet or a silent woman, and now, with the whole countryside for audience, she fairly let herself go. Vague and often pointless as her stories were, they gained coherence by repetition, and things were said on her authority which were almost outrageous enough to be the truth.

The manner in which she had fled from the Community, and the strange occurrences which had led up to it, made a lurid tale, and the anxiety she now betrayed over the fate of her poor deluded daughter was very touching. The thing which was really driving her forward, however, and which gave

satisfaction to the telling of every unkind imagination, was not the thought of Carrie in the least; it was the unpleasant and unescapable fact that the Widow Carp had no money. Every dollar of her considerable fortune, every acre of her landed property, had been made over by deed of gift to the Prophet; and it was only by the charity of the first people she had met in Foreshore that she was housed at all. The plight in which she found herself was not one of the things the widow disclosed. With all her silliness she had a streak of sense; and besides, she was ashamed of having been such a fool!

The two sources of gossip, Thomas and the widow, did not meet. On either side there was a great reluctance which not even their common antagonism could break down. But they knew of each other's presence, they heard and magnified each other's tales, and between them they worked up the neighbours to a blaze of indignation. A village meeting was held to discuss "The plague spot which is in our midst," and on the following Sunday the pastors of the two chapels preached red-hot sermons. The tide of public excitement rose higher and higher.

Into the midst of this the doctor tried to infuse caution and delay. "I go there often," he said, "and I see nothing wrong with the place. Better leave it alone. It's no business of ours." But even as he said it his voice was doubtful, and anyone with a discerning eye (and who at that time had not?) could see that in his own mind the doctor was suspicious.

From day to day the indignation and excitement spread, until it was evident that something was going to happen. Some were for invoking the law, only the Sheriff pooh-poohed the whole thing and refused even to consider issuing a warrant; others were for tarring and feathering the Prophet out of hand. For a time no one was agreed on anything but the necessity for some kind of action.

Then, in the curious way of country places, the whole thing went underground. Something was in the wind, but those who knew would say nothing, and only those who did not went on talking as before. It had reached danger-point.

Inside Foretaste no one knew anything at all until the doctor warned Sarah. Long experience of the villagers had taught him to know the signs of trouble, and he saw well enough that mischief was on foot, and so he told her. She could use her own judgment about the others. It was more her affair than his, he thought; the whole thing was distasteful and uncomfortable, especially that girl Lottie. He drove up, and he drove away with a troubled mind.

In the confusion of his own impressions, the doctor did not take into account Sarah's complete ignorance of all that had been going on outside the walls of the Community. The warning he thought he had given her was in reality no warning at all.

"The villagers are much upset about this place," he had said, "and I

shouldn't be surprised if you had a visit from them one of these days; there is a lot of ugly talk about."

In her innocence Sarah thought this not at all bad news. Visits from the outside world were what she wanted; let them come as soon as they liked. The doctor's gloomy face conveyed no extra meaning; he was always ill at ease. But he had said that Edmund might sit up, and walk a little if he felt inclined. Sarah's attention hardly touched on the warning, for the pleasure of seeing Edmund out of bed.

In the last few days spring had come with a rush, and the clear sunlight was enough in itself to heal the body. Sitting for the first time by the window, young Edmund could feel himself recovering, and smiled with the pleasure of it.

The birds were singing like mad . . . birds, birds? What did birds call into his head? It was something disagreeable, sore to the touch, he would not think of it.

"Mother," he said, "come here and sit by me." He still needed protection from the power of the things he had forgotten.

"It will soon be all green, won't it, Edmund?" Sarah said, sitting down beside him at the window. "We can almost see the leaves pushing out of the branches. And oh, look! There is a thrush!"

Birds, birds, fat, greedy birds eating the corn, and he himself making a funny sort of scarecrow. Edmund's face clouded with the effort not to remember what was so insistently coming back to his mind.

"Where is Lottie, Mother?"

"She is upstairs, I think, Edmund."

The boy took the answer quietly, and his mother turned her face away that he might not see the anxiety in her eyes. She wanted to say something ordinary, something that was not charged with the danger of emotion, but could not trust her voice. A little silence fell. Then:

"How did I get ill, Mother? I can't remember."

"You had a fall, Edmund, and it brought on a concussion. You have been ill for many days, but the Lord has brought you through."

A fall. For a time he rested on the thought, which conveyed nothing to his mind. He did not want to disturb the peacefulness of the moment.

Looking furtively at him, Sarah thought the danger was over, so quiet was his expression. He was watching a fat, greedy bird upon the grass below.

"You must come back to bed, son; you have done enough for your first day."

Even as she spoke, Sarah saw the change in his face. It had come back, all the old horror and despair!

"Oh, Mother, Mother, where am I? Is this all a dream?"

Much had Sarah prayed that the awakening when it came would come gently, and often had she planned out what to say. But now, when it was actually here, she forgot all the careful speeches she had planned. The look on the boy's face was more than she could bear.

“My son, Edmund dear, if only I could bear it for you!”

Alas, what a useless cry! The boy wept in his weakness, and his mother could not comfort him.

“Father, do Thou temper the wind. Oh, dear Jesus, comfort him!”

Edmund was still very weak, and the dreadful tide of memories which swept over him quickly used up his reserves of force. Sarah almost carried him to his bed, and there he lay, his eyes shut, his head aching, and in his heart the heavy, familiar despair of the day before the Dance.

CHAPTER XI

THE ATTACK

THERE WAS NOTHING to be done for Edmund but to leave him in peace. Perhaps he might sleep; in any case he would not talk, and rest was the only thing which could help him. Sarah stole out of the room and went to the next one, where Nurse Abraham lay sleeping the afternoon away upon her bed. She must decide now what was to be done, she said to herself, but already she knew what the decision would be. Now that he remembered it all, Edmund must be taken away; he could never get well in that poisonous atmosphere.

They must go, then, and naturally they must take Lottie with them. It would mean a scene with Rufus, of course, but Sarah did not object to that. With Nurse Abraham as a witness, and the doctor too, she was not afraid of Rufus. And after one short, sharp struggle they would be quit of him for ever.

So Sarah planned, and wondered only how to let Lottie know what she intended. The next morning would be the best time, they could actually go away in the doctor's carriage. She must manage to speak to Lottie before night. It would all be easy enough.

Just as Sarah was thinking these things, and praying over them to make all right and good, she heard a new and rather curious sound somewhere outside the house. It was like the shouting of a lot of men in the distance, in fact, after a moment or two she was sure that that was what it was. Some new form of Community worship perhaps, only there were not enough women's voices for that.

The sound seemed to be coming nearer, and Sarah, slightly apprehensive, roused the nurse. The two women went to the window together, asking each other what it could be.

The window at which they stood looked over a walled yard in which there was nothing to be seen; but the noise was approaching, and the clearer it grew the more ugly and alarming was the sound. No words were distinct as yet, but that the sense of it was hostile there could be no doubt.

"They are after someone," said Sarah, and then with a pang of anxiety she thought, could it be Lottie they were chasing?

Even as she thought this, she was reassured, however, for into the yard below ran three of the men of the Community, who slammed the door behind them, and hastily put across it the iron bar with which it was secured. They moved with every sign of agitation and haste, and indeed they had none too

much time, for something came banging against the doorway not half a minute after they had secured the bolt.

The yard ran all along the back of the house, having cowsheds and dairies opening off it on the far side, and although the three men ran hastily from one to another, trying to close all the doors, it was evident that they could never hold so exposed a place, and that in another moment their pursuers would find a way in.

The hurry and excitement below were tremendous. Sarah watched it absorbed, not thinking it had anything to do with herself, but only wondering what it could mean. It looked like an armed attack on the house. A shower of stones came flying over the wall, falling with a rattle and thud, some into the yard and some against the house itself. One of the men was hit, and staggered for a moment against the wall with a cry of pain. A yell of anger came from outside.

Terrified by the stones, the other two men in the yard bolted for the back door, and the wounded one made that way also, and an instant later it banged to. Almost at the same time the yard filled with people, who came streaming out from several of the sheds, shouting and running upon each other.

What could it all mean? There were lots and lots of men, nearly a hundred it seemed, and they were evidently bent on getting into the house. But what could they want?

The cries below were plainer now, and Sarah heard words distinctly. "Anti-Christ! Devil! We want . . . down with . . . Yah, yah!"

In the house commotion began, and turning round for a moment Sarah saw through the other doorway the men and women of the Community streaming into the Sanctuary behind. There was a buzz of talk, and a sound of hysterical weeping, but even yet Sarah did not think of danger to herself or any of her party. It was exciting, but remote.

In the room behind Rufus began to speak, and his clear tones silenced the noise within. Outside the people still shouted and roared, but inside the Prophet spoke. And then Sarah understood.

"They shall calumniate me, and cast stones; the people which walk in darkness shall encompass me, and try to work an evil. But the Lord, the Lord shall hold up my feet. It has come, it has come, the great day, the day of trial. The enemy is at the gate! Know ye, my chosen people, that this is the great testing, the winnowing out of the chaff. The world, the flesh, and the devil are at the doors; be calm, be steadfast, for the Lord will lead us through."

The thrilling tones held the Community spellbound. So long had they trusted that voice, why should they doubt it now? Angels with shining swords might spring up to defend them; the Lord himself might be coming, and fear turned into exaltation. Only Ebenezer Dale, whose arm had been hurt by the

stone, escaped the spell; one man, and Sarah and her companion in the inner room, and Edmund lying with his head under the bedclothes, so as not to hear that voice.

Exaltation and religious fervour were all very well, but the crowd outside had forced the door of the house, and were even then streaming up the stairs.

In spite of herself, Sarah cried out a warning:

“Turn, turn, they are behind you; look, there on the stairs.”

Rufus turned, and at that very moment the intruders halted on the threshold. Face to face, for an instant, stood the hunters and the prey. The moment for the miracle had come.

Confusion followed quick upon that moment. The men on the stairs behind, pushing upward, drove the foremost ones straight into the Sanctuary. Carrie Carp began to shriek, crying, “Murder,” in a dreadful voice, and there was a banging and thumping and a crowding to and fro. In a rush those nearest the side rooms ran in, a dozen through the open doorway into Lottie’s room where Sarah still stood amazed, and others made for the Prophet’s own sacred apartments opposite. Even in their fright, however, they dared not enter, and stayed crowded against those heavy curtains.

The scattering of the faithful left the strangers in possession of the Sanctuary, and of the Prophet, who had calmly stood his ground. A queer pause followed, in which no one knew exactly what to do.

The intruders looked about them, a trifle uncertain, now that they had reached their goal; the faithful trembled and shrank back, and waited for the Master to lead them. For the second time a miracle was due.

Was it a miracle? Afterwards, looking back on that hour, some of them believed that it had happened, and that the commonplace shape it took was but the testing of their faith; for subtle are the doings of the Lord. At any rate, what happened was not sensational; but why, after all, must miracles seem strange?

The greatest one of all, the true weight of the hand of God, falls always on the hidden secret soul. And so it was now: for the violence, the shouting and the cries melted away, and the leaders of the mob and the leader of the Community fell into peaceful conversation.

In talking to outsiders Rufus was always very reasonable and polite. None of his fervour showed through his formal manner, and even his voice was steady and flat. It became fantastic to believe him an Anti-Christ, and the simple fashion in which he invited inspection of the whole place disarmed their last suspicions.

“I do not know by what right you are here,” he said, “nor why you should come with stones and shouts to visit us. But we have nothing either to show or to conceal. Look for yourselves, if you wish, and be satisfied.”

At his call the others came back from their corners, and although some

were indeed still terrified and upset by the shock, nothing in their appearance justified the claim of the intruders to be a rescue party. A healthy, well-fed set they were, the women in plain white caps and dark, bunched-up dresses, the men in tunics and trousers. There was nothing more than a quaint uniformity in their looks.

Lottie had run to Sarah's side when the alarm began, and there the strangers presently found her. There was nothing in her looks to excite suspicion. The pleated dress concealed her figure, and she seemed just a pale and rather frightened child.

"One of our members is very ill," Rufus announced, as he ushered the visitors in to inspect the two rooms. "He is here with his mother and sister and a nurse. Is it not so, Mrs. Sonning?"

Sarah looked at the intruders, and wondered whether to use them in any way for her own escape. She was tempted to claim their help, but on the whole she thought it would be better not to do so. The doctor would be more useful; Edmund might listen to him, and he would have a kind of authority over Lottie; besides, more disturbance and publicity would be bad for both the children that night.

"We are very comfortable here," she said, "but we shall be leaving soon now, when my son is better."

It seemed all as natural and straightforward as possible. They had no shadow of excuse for their visit.

"We thank you, Mr. Hollins, for your courtesy. There has been some misunderstanding. We were told . . . but evidently it was a grievous mistake."

"People do not like others to keep to themselves," Rufus said with a little smile. "To tell you the truth I had half expected a visit of inquiry from the neighbours; though I did not think they would enter in quite so unmannerly a fashion," he added gravely.

His hearers were thoroughly ashamed.

"We wish to live to ourselves," he went on, "chiefly because we are trying to carry out the principle of community of goods among ourselves; and, as you can readily see, the more intercourse we have with a differently organized world, the harder will our experiment be. Well, now," he added, in a tone to close the discussion, "if you have seen all you care to, perhaps you will come and partake of some refreshment? Sister Abigail and Sister Lavinia are famous among us for their cakes." And again he smiled his slight and serious smile.

The intruders were completely discomfited. When they finally left Foretaste, having been obliged to accept its hospitality, they were in a subdued and chastened mood. Some were inclined to be angry with Thomas for misleading them; others blamed the tittle-tattle of women; but all were agreed that the household they were leaving was innocent of even the faintest shadow

of wrong.

“Very worthy people, very much maligned.”

CHAPTER XII

SARAH'S SIN

WHILE RUFUS AND the others stayed downstairs, entertaining their uninvited guests, Lottie stayed above with Sarah, and for the first time for many days the two were able to talk privately together. Sarah, of course, seized this opportunity, and, sending Mrs. Abraham down to her meal, she began to tell the girl her plan and to explain how she proposed that they should all three leave the next day, at the time of the doctor's visit.

"Do you get ready, child, if there is anything you want to take, though the less the better. And be sure to come to this room when you see the doctor arrive."

To Sarah's astonishment Lottie greeted this suggestion with a flood of tears; and, though she clung to Sarah in her distress, what she said was, "No, no, no, Aunt Sarah, you mustn't leave me. I cannot go, I dare not."

Lottie was sobbing out these things, and more to the same effect in her own room, and Sarah was trying in vain to quiet her and get at the reason for her refusal, when Edmund in the room next door heard something of what was going on. At once he got out of his bed, and, holding on to the furniture and by the walls as he moved, he made his way into the room where his mother and Lottie were. Lottie, his own Lottie, was near, and was crying; he felt that at all costs he must go to her.

"Edmund, Edmund!" Lottie called when she saw him. "Oh, Edmund, you will understand. Tell Aunt Sarah how it is. She wants us all to go away, but indeed you know I cannot."

His mother was at his side, supporting him. He leaned thankfully against her strength, and she led him to a chair.

"What does it all mean?" he asked, and found that Lottie was holding his arm in a tight, eager clutch.

"Quietly, quietly, children," said Sarah, speaking as she might have spoken to the little girls. "Don't be nervous, either of you. The Lord will lead us out of all our troubles."

The Lord! Where was He leading them? Not even Rufus the Prophet could tell. But to Lottie, amid all the horrors of her situation one thing was clear. To abandon Foretaste was to abandon the Lord.

"Listen, Aunt Sarah, Edmund, both of you. You know how it is with me. Soon, quite soon now the child will come, and that child is . . . the Master says

. . . Oh, Edmund, what have I done to be worthy of it?"

"I don't understand you, Lottie; can't you say it plain?" said Sarah, troubled by what she heard.

Poor Lottie was trembling all over. How could she express that great, that stupendous miracle which even the Master had never yet defined in words? The child she carried was to be the new Messiah; Rufus himself, the forerunner, was the father, and she, Lottie, the mother of . . . she was incapable of putting it plainly.

If Sarah did not understand, however, Edmund did.

The old bewildering atmosphere of Foretaste closed round him afresh as he heard Lottie's speech, and the old torturing doubt came back. What if it were all true after all? What else could he bear to believe? Weak and unhappy as he was, Edmund felt unable to face all the decisions, all the renunciations of disbelief. "I must, I will, I do! Lord, help Thou mine unbelief."

Like a glow of warmth came the answer; to believe meant peace.

The effort of it all was exhausting him, and he couldn't think clearly any more, but the impression of safety in believing remained, a patch of shelter in the storm. Nothing else was safe.

"Mother, Lottie is right. She and I must stay here until the Lord is manifest."

It needed all Sarah's self-control to take that bitter word in silence. The boy's miserable pale face and the girl's sobs were strong motives, however, and she entered upon no argument.

"Back to bed with you then, my poor boy," she said gently. "We must not trouble about these things now."

Edmund shook his head, but let her help him back, and a few moments later she had her two difficult charges tucked up again, with their puzzled heads upon their pillows.

What a fix this was! Unless she could change their foolish thoughts, here they would all remain for another two months! In Lottie's condition her delusion was probably fixed, and not amenable to reason; and it was evidently useless to think of getting Edmund away without her. What a terrible complication! "Lord," she said reproachfully in her heart, "why dost Thou afflict us so grievously? Canst Thou not let these young people escape out of the net? What are Thy purposes, Lord?"

Sitting by Edmund's bedside, while the poor boy slept exhausted, Sarah pondered over the difficulty, and she was very slow in finding an issue. But all the time she knew that in her heart the Lord was speaking quite plainly, giving her the answer to her questions. And she knew that she was unwilling to listen to what He was saying. And yet she knew also that, unwilling as she was, she would have to accept His will in the end. For what else can a mortal do? Yet

surely there might be some other way out? Surely she need not . . . but the Voice was there, insistent, and after a time she gave in.

“Thy will be done,” she murmured, bowing her head and closing her eyes, as she had so often done in her life before. And, as always, peace came to her soul with the words. Down upon her knees she went, thanking God for the glow of comfort which sprang up in her heart.

“Merciful Lord, we are all in Thy keeping.”

Sarah was still kneeling when Mrs. Abraham returned with her supper, and she rose quietly and composedly enough to eat it. The Lord wanted her submission, and her heart, and these she had now given Him. The struggle was over, and she was hungry for her food.

The nurse had a good deal to say about the visit of the afternoon, and the comments thereon of the community, and Sarah listened to it all with interest. If she was to stay here, as with characteristic thoroughness she now absolutely expected, she must know more about what went on. It was important to break down her isolation, so as to keep near the young people in everything. And, besides, she was curious to know what they said of it all.

The nurse was stupid, and besides she accepted the whole place at its face value. Her reports, therefore, were very inadequate and superficial, but even so Sarah got the sense that the community had been a good deal upset by the occurrence. Following as it did upon the escape of the widow, it had brought the outer world back into prominence with rather a disturbing effect. And then the miracle which hadn't happened, or had it? The nurse did not make much of this point, but Sarah, accustomed to theological subtleties, was quick to see what they must be arguing. How childish, how unreal it all was! *She* knew what it was the Lord wanted, the one thing which was sufficient for Him, and it wasn't faith in this or that Improbable Thing, nor the upsetting of all the common things of life. No, it was simpler, if a harder thing than these outward manifestations. “A humble and a contrite heart. Lord, give me Thy help.”

Sarah came back from this excursion of the soul to hear the nurse saying, “and so there is to be a community meeting to-night, and if you don't mind I'd like to pull the curtain a bit open, so as to hear what they say.”

Words, words, words, what a spinning out of intangible nonsense it would be! How bad for Edmund and for Lottie! But the Lord would be watching over them all; so Sarah agreed to pull the curtain back. After all, she was curious to know what Rufus would find to say next.

The night came, bringing for Edmund a return of feverishness.

Lottie went out into the Sanctuary, and took part in the meeting, and Nurse Abraham listened from the other room, but Sarah, sitting by the boy's bed, was a prey to other thoughts and fears. Edmund would lose his reason amid all this frightfulness, or if not his reason, then his faith. She faced these fears, and

even looked at the unescapable fact that the boy was the son of Thomas, and might go that same appalling road, and the future became black in front of her. If this tragedy was impending, could she still find it in her heart to bow to the will of the Lord?

The tormenting suggestion that He was preparing these misfortunes for her special trial would not leave her. Like so many of her generation, Sarah was able to believe the worst cruelties of her Heavenly Father towards His children. She thought that some were afflicted with misfortunes in order that others might be tested, tried and reclaimed. Death, she thought, was often so used; but how much easier a test would Edmund's death be than this to which she now looked forward!

Sarah was tired, depressed by the bitter disappointment which she had stifled, and by the loss of her hope of escape from Foretaste. In vain she tried, once again, to make that perfect act of submission which alone could avert the evil. In vain she said, "Thy will be done," and bowed her head. Her innermost spirit refused this time to comply with her own will, and there could be no doubt that the Lord knew how rebellious she was. Wearily, miserably, she told herself that her stubbornness was dooming the boy; sadly and regretfully she looked back on the heavenly moment of peace she had tasted only that very day. It was of no avail; she just *could not* accept this trial, and in that wickedness she finally slept, sitting by the bedside of her son.

It was very late in the night when Sarah woke. She had the impression that someone was moving in the room next door, and the bewilderment of waking became, in a flash, the terror of real fear. In the darkness and surrounding silence stealthy movements seemed very close at hand. What could it be? Could it be Rufus again?

Sarah moved her right hand, feeling softly over the bed, and was a little reassured to find Edmund lying there, sleeping. After all, she had only to call aloud and the nurse would come from the next room with a light. Sarah tried to quiet her nerves, but something deadly was near, and she knew she was afraid to raise her voice. The voices were now still, but the feeling of a hostile presence was strong, and she strained her eyes into the still darkness.

"Who is there?" she managed to say at last, in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

There was no answer; and the chill that crept over her at the silence was weighted with fear. She made a great effort, and spoke again. "Who is there? Answer, or I shall rouse the house."

She felt Edmund move in the bed, and knew that she had wakened him.

"Nurse, nurse!" she cried; "quick, bring a light."

But there was no movement from the other room.

"What is it, Mother?" asked Edmund, his hand upon her arm.

"I don't know, son," she answered, "but there was someone moving in the next room a moment ago."

Edmund, warm and protected by the bedclothes, was not so much frightened as his mother; moreover, he had matches within reach. Turning to the table at the other side of his bed he struck one, and in an instant the whole room was exposed. It was empty.

"What is it, Mother? What did you hear?"

"Stay where you are, Edmund. I think something has happened."

Sarah went forward to the communicating doorway and looked into the other room. It was empty; the nurse was not in her bed.

In the inner Sanctuary all was quiet, but from the rooms of Rufus, across the way, a faint light streamed forth. In spite of the quietness of the house, Sarah felt afraid. All the fine-spun, spiritual distresses with which she had fallen asleep were banished now, driven out by physical fright. She thought no more of the punishments of the Lord. The malignity of Rufus was enough for present terror.

What could have happened to the nurse? What were the movements she had heard? Alas, in that house of maniacs how unprotected she really was! No escape for weeks, perhaps months longer, with the tide of madness rising higher and higher about them! Sarah went back to Edmund's bedside, and spoke reassuringly to him. But in her own heart there was panic.

The boy fell asleep again, but his mother did not. Sitting there, with the candle burning, she began her unhappy thinking once more, but this time on a different line. The delusion in which the Community believed now came to the front, and the fearful travesty of Christianity appalled her. How could Rufus dare to teach, and how could Edmund manage to believe, that Lottie was to be the mother of a new Christ, of which Rufus himself was the father? The thing was monstrous! Was there really no escape from the toils of this crazy prophet, and his blasphemous pretensions? Did the rest of the Community know, and would they really accept the coming child as divine, and begin worshipping it? And what then? Would Lottie stay forever, and would Edmund stay? And where would her own duty lie? She *must*, she *must* rescue them before this unforgivable sin was committed, before the poor little innocent was born. Alas! what a tangle of despair.

It was cold in the room, but Sarah did not feel cold. The force of her indignation kept her from noticing her body, and, indeed, it presently swept her quite out of her accustomed self. The thing could not be permitted. She was wrong and weak, even to have contemplated staying on. If she knew, as she did know, that to stay spelled disaster, then she could not sit quietly by while it happened. The Lord . . . for a dreadful space Sarah rebelled against the Lord! If it was His will for this to happen, then His will was wrong. "I won't, I can't,"

she said, and then, with a full sense of the impiousness of her course, “Take away this cup, Lord, for I will not drink it.”

What a fool she had been not to cut short Lottie’s decision to stay. It would have hurt Edmund, no doubt, to have had a scene, but not half, not a quarter, what it would hurt him to stay! All alone, with the agonizing suspicion that this time the Lord was against her, Sarah vowed to leave Foretaste the next day with both her young people. She was strong enough to compel them both. With the doctor for her ally, the thing could be done. The situation was preposterous as it was, indeed it was dangerous already, and in a few weeks it might well be tragedy. They must fly before it was too late.

So Sarah planned, gathering her strength for the trial, and deliberately shutting away the paralyzing prayer which was knocking at her mind. Afterwards let the reckoning with the Almighty fall on her head. This time she must have *her* will.

Dawn came, and soon after a noise in the next room announced the nurse’s return.

Sarah went to the doorway, and was in time to see her led in by Patience and Silence, heavy-limbed, moving as if asleep, her eyes open but unseeing, her feet bare and clean.

Was she drugged, or drunk, or what was it? What had been going on? Sarah watched with absorbed attention, but, of course, she did not understand. All she realized was that the nurse was being somehow tempted away, and that Rufus, her enemy, was seeking to detach all her allies from her side. Lottie, Edmund, and perhaps now this woman too, were all won over by his Satanic arts. Alas! was she all alone? Where, oh where, was the Lord?

CHAPTER XIII

THE CRISIS

TWICE HAD SARAH planned the escape, and twice had she built her hopes upon the next visit of the doctor, and yet some hours before he came she was forced to abandon them again. Hardly had breakfast been eaten, and the routine of the day begun, when the nurse came to Sarah with important news. Lottie's baby was about to be prematurely born.

What had actually happened in the night Sarah never found out, for in the hurry and anxiety of this new trouble she made no investigation; Lottie was in the Master's room opposite, and Sarah went to her at once.

Across the outer Sanctuary the two women went, and into the room from which the light had shone the night before. It was heavily curtained all round, and there was a queer scent in the air, unfamiliar to Sarah. The very feeling of the atmosphere was uncanny.

Lottie was there, sitting at a table, her head bowed on her arms. Silence and Patience were there, too, and Rufus was striding to and fro. All four were perfectly silent.

As Sarah entered the quiet, shrouded room, the whole thing began to seem like a nightmare, distorted out of time and space. Her accustomed decision of purpose grew faint, and uncertainty came into her mind. What could she do against these people, against the approaching crisis, against Fate? For the first time in her life Sarah was entirely at a loss, and she hesitated in the doorway. That poor excited child, Lottie, seemed to be utterly beyond her reach. What could she do there among them all?

Rufus saw her pause, and his sense of power leapt to even dizzier heights. Everything, even this woman who was evil incarnate, was as dust before him. The hour of the Lord was striking!

"Quick, quick, call the brethren!" he ordered, and then, as the two sisters went out to do his bidding, he turned courteously to Sarah.

"Come in, Mrs. Sonning, come in. You and Mrs. Abraham are to stay here with this child, if you will, while we pray without. A great event is impending. Glory from on High . . . come in, come in, for even you have your part allotted."

Lottie looked up, and at the sight of her anxious, pitiful face Sarah's presence of mind returned to her. Poor child, what she was going through! And what worse things lay before her! Without thinking of Rufus, or his mysterious

room, Sarah hurried to Lottie's side, and put her arm about her.

"Lottie, dear, I have come to help you."

The girl hardly seemed to notice. Her eyes were very wide, and stared unblinkingly at Rufus. She was trembling a little and there was a bright flush on her cheeks.

"The hand of the Lord is heavy," said Rufus suddenly, pointing his hand straight at the girl; and with a moan she dropped her head upon her arms again.

In the outer Sanctuary the sounds began to be heard of people assembling for the unexpected morning worship to which they had been summoned. There were footsteps and a little subdued talking, and now and then the sound of a cough.

"Stay here," ordered Rufus, and then, turning to the nurse, he added, "you are to get everything ready, even as you have been instructed." And with that he pulled aside the curtains and vanished into the outer room. A stillness followed, both in the room he had left and in that to which he had gone.

In that stillness, presently, the voice of Rufus was heard, and the spell of the sound of it began to work upon the assembled people. At last, at last, that for which they had waited was coming. Now, now, the Lord was in very truth at the door.

Long, long did Rufus speak, and now loud and now soft rang his voice. The people murmured in answer, and mystery thickened over the Sanctuary; but behind the curtains Lottie sat and trembled in her fever, and the two older women watched and impotently waited. Lottie's state alarmed them. The doctor, if only the doctor would come!

Nothing of what was said in the gathering outside could be understood within, yet even so the sense of calamity deepened. Outside they were waiting in painful expectation for the birth of that new Messiah of whom Rufus had been the forerunner; within they waited for the crisis too; and it was long delayed.

Edmund, when his mother left him, had risen from his bed and put on his clothes. Lamentably weak as he was, the news of Lottie's condition had banished his own concerns entirely. Nothing mattered but to know how she fared. Dressing was a slow process, and once he all but fainted; in the end, however, he got to the door, and passing through it he found himself in the presence of the whole community. Quietly he slipped into his place; he thought Rufus did not see him come, and he knelt between Carrie Carp and the little old sister who was the keeper of the door. It was not long before his weakness made him sink back into a sitting posture; but this was his place, and at all costs he must stay. He believed it was necessary that he should.

In the first flush of excitement, and in the first rush of the blazing words of the Master, all the Community believed. The Lord, he said, was taking flesh,

even as he spoke, in the Sanctuary within. One of them had been chosen, as Mary of old had been chosen, and in the shape of a little child the Lord would come again. He, Rufus, the forerunner, the instrument, the father—it was not clear what he was, but no one paused at that—he, Rufus, would bring out the child, and in the glory thereof this world would suddenly end. Fabulous, ridiculous as it all was, at first they accepted it all.

“The Child, the Child, show us the sacred Child!”

Had Rufus been able to do so the delusion might have lasted longer, and the course of events have run otherwise than they did. But the child was not yet born, and Rufus could not show him forth. Delay, delay, delay! He had timed it wrong, and the enthusiasm could not stay at credulity pitch in every breast. A twinge of astonishment had time to creep in; some thought, “how strange,” and some, “how unforeseen.” One said aloud, “Surely this is not seven months and seven days from the day of Revelation?” and another whispered, “So this is what Brother Rufus was doing when he had her so much by his side.” From one to another the evil contagion spread, and the words of Rufus no longer held them quiet. Where was the Child?

Rufus was quick to feel the change, but powerless to arrest it. He sent Patience to the harmonium, and as the droning sounds pealed forth he hurried to the inner room. Surely the Child was come? But there was no change yet. Lottie still sat by the table, her head on her arms, and the Lord unaccountably delayed.

They were still singing in the Sanctuary when the doctor came; and to some of them, who still believed, it seemed most strange that a doctor should be wanted at all. “There was no doctor at Nazareth,” they said, and noted with dismay his very prosaic dress, his black, professional bag. Surely it was not by the aid of such a man that the Lord was to be born again?

Within, however, the doctor was hailed with great relief, and in a few minutes he was making his examination.

“Some hours yet, it may be. Great care, perfect quiet . . . send all the people away; no singing. Yes, I’ll stay, of course. Bring me water.”

The whole atmosphere of the room changed with his presence, and the dreadful feeling of nightmare passed away from Sarah. There was crisis and trouble still, and Lottie was clearly very bad; but there was help at hand.

Rufus, perforce, went back to the assembled people. Summoning all his courage, and using deliberately all the arts he had so often unconsciously practised, he tried to regain his sway over the faithful before bidding them go their ways. But he knew that the thing fell flat. The devil was at work among them; oh, why did the Lord delay?

The Community retired, after this over-fervid praying, and went back to the central hall below. And nearly everyone carried a new and disturbing

doubt. For some it was vague and reluctant, for others it was sharp and cruel, but for one or two it was indescribably welcome. To each according to his need.

They gathered together in little groups in the hall, talking the thing over, wondering and disputing. They had never thought the coming of the Lord was going to be like this! Ebenezer Dale was the first to say openly that the whole thing was a blasphemous parody, and that they had best be gone. He would just wait to get back from Rufus the money he had entrusted to him, and then he was going to shake the dust of the place off his feet. Who would come with him?

Carrie was weeping noisily in one corner, and in another Silence Thrush had a differently minded group about her, a group of people who were still faithful. It was all a test of their faith and their loyalty, she admitted, this strange and unexpected method of the coming of the Lord. But they had known they were to be tested.

“That is all very well for you, Sister Silence,” murmured Lavinia Harkness, “but you’ve had time to get used to the notion, I doubt not, sleeping in the same room with Lottie as you did.”

“Oh ho,” said a malicious voice behind her suddenly, “perhaps there may be *two* Messiahs born?”

Silence turned about in a passion, only to see a smile pass from face to face. Was this gratitude, loyalty, faith? Alas and alas, mankind was not worth the saving. Going alone into her office she wept; but as she wept she gathered the papers and valuables of the community together. It was as well to be prepared for the worst.

Rufus, meanwhile, had betaken himself to Edmund’s room. His own rooms were taken up, filled by the alien, hostile element, and by the preparations for the coming event. For once—for the only time—he, the master of the place, had nowhere to retreat to, no secret abiding place in which to hide. In the room which had been the Punishment Room in the days before all these disturbances had begun, Rufus now took refuge, and there, with the boy for sole audience, he prayed and lectured still. One disciple to listen was enough, even if it was only a boy with a sick mind and a desperate determination to believe him. It was easy to work the sacred spell now; talking in burning phrases, the Master built up yet once more those defences of holiness and of magic which the doctor had seemed to overthrow. And once again Rufus felt the power glowing within him, and forgetting Lottie and Edmund, and the backsliders, forgetting time and space, and the limitations of the body, he sailed off into an ecstasy of his own making, and forgot all the world beside.

Hours passed, and no news came out from the room where the doctor was. The morning turned into afternoon, and the sun slipped over towards the

horizon, and still no change in the room upstairs. Ten of the Believers, who believed no more, had interviewed Silence in the office below, and with Ebenezer for their spokesman, had demanded back their worldly goods. She had reminded them that their deeds of gift and transfer of property had all been regularized before the Community began, and had refused to part with anything which was the Master's. After a stormy scene of anger and reproaches they had left, vowing vengeance in the courts, and they had taken themselves off in the farm cart. Not another night would they spend in that unholy house.

Only the faithful and the doubtful were left. Silence, moving discreetly about among them, began to hope that a remnant could still be saved. "If so be as ten just men can be found . . ." she thought, and talked quietly and subtly among them.

The evening meal was eaten and cleared away, and bedtime came on. And still the Child was hidden from them, and still the Lord delayed.

Rufus had long since stopped speaking, and was sitting in a trance of rapture at the window. Edmund had lain down upon the bed, and from sheer exhaustion was asleep. Sister Patience had returned to her old room, from which she could watch both Rufus and the curtain of the doorway opposite, and so the night came on. No change; it may be hours yet; oh, why does the Lord delay?

Into the quiet of the night the crisis came, a running to and fro, a sound of whispers, hushed and awe-struck, yet echoing loudly in Edmund's heart. Sounds of moving in the other room, and a cry of pain, and the overturning of a chair. Then water being poured, and more whispering. Edmund standing now close up against the curtains was desperate with suspense.

The alarm ran over the house; other figures came creeping softly to gather beside him in the darkness.

"What has happened?" "What is it?" "Is the Lord here?" "Is the child a girl?" "Oh, pray, let us pray, for indeed we walk in darkness!"

Through the group strode Rufus, roused at last from his reverie.

"I come, I come, Lord, Lord, behold thy servant!"

He was magnificent, confident, all glowing with his joy. They bowed before him as he went.

Once inside those heavy curtains Rufus was silent too. What was it that he had seen within? It was unbearable outside there in the dark. What kept them out? One by one the remnant stole into the first room, that study of their Master's which no one but Lottie had entered until that day. There was no one there but the doctor and the nurse, two alien figures, talking together.

“What is it, Doctor, tell us quickly,” whispered Patience, but Edmund stayed not for the answer. He must go on. Within there, in the holy of holies, the secret lay, the secret which was also Lottie, his love. While the others hung back Edmund fumbled with the heavy curtains, not knowing what he was doing. They parted unexpectedly before him, and as they fell apart he blundered full into that inner room. There, on the Prophet’s couch, Lottie lay dead, with a dead child at her side.

With bewilderment Edmund gazed at the scene, not understanding. His mother was there, kneeling by the bedside, her head bowed low. Rufus, too, what was he doing, standing so still there at the foot of the bed? Edmund could not grasp it, and yet . . . it must be some mistake, some new trial of his faith.

“Lottie, my dearest!” he cried, as if to waken her, and started forward from the door.

Only his mother moved. Lottie lay as still, as silent as ever, and with the force of a blow the truth came to the young man. His rush forward stopped; he did not cry out, but with an appalling suddenness the world broke out of shape before his eyes. The shadows round Lottie’s dear face grew long and longer, the room whirled and spun about, while Rufus grew larger and larger, until he was gigantic, his head twice the size of life, and his hands . . . oh, God! what cruel, terrifying hands!

“Edmund, dear, I am afraid of him!” Lottie seemed suddenly to say; and the child on her arm shrivelled until it was only a bird.

“Don’t touch me, Mother,” he cried, putting up his arm as if to protect himself. “I see it all now as plainly as plainly . . . God is a SHAM, you know. The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, all three shams, Mother, except the last one. He’s a bird, you know, Mother, a bird with WINGS!”

The bird that was Lottie’s child seemed to flutter up into the air. Edmund pointed his finger the way it flew.

“THERE HE GOES!” he cried in a loud voice, and began to laugh horribly.

CHAPTER XIV

“GOD IS GREAT”

SARAH AND HER sister were sitting on the verandah of the house at White Pastures. It was a glorious summer day, and the terrible events amid which the colony of Foretaste had broken up lay now three months behind them. All the sordid difficulties which had attended the smash, the recriminations and the talk had died down, and even the mystery of the whereabouts of Rufus and Silence was no longer referred to. The place had been sold, and the proceeds divided among the destitute and disillusioned followers of the false prophet, who had slipped back into the common world with such explanations and excuses as they could find. Patience Thrush and Ebenezer Dale had been hurriedly and quietly married and the rest had gone back to their homes. The whole episode was at an end.

For the Sonnings, however, the thing could never be ended. Edmund Sonning, indeed, had had no worldly goods to lose, but he had lost what was of far more value, his hope, his love, his faith, and all that spring of youth and enthusiasm which had been his before. For weeks after that fatal night he had lain desperately ill at the Linton farmhouse, and his mother had seen that he was trying to die. He was better now, though very listless and apathetic, and James was still anxious about him; indeed, Anna knew that he greatly doubted whether the boy would ever really recover his strength and his balance again.

It was James and Anna who had arranged everything after the catastrophe. They had bought back White Pastures, and had moved the whole family there, and Anna, seeing how necessary her presence was, had stayed on to look after them. It was a wrench leaving James alone in the city, but, after all, Sarah was her dearest friend, and it was James himself who urged the plan upon her.

“We have never been parted before, Anna,” he wrote, “and I devoutly hope we may never be again; but you must not worry about me. Whatever you may think, I am a grown man, and a little discomfort won’t hurt me. Besides, you don’t know what things are going on here in your absence. I had three kinds of hot cakes for breakfast. Make your mind easy about home things, and tell me all you can in your letters. When you think there is any change in the boy, let me know at once and I will try to run down and have a look at him. It would be dreadful if he were to go the way of his father. Anna, dear, I could almost wish to be ill, so as to have you to nurse me, but I am sorry to say I am as well as mortal man can be.”

With letters such as this to strengthen her, Anna took up the complicated burden of housekeeping for her sister, and she carried it on for many weeks with no apparent change in the situation. Thomas grew, perhaps, a shade less troublesome, and Edmund a shade less apathetic; the little girls were happy, and unconscious of the disaster around them, but that was all that could be said. It was a weary and an anxious time.

As for Sarah, her sister saw that she came very near to a breakdown during the hot and empty weeks. Something more than grief and suspense was weighing on her, and Anna guessed that there was some inner conflict troubling the very depths of her soul. Perhaps it was her faith which was shaken? Terrible as that would be, it would not be unnatural, Anna thought. Only the old, familiar trust in a personal and loving God would help Sarah now, she knew, and if He seemed far away, how black would be the chasm before her! But Anna guessed, and rightly guessed, that there was no help in her power to give, beyond the external help she was already providing. Sarah had to work through her soul's troubles alone. It is so with every human soul.

Sarah Sonning was indeed suffering greatly. Like every other human being she had had her secret world of fancy, into which at times she had withdrawn for comfort. It was not peopled with imaginations of those she really loved, as such regions often are. She had never in her fancy touched some well loved hand, or heard from well loved lips the words they could never really utter. She had not created for herself that rapturous trance in which reality can be shifted and moulded to the semblance of the heart's desire, for romance of the common, human kind had passed her by. It had been a stranger and a wilder dream which Sarah had cherished, a dream which was far more secure from the rough interference of fact. Her secret world had been God, and her dreams of Him had been fully satisfactory. When things had pressed hardly upon her, when her courage or her patience had grown weak, she had turned to Him as an infallible refuge. In the darkness of the night-time, when alone such dreams can come, she had often sought and found His comfort, and it was this, above all else, which gave her strength to live.

But now, what was she to do? If the Lord were withdrawn from her, this essential secret joy would vanish, too. Calamity without, and poverty, and illness, and even death she could have faced, with the Lord as her friend. But how if the Lord were gone? Could she face them then?

Nothing is so difficult, at times, as for people who love each other to speak freely. Sarah and Anna lived intimately together all through those summer months, and talked again and again about the outward aspects of the tragic affair which had come so close to their lives, and yet they could not touch upon its inwardness, nor express their full emotion. They took too much for granted, and denied themselves the relief of speech.

There came a day, at last, however, when Anna forgot her reticence, and Sarah her isolation, and the sisters talked from their hearts. And because of the very intimacy which had made it so difficult to begin, they now found it easy to understand.

It was a day in early September, when the heat of the summer was beginning to fade away. Warmth was coiled still in the rocks and pockets of the earth, and the sun still deluged the air with gold, but for all that the summer was past. The sisters were sitting on the verandah, in the shade of the white, wooden house, rocking their chairs slowly to and fro as they talked, and now and then taking up and putting down the sewing each had in her lap. Just outside, and sometimes even underneath the porch, the little girls were playing, and their quick, young voices and cries of happy nonsense gave pleasure to both the women. There was an outward peace over everything; upstairs, Edmund was asleep, and somewhere in the house behind them, Thomas lurked, nursing his grievances, grumbling, writing another of those dreadful letters perhaps, peevish, fretful and unbalanced. But out there on the porch he was for the time forgotten.

“Sarah, dearest, I wish you could be happy!”

“Ah, sister,” it was a real sigh. “Do you think happiness matters?”

“Your happiness matters to me, Sal. Can’t you tell me what you are thinking?”

“I can tell you, Anna, but you know I don’t feel to have mastered it yet. There is something which always escapes me, which I feel is the essence of it all.”

Anna waited, watching her sister’s face.

“The night before Lottie died,” Sarah said presently, “I committed a sin. The Lord said to me, as plain as I am talking to you now, that I must give up my will to His. And I refused, Anna. I just couldn’t do it.”

“Do you think things would have been different, Sally, if you had?”

“I don’t know, sister. We can’t know, can we? But it may be that the Lord has laid His hand upon me in punishment.”

“I don’t think He has, Sally dearest.”

“No,” agreed Sarah, smiling a little. “No, I shouldn’t expect you to think so. I don’t really think so myself, you know, except sometimes.”

Already the nightmare of this thought was easing, in the relief of expression.

“But, Anna, I can’t understand why the Heavenly Father should have allowed all this to happen, otherwise.”

“We are not expected to understand.”

Sarah shook her head.

“I can’t leave it at that, Anna, though I’ve tried, goodness knows. It comes

too close to me, somehow, and I *must* be satisfied about it, or I can never be at peace again.”

“Have you tried prayer, Sally?”

“Yes, I’ve tried prayer,” Sarah sighed. “Do you know, Anna, what it is like to think and think, and pray and pray, and to get no kind of answer? It’s like being lost in a dark wood. You know there must be a way out, only you can’t find it, turn which way you will.”

“James would say there is no way out, in the sense you mean,” Anna ventured. “He thinks we are just atoms in the scheme of things, and that the Great Principle of good is quite impersonal, and out of reach of our tiny efforts.”

“I know what James thinks,” Sarah answered, “but it doesn’t meet my need a little bit. What I seek is a living God, who will listen when I call Him, and know what happens to me. The God of the Bible, Anna; without Him I am unhappy.”

Anna shook her head sadly. She knew that the wide abstractions in which her husband found comfort were not what her sister wanted. For herself, she thought, it is all one. What does it matter how we see Him, so long as we do? James’s way, and Sarah’s, were only parts of the same thing . . . if only she could make her thought clear.

She tried, but it was not much use. Sarah did not seem to understand at all, and in the little silence which fell between them, Martha’s childish voice from almost under their feet was clearly audible.

“I’m King now, and I’ve got power over everything in the world, so you’ve both got to do what I say.”

“You can’t make the sun stand still, so it won’t ever be bedtime,” came Sally’s impertinent tones.

“Of course I can. I’ve only got to want it hard enough, and anything in the world will happen.”

“Oh, but you can’t, Martha, you know you can’t.” Bessie was shocked. “There always has been day and night, and there always will be.”

“It’s true, whatever you may say. It’s in the Bible, so there!”

“It isn’t, it isn’t!”

“Oh, Marty, how wicked you are!”

“Well, then, let’s ask Mother.”

There was a great disturbance underneath the porch, and presently all three children rolled out upon the lawn, hot, dusty and anxious.

“Isn’t it true, Mother, that the Bible says I’ve only got to believe hard enough to be able to do anything I want?”

“The faith which removes mountains,” murmured Sarah, looking gravely at the excited faces of her children; and then suddenly she burst into tears.

“Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief!”

Alarmed by this unexpected answer the children crept away, and after a time Anna followed them.

“I will go to Edmund,” she said as she rose. “You can stay here as long as you want. It may comfort you to cry, and no one will disturb you. If you would like me to come back you have only to call.”

Through her tears Sarah tried to smile.

“What should I do without you?” she said.

After that there was silence on the verandah for a long time. Sarah’s weeping stopped, and she sat quite still, going over once more the troubled path of her difficulties.

Her tears, the first she had shed since Edmund’s illness, had done her good, and it was not now her morbid fancies but the practical aspects of the situation to which her thoughts turned. Out there beyond the meadows lay the railway, which led to the great cities and all the tangle of life. In a few weeks now, she supposed, they would have to go back to it, and take up the struggle for existence. She must harden herself, somehow, to face it all, if only for the sake of the little girls. They must not have their lives blighted by the tragedy; for them she must manage to make things safe.

Slowly and doubtfully Sarah thought about these children. Outwardly and inwardly she must protect them, Bessie, Sally and funny little Martha. “Thou wilt have to help me,” she murmured, falling back into her old habit of counting on the Lord.

It was going to be hard in every way. As for money, she supposed she could set to and earn it herself; and by and by, if all went well, Edmund would be able to help. If he could manage it, work would be the best thing for him, and in course of time he would forget the whole dreadful business. No, he wouldn’t forget, she thought, but it would be overlaid and buried down out of sight.

The thought of Lottie came upon this; poor Lottie! She, too, was overlaid, buried, and by and by to be forgotten. Poor, childish, trusting Lottie, with her little lifeless baby. Why had it all been allowed to come to pass?

“I wish Thou would’st explain it to me,” Sarah said to her Heavenly Father, and a flood of comfort came to her as she realized that her contact was renewed. For a moment she closed her eyes in happiness and relief. “Nothing can make me quit trusting Thee now,” she said, “but I do wish Thou would’st let me understand.”

There was silence and stillness in her heart, but no Voice spoke.

“They were sincere,” she thought; “even Rufus himself in his way believed in Thee. What was it that went wrong? Why did’st Thou let them fall into such a shocking delusion?”

Silence was still the only answer, but after a time Sarah took up the Book which was always at her elbow, looking there for the answer of the Lord. She opened at the book of Job, which had been her study of late. Like so many other troubled souls she was comforted to let her mind drift off into its mysterious poetry. To and fro she searched among the inspired pages, finding here a phrase, and there a phrase which voiced her own emotion.

“Terrors are turned upon me: they pursue my soul as the wind . . . and now my soul is poured out upon me. . . .” Even so it had been with Sarah. All she had believed had been poured out, shaken, though not finally destroyed. “When I looked for good, then evil came unto me, and when I waited for light there came darkness.”

Sarah brooded over the Book, and the day went by, carrying its portion of human struggles and endeavour away with it.

“Whence cometh Wisdom? And where is the place of understanding, seeing it is hid from the eyes of all living?”

Hidden indeed it is, she thought, and not to be found in any doctrine that she knew as yet. She sighed over the Book, wondering and seeking, and still believing that her Heavenly Father would manage to make all plain and simple again, as it had been in her childhood.

“God understandeth . . . for He looketh to the ends of the earth, and seeth under the whole heaven;” not just this little atom here which is myself, she thought, nor this little space which is my country, nor this brief moment in which I live and pray, but “to the ends of the earth, and under the whole heaven.”

Sarah looked out over the darkening landscape, and the ends of the earth and the whole arch of heaven were very far away. The mighty spaces and the great complexities of time and of eternity appalled her.

“Behold, God is great, and we know Him not.”

EPILOGUE

ON THE SLOPES of Mount Tabor, on the side which overlooks the Jordan and the caravan route through Samaria, some little foreign wooden huts had been built. It was said in the countryside that the two hermits who lived in them really were holy people, even though they belonged to an unknown Christian sect. They were quite harmless, ate roots and honey, and made no interference with anyone.

One of the two was an old man, and why he was called "the Red" no one could say, for his hair was nearly white. The other, the she-hermit, was old, too, angular and active, and it was she who managed everything and went into the villages on her donkey to buy fruit and flour. She went further away, too, to the coast perhaps, or who could tell where? and came back sometimes with companions. After a time more huts were built, and presently the shepherds reported that there were ten or twelve of these hermits, and that they made groaning noises all together, and knelt upon the ground in front of the Red. They were also foolishly trying to cultivate some particularly barren, stony ground, and the path up the mountain side was getting well worn.

At night the stars stared out at the Holy Land like cat's eyes, and the caves in the mountains were wells of blackness, and the aromatic scents of the eastern earth blew up and down the valley, even as they had blown in the days of Jesus of Nazareth. But up on the hillside, in the huts of the New Believers, an alien atmosphere held sway. The harmonium, which had been dragged with so much trouble up the mountain path, droned out revivalist hymn tunes, while the faithful spoke of the Second Coming of the Lord and looked for miracles. Outwardly they were incongruous, strange, and sordid; but inwardly, how right and how enthralling was the certainty of their new Revelation!

On a night when the sky was velvet black, and the stars were big as daisies, Rufus the Prophet stepped out from the blare and noise of the Sanctuary hut, and went up the hillside to pray. He had been preaching, and the people had been more than usually moved by his phrases. It had been a good session, and the faithful were powerfully sensible of the especial mercies of the Almighty. To Rufus himself the great emotion had come, fresh and enchanting as ever, and he had been permitted to pass some of the glory on. Truly the Lord had always new joys and new promises for His chosen ones.

Out in the soft and fragrant night his heart leapt up, and his excitement rose yet higher. The darkness was an intoxication, and the rapture which flooded him was so great that life stood still.

Silent and motionless, Rufus once again heard the Lord speaking in his soul; and his soul cried out in answer.

“As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Shaken by the Wind: A Story of Fanaticism* by Ray Strachey]