



THIS is the whole story, though it range over no more than a few months. The first forty odd years of this life are pure preliminary, obscurely and fatally composed, to the passage which marches nobly and passionately to an ecstatic end. Until this ecstasy broke across its decline, the heroine's life had so little to be revealed, even through the medium of most powerful lenses! She had lived her life in a neglected mode; to her, *sensibility* of life was only supplemented by *knowledge* of life, never supplanted by it. Like children, she derived support from accepting things as they are; trees which she had always remembered were to her as enduring as the sky; a fallen tree was something tragic. When she was a child, during the night of a terrible storm, a young man had been struck blind by lightning, and four old trees had been blown down. The blind man still desolated to her ear a certain stone passage with his 'Buy of the blind!' and she still called the two remaining elms the Seven Sisters. Here she had a group of impressions: on the one hand she was acquainted with the long-past facts, like anybody else of her age; on the other hand she had a *sensibility* of the thing, not fantastic, nor in any way connected with fear of lightning, in which it was at once ordinary and extraordinary. The government of the country, the queen, the town council, to her *sensibility* were like facts of nature; while her intelligence knew well enough why the sovereign reigns, that there might have been another sovereign or no sovereign, whence the members of Parliament and the Cabinet come, and the different applications of revenue and parochial taxes. So also with, say, printed books and pictures. The author writes, the printer prints, the binder binds; but in that part of her where lay the undefined, but undisputed, convictions, a book as a determined object had an authority beyond any combination of the elements which produce it. In like manner a certain engraving she possessed of one of the Martin biblical subjects, while it filled her with awe and admiration, had no value as a product of human invention, skill, and patience; the feeblest pencil drawing of a flower stood for more on this footing; perfect knowledge that the engraving was the result of thousands of dexterous scratches made no difference; even if she had seen the engraver bending over the plate with his goggle and gravers, she would not have connected his work permanently with a picture which had hung

hung in the same place time out of memory. May this insistence upon the lifelong rivalry of simple heart and simple brain tend to indulgent appreciation of the heroine's conception of God, comparable to her sentimental notion of any settled fact; for though at this grave point her attitude approached that of most uneducated people, in her case it was in no way answerable to neglect or laziness.

Her husband was a smith; his daily work had been at the same factory ever since their marriage; his weekly wages had varied only within familiar limits. These conditions, in conjunction with her husband's meek disposition, would have secured the evenness of her married life, apart from her sanguine fatalism. The smith went to his work at an early hour of the morning. His dressing was finished completely in the bedroom, even to his top hat. Before starting he took a cup of coffee, which in summer was prepared by his wife, in winter by himself. When the smell of the pipe he lighted in the doorway reached her nostrils, his wife got up. This had been the strange signal all the time, which she had never happened to mention to him. She only heard him leave the house on days when he was a little poorly or the weather was bad, when she was fully awake and listening; for, with an oiled lock, and by holding the knocker with one hand, he left with scarcely perceptible noise.

Until she took her breakfast she busied herself heartily with rougher work; after breakfast the bedroom was set in order, as also the part of the house through which her husband passed when he returned, from the door-handle to the kitchen stove. Next she prepared dinner, and while this was cooking she made her first toilette, rather tidying of her person. The smith came in at a quarter-past one, ate in silence for half an hour, and went away. After dinner her house work for the day was soon finished; she made her real toilette, and settled to needle work or reading, or went out. At a quarter-past six tea was eaten in the sitting-room, where husband and wife passed the evening until supper, for which meal they went to the kitchen again. Then the smith smoked his pipe, drowsed, his wife prepared his breakfast for the morrow, and the house was shut up for the night.

This was the outline of a typical ordinary day, as days had passed for twenty years. Sunday showed an important variation; it differed from the week-day in every one of its outward details.

On Sunday they rose later, breakfasted later; not only was breakfast different in character, but different plates, cups, and forks were used. The smith was pompous, reflective, in broadcloth and clean shirt,

shirt, in the wearing of his oiled hair and embellishments struggling to realise the daguerreotype portrait of himself young. His wife also was contained, formal. The pair preserved on Sunday the attitude of courting days, stripped of tenderness. The smith left the house first, making for the distant Lemon Street Baptist Chapel. Another chapel of the same body was very much nearer, quite close in fact, in the opposite direction; he was a 'steward' of the chapel which took tithes of all his being. When he was gone (he banged the street-door on Sunday) his wife cleared breakfast away, as sedately as if her husband were still present; then she went to the poorer but more aristocratic Bible Christian Chapel in Chapel Street, also very distant from the house, but the only colony of the sect in the town. Returning, she had reached home, and put the potatoes to simmer, before the smith reappeared; he stopped to gad on the way home; you could see it in the grimace of recognition, which his wrinkles were slow to relinquish.

After dinner the husband went again to his chapel; while his wife first did what was absolutely necessary to be done in the house, then read a little, then laid tea long before the time. (Almost every Sunday some one came to tea.) Lastly, with folded hands, she chattered for her husband's return; real yearning for his presence possessed her. At tea, if strangers were present, the pair called each other Mrs. and Mr. Smith.

The Sunday evening was a notable weekly event with them; it offered so much strictly ordered variety. In their religious world, by a rough delimitation, the morning is applied to worship, the afternoon to the instruction of children, while the evening is a forlorn crumb for the need of the whole world outside the particular sect. (Sometimes a week-day evening is given up to projects of enlightenment of Parsees, Tierra del Fuegians, Buddhist monks—heathens generally.) But that crumb, the Sunday evening service, gritty enough to the damned, is sweet in the tooth of the judges. In the morning man speaks to God; in the evening God, richly commented, to express it cautiously, speaks to man.

The smith's wife adored the Sunday evening service, partly from habit and training, partly in a childlike way; for it was narrative, anecdotal, variable. In addition it meant the occasional company of her husband. Every third Sunday evening he was free, and the two went together where they liked; on one of the two intervening Sundays they went to the husband's chapel and came back together, almost always much edified, in a mechanical way, by the warnings to the wicked which they had heard.

On a certain Sunday when the wife, in the order of things, was spending the evening alone, her husband said to her suddenly, not as usual, 'Where are you going this evening?' but:

'Why don't you go to . . .'

'Newbury Park?' A voice inside her finished the sentence. It was very distinct, and, strangely, the reverberation seemed to come from her chest rather than from her head. The husband's question was:

'Why don't you go to Winter Street?' They called all the chapels by familiar names, like 'the iron chapel,' or by the name of a street.

'I was thinking of going to Newbury Park.'

'It is so far,' he persisted; 'why don't you go to Winter Street? Captain Stocker (an inspired engineer officer with no chin) is going to preach. You like him . . .'

'I am inclined to go to Newbury Park.' He did not answer, and she repeated:

'I want to go to Newbury Park.' She was ashamed to explain her choice more narrowly.

'Oh, very well.' They could get no nearer to a quarrel on such a subject, and to Newbury Park she went.

Not at all easy in her mind though. It was a dismal night, and the distance was so great. And then to have had words with her husband on a Sunday evening. Fatigued, and almost tearful, she came into the hot room she thought of as Newbury Park. Preliminaries of consecration of the proceedings past, the speaker, standing behind a little rostrum with his hands behind him, said, 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee: Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'

She knew these words just as well as the 'Our Father' or 'There is a green hill.' . . . She had heard sermons, discourses, upon them beyond recollection. At another time she would have nodded the cadences of the phrase, her lips anticipating each word. Now the words loomed great and unfamiliar, as if memory or hearing were out of focus; in a darkness, the negation of a stunning light, which yet seemed near. She saw the speaker grasp the front of the rostrum with both hands, stretch his arms stiff; she heard him repeat:

'Our Lord speaks: Verily, verily; truth of truth, unanswerable absolute truth; He says, I say unto *you*.' He raised his right hand and dropped a threatening index, as a bravo might a revolver, straight at her. 'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'

A ray fell from distant heaven. Alighting in her, it exploded her soul

soul into radiant, conscious being. In an instant, before the speaker had punctuated the sentence, so to speak, herself and the visible and invisible world were created anew. The flood was overpowering; a thousand biblical reminiscences; the creation of the world, sacrifices, voices and fire from heaven, whole psalms with every word and letter distinct in idea, were present in a flash. She was afraid and consoled at once. With the desire to scream came the comfortable words: *I am here*. She had seen women swoon, have hysterics, in chapel. It had never happened to herself. There was no danger now; the body had no time to exclaim as it went down under the victory of spirit. Panorama veiled panorama with incredible rapidity, and side issues came and went too at the same time, scraps of conversation years and years ago, visions of streets, forgotten faces, trivial occasions and incidents; a great deduction emanating all the time, the life of our Lord in minute detail, from babyhood with all its incidents (of which she had no practical knowledge) to the terrors of Calvary. Not stopping here, for the new creature she was for the moment knew no fear or hesitation; she followed His being boldly from the lips of His wounded, tortured body to the ecstatic arms of His Father.

Such was the preliminary trial of the course she had now to run.

She began immediately to foot the glorious path. She began to pray; but her prayer had no words, no known aim; she prayed for things she had never heard of, and in a language she did not know. The light she threw round her gave visible objects an unaccustomed, alluring interest: a sin at the first step, which was followed instantly by forgiveness and reconciliation. The Light within her was the object, the object of objects.

The Light said, in words of music and light, 'He giveth His beloved sleep,' and a veil was drawn across the ecstasy.

When she reached home she had not the faintest excuse to make any confidence to her husband of what had taken place. Indeed, how could she possibly communicate it? She had no terms in which to express the new birth even to herself.

The Monday morning rose as pale as any other. There seemed no prospect of a return of the ecstasy. The repetition of the words which had induced it was unavailing. Only the universe was still rational to her, as in the moment of revelation; it stood no longer simply a fact, dull, uniform, unexplained; the living parts of it were very much alive, the dead not worth a thought. And the Lord of Life lived in her; she knew that; there could be no mistake about that.

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She began to pray ; a long communion with the Light by faith ; for it was not evident. But now her prayer was in mortal phrases of human speech ; a tempestuous, chaotic prayer, though with no movement of the lips, no activity of the brain ; it throbbed, as before, from her chest. It was a long narrative, with supposed rejoinders, interruptions. It often repeated itself ; it was full of cross purposes. Some parts of it were in a lower tone, parts so low as to be next to silence ; at last, in a dead hush, the request escaped her : ' Speak to me.' Then a full swell ensued, gigantic soliloquy, in a small degree comparable to incidents of the great interview, a half memory that, in the mystic prayer, the soul to soul speech, a desperate entreaty had been made ; that she might know the bliss of faith, never again receive revelation or smallest encouragement ; that she might live like Him, die like Him, forsaken by Him, with no sight of His face, no sound of His voice. Had He put in her heart a prayer so exalted ? She knew, with angelic perception, how great this prayer was. She framed such a prayer instantly ; she knew that He looked for courage in her : ' Try me, test me, give me suffering, neglect me ; give me grace to love in absence, for present, how could I do else ?'

She shook through all her body like some one awakened from sleep, saw the visible objects of the kitchen, the work which engaged her hands ; she found, with a light surprise, that she had been busy all the time.

The dinner was excellent. The smith almost overstayed the twenty-five minutes he had ; his wife was so cheerful, so smiling, so clean personally. He took for granted, as well he might, that this was a favourable combination of ordinary circumstances. Not at all ; it was an ordinary aspect of a new order of things. Those who know even a little of heaven usually know a great deal about earth ; and here was no exception. To see the world with washed eyes, everyday matters and objects, to distinguish their classes, means to handle the matter which concerns one with dignity and discretion.

This woman had been, let us say, from the point of view of a high standard, fairly cheerful, demure, restful to the working man, who was nearly always tired when he saw her. But why should duty to a husband in this sense depend upon accidents of nature and circumstances ? She put and answered this question. Also in the preparation of food and the cleansing of crockery and accessories. *Intention* can add something to perfect mechanical execution. An utensil cleansed in the highest name must be abundantly clean, lavishly brilliant. To

scour potatoes as though they were all alike and little different from other roots, to leave them in hot water so long, steam them so long, and then fling them at the eater; slaves for slaves might act thus. Coming to conclusions such as these under the image of incensing the Divine, who Himself swung the censer, an unlearned woman, who had handled very few books in her life, was primed to confound many a doctor.

For something more than two weeks a state of being showed little variation from one day to another. Exalted faith in the Divine Presence hourly renewed, either at the occasion of reconciliation after slips, neglects, moments in which something stood before the Light; or by simple, formal pact. She agreed to ask nothing but at the Divine dictation, to expect nothing, not to be inquisitive or impatient; above all, to keep the union a secret, to hold infinite stability as jealously as though it were a bubble. So, while every day changed from point to point like the colours of an opal, an infinity of differently coloured sparks, though storm and hush succeeded, contrition and ecstasy, before his very eyes, the smith saw not the weakest ripple in his wife's placid and perfect demeanour.

To return a moment to her everyday conduct of life, she was scrupulous to dress, to keep herself, as the warden of an idea, as the shell in which it lay active and sleepless, hidden.

One morning the interminable conversation had dropped to an even mildness; the answers to her whispered confidences seemed to grow faint—almost inaudible. An alarm came upon her, and under the strange condition, in the language she did not know. It would not be beaten away. Calm retreated into the depths of a distance such as she had never before beheld, and a rough voice bellowed through all the vacuum:

‘Halt!’ She held her breath, firm amidst immensity of loneliness unknown to sand, or sea, or sky.

‘Doubt!’ added the voice, with long-drawn insistence; and a hail of questions rushed vertical upon her, driving her down, down. What was she? whence? who? where were her titles? The Light she housed, what was it? it? it? Why *it*? What was its form? Was it a person? What person? Did it really speak? Did it speak truth? Descent must be arrested before she could answer, but that was impossible, till faith spread arms beneath her, and in seas of down and spice, in a world of light fluttering into song hushed at the moment of utterance, all her being melted into those conditions, and the familiar voice said with unfamiliar tenderness, ‘My Beloved is mine, and I am His.’

‘No,

'No, no,' she cried, 'I am afraid.' The sound of her voice brought her within the narrow walls of the kitchen with a jar. She sat down and wept for a long time without thought.

The paroxysm coincided with the smith's return to dinner. His wife stared at the clock until her face was as candid as its own, and the key sounded in the latch. She had a severe cold at this time, hence her husband took little heed of her swollen appearance. He, for his part, was sullen, unsympathetic. The perfection of material surroundings had begun to prey upon him. His ideal of life was of a balance of give and take; he knew so well in his work how a good job foreshadows a bad; and while he relished new comfort, he already smarted under a deprivation. Ah, man, man; the lentils of captivity were sweet in his memory at the table of joy!

He finished his dinner and went away, but the darkness of his presence remained behind, filling all the part of the house through which he had passed. She cleared the meal. The platters returned noiselessly to the dresser, brighter than they had left it. 'Give me sorrow,' she prayed; 'give me desertion, longing. Ah, I have longing; I long, I long.' She went to the bedroom, dressed herself, came down, and went out. She took no note of the direction: the invisible Guide had all the care of that. Her way lay across the adjoining heath; then by a turn she retraced her steps. Her eye rested here and there on scrub and struggling growth, always in the name with which every leaf was signed. It came into her fancy that she would like to see the sea which He had made. Instantly, like a child to be humoured, she saw the great expanse of the water with noble vision, shoreward and seaward at once, and the delicate contact of its rim with the fringe of the sky. Then, changing a little, the horizon was more distant; it seemed the same sea, but there was so much more of it; it was the face of waters clinging to the confines of a larger planet. The stars too, for these appeared, fell into unusual patterns. Occupied with the vision, she gradually descended into the town. She went on, absorbed in her prayer, crestfallen and timid, delighted to take a low place before Him; when she turned her head, as though she had heard her name, and saw in a stationer's window the words emblazoned: 'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' The sight of the words certainly awoke a profusion of memories; not so many but that she noted clearly the position of the card, the manner in which it was entrenched among piles of book backs. The card reminded her that she wished to buy something of the linendraper a few shops on. It is
difficult

difficult to see how it should have reminded her, unless it was the denial of the wish to buy this card. How can you hang up your birth? or whilst you live in it, why should you write up in your room the information that you were once born?

For some time communion, though tender, delicious, uninterrupted, took place on a lower level. It was the expression on her part of deep contrition; ever a new wound meekly, weakly, presented for healing. With the consciousness that the subject was less exalted than sometimes, there was no notion in her mind of comparison, for deepest anguish was ecstasy beyond thought. The very vagueness of her attitude was soothing, a reward, delight that she was permitted to know the divine union by faith. On a certain night she dreamed (it is fit to state that she never dreamed of the Divine Lover, and little at any time). She dreamed that she arrived in a square in a large town. A garden was in the midst of it, and it was inclosed by large, gaudy buildings lighted up, though it was day. She made her way to one corner of the square where there was a book shop, over which was a poem written in gold letters. The poem had eight lines; four which rhymed correctly, and in continuation four others, not rhymed, which seemed to dwindle away. In her dream this had a deep meaning, but she only retained the concluding words:

. . . it was a wondrous thing

To be so loved.

In the window of the shop was the card she had seen in the stationer's window, bearing the words, 'Except a man' . . . at least so she took for granted, for she did not distinguish them. Turning round she saw that the square had an Oriental aspect; then the dream became stupid, then unpleasant; a pungent smell pervaded it. She woke suddenly to the fact that it was tobacco; she heard the soft click of the street door. Running over the circumstances of the vivid dream, she had the staunchness to reject it as of no consequence. She looked upon the time it took to examine it as time wasted, and turned joyfully to address Him who never sleeps. It was He who began:

'If I should not be who you think I am, would you love Me?'

'That I would,' she answered fervently and without hesitation.

'And if you make a mistake, and were to be damned?'

'I should still be grateful.'

'You do not know.'

'You have given me knowledge above all knowledge.' And the silent utterance of her soul grew voluble, universal, a torrent of reckless thanks

thanks and prayer. Thanks for what she had never possessed, prayers for what she already enjoyed. She offered thanks for her existence, that she was her very self, that she was a *woman*. The Lord had been born of a *woman*. She could understand a little what it must have been to be the holy mother of God. This notion was very new to her, quite new; but that caused her no surprise, for everything was new.

There was a peculiar bliss in the thought. She came to it again and again. When she had pursued it to the end of one set of considerations it returned afresh and afresh. The morning passed with astounding rapidity—the contrary phenomenon was commoner—but nothing was belated. The dinner was as punctually served to the minute as though she had watched the clock anxiously all the time.

The habit of divine communication had long since become continual. She was able to maintain it through the most complicated demands upon her attention. Her ordinary life presented few alterations to view, her ordinary manner, her ordinary appearance. A greater solicitude might have been noted. Her clothing was really very different from what it had been, but the changes were so dexterous as to be scarcely perceptible. It cannot be denied, too, that as soon as the traces of dinner had been removed she hastened to put on the best clothes she allowed herself to wear on a weekday.

It had become necessary that she should go to a London shop, one of those warehouses where everything is to be bought. This periodical visit was always made in the same way. She hurried off immediately after dinner. From Charing Cross, which she reached by rail, she walked across Charing Cross Road and Leicester Square to Piccadilly Circus, whence she took an omnibus to her destination. Her shopping over, she came back by a different omnibus to the railway station. On the present occasion she laughed to recognise in Leicester Square the scene of her dream, in the Alhambra Theatre the Oriental colouring of it. Sure enough, too, in the north-west corner of it, was the book-shop, but the name of the proprietor stood where the poem had been cramped in her dream. In the window, by a coincidence, a white card was visible in exactly the position which the text had occupied. Rejection of the dream gave way to this extent, that she crossed the road to find out what it was. The back and side of a book were exposed, and before it was a written label: 'Just published: *The Excellent Way*,' and some further particulars. She wanted the book, though the idea was preposterous; she had never in her life paid even two shillings for a book; this one surely cost more. There was no time for dallying; her errand pressed.

pressed. She went into the shop, and the book lay dazzling on the dark counter before her. The shopman, amused at her shyness, her unwillingness to touch it, exposed the back, the sides, opened at the title-page. She saw there was a picture. The desire to possess the book grew. The shopman dropped the leaves casually through his fingers. She saw the words: 'Lord, if thou art not present.' . . . 'Ten-and-six,' said the man; 'it is beautifully printed, beautifully got up.' She thought that did not prove much, but she repeated with alarm: 'Ten-and-six!' The leaves splashed over each other. Seeing again the words she had seen before, she hurriedly closed, gave gold and silver for brown paper, string, and a possibility. In the omnibus she opened the parcel and peeped into the book.

Popery! and she wrapped it up again as well as she could.

At the store, in the tea-room where she went, according to her custom, to get breath and take a little refreshment, she could not resist taking another look at the book she carried. This time she patiently sought out the poem which had first arrested her eye.

Lord, if thou art not present, where shall I

Seek thee the absent . . .

It was very disheartening; it did not speak to her at all. She could not find words in which to reproach herself with her folly. After a few moments of such reflection, ill at ease with her conclusion, she took yet another dip and alighted on a page where a sonnet began:

Before myself I tremble, all my members quake

When lips and nose I mark, and both the hollow caves . . .

It was hopeless; she shut the book resolutely with the sudden determination to return it. With this intention she took her departure and hurried to the book-shop, which, when she reached it, was closed.

The train had little comfort for her. Only when she was some few minutes on the road did she remember that the loved communion had been interrupted just as long as this unfortunate book had been in her possession. She hastened to repair the deprivation; and though her wish did not remain entirely without response, the book beside her was a drag by its presence. She had thoughts at one moment of throwing it out of the window.

Reaching home, the book had to be smuggled into the house. The difficulty of this accomplishment, not to mention the danger, was something very like a blow to the poor owner. There was no possible question as to whether her husband could be let see it or not; accordingly it was necessary to enter the house quickly and noiselessly, to deposit the book nimbly upon one of the dark stairs while she went
into

into the sitting-room to give an account of her journey and soothe the anger of the smith, which she could count upon—anger at her forced absence, though it was surely as much upon his account as upon her own; then she must snatch the packet dexterously as she went up to take off her coat and bonnet, and hide it effectually before she could be followed. It had to be done and she did it. She was very weak next morning through lying awake devouring her tears.

To allay the agony of her doubt, the difficulty of return to the divine communion, her first determination was to put the book out of sight and leave it there. This turned out so little satisfactory as a salve that she changed tactic, and, withdrawing it from its lurking-place, she cut the leaves and began to read it straight through, disregarding the shocks to her accustomed beliefs which occurred ten times on every page. Her determination was so strong still when she had penetrated a few pages that she found herself spelling out the name of she did not know whom: Blessed Jacopone da Todi, not skipping this, to her, unnecessary preliminary to the perusal of the poem following it, which answered her unconscious glance with better promise than any of the preceding had vouchsafed. Ah! dear Lord, Light in dark places indeed. The first line she read set all her doubts at rest. Joy filled all her being, she did not know why; but such was the perfection of joy to her, when she could not trace it to any earthly origin. She could not have declared that she understood fifty per cent. of the words under her eye, but she was sure in the awakened part of her that here was something for her. What did she care now about the origin of the book, for what petty or even wicked purpose it might have been put together? She knew enough to be certain that He uses all things, all means, for His good pleasure. Until she could look into His face, follow with her own eyes the moving lines of His lips as they move in speech, she must be content to hear His voice where it is to be heard.

O Love, all love above!

Why hast thou struck me so?

All my heart broke atwo,

Consumed with flames of love,

Burning and flaming cannot find solace;

It cannot fly from torment, being bound;

Like wax amid live coal it melts apace.

It languishes alive, no help being found.

And so forth. The words had no special reference to her own condition at the time, probably none at all; yet such was the force of this unlooked-for revelation, she knew once for all and at the first glance
that

that these words were meant for her. Even had she been told that Blessed Jacopone was a minor brother, and had she been told at the same time what a minor brother was, it would have made no difference to her. From the afternoon when she was made free of the ancient Italian poem, the father of so much of the best that has followed it, she gave it her attention until she knew it all by heart, and could again put away the book containing it, for she cut no more pages.

With no more power to define a symbol than a baby, she knew very well from the outset, and practically, that all visible nature, and more especially the Word of God (that is the Bible) are intelligible only in the manner of symbol; that all appearances, all divine utterances, portray something beyond, which in turn is the emblem of some remoter truth—reality. She was fully convinced that the various recorded and unrecorded acts of Christ, the incidents of the life He passed on earth, are continually re-enacted for the furtherance of His kingdom, and the nourishment of the souls of His. This belief, perhaps it is proper to add, was held only on the authority of Christ; it had no further support. She knew that the way of illumination has either to be trod without fear or left alone. There must be courage to meet and face Apollyon, but how much more courage does it need to listen to the voice of the Beloved!

Let it then be stated categorically (where the smith's wife had been convinced in one point of time) that she had not shunned a conclusion which had been forced upon her: Christ had once been born of woman miraculously; that momentous event had had its direct value, the physical redemption of man and fallen nature; but beyond this was there not something else? It is a matter of vulgar knowledge that the great sacrifice is infinitely more far-reaching in its effect. As our Lord then was born of His mortal mother in mortal flesh, so is He conceived mystically in every one of His chosen, and born spiritually, but not less truly. The act too is reciprocal, and the ramifications of the mystery extend no doubt till limitless space is filled with the glory of God.

On an afternoon, at the accustomed hour, the smith reached his house, and hearing no sound to indicate the presence of his wife within doors, walked into the sitting-room to verify her absence. She was sitting in the usual chair, with her head bowed and her hands crossed in a strange attitude upon her breast. He asked her what she was doing, but all the answer he received was a deprecating wave of her hand. He placed himself before her, intercepting the light of the window, and there stood stock still. Presently she lifted her hands
with

with the palms towards him, and then stooped the whole upper part of her frame until her forehead almost touched her knees. Raising her face then, her lips, which were very white, moved rapidly without sound, presently breaking into cadences :

Against me let no blame henceforth be held

If such a love confoundeth all my wit . . .

She brushed her hands across her eyes, shook her head, and smiled recognition to her husband.

The following day their doctor called in the afternoon, quite accidentally. He explained his visit as accident, adding some professional jest. He stayed almost an hour, and then, a strange request, asked for some tea. The smith's wife, quietly flattered, prepared a cup of tea, and they resumed their conversation. The doctor snatched greedily at any seeming opportunity of talking upon religious subjects ; but she would not be enticed, and at length he went away. When the smith returned, his wife told him of the visit ; he affected surprise, though he had just seen the doctor, and heard from him the following opinion on the health of his wife : ' Take care of your wife, you will not have her much longer ; I cannot discover anything wrong with her ! '

There was a great peace over life for a day or two, a rest from ecstasy as sweet or sweeter. Then, sweeter yet, suddenly the renewal, the ' light without pause or bound,' of the poem. To light the world from one's own body, to bear the Light within one, to be the genetrix—it surpassed reason.

Not iron nor the fire can separate

Or sunder those whom love doth so unite ;

Not suffering nor death can reach the state

To which my soul is ravished ; from its height

Beneath it, lo ! it sees all things create ;

It dominates the range of dimmest sight . . .

She gave way completely to the fact. The conviction that she truly bore within her her august Familiar was so profound that she grew to the pain of regret that the course of nature must obtain, and that, the day and hour accomplished, she must part with the mystical burden and enter into a new relationship. So jealous did she become that a notion one would think she could not escape did not enter her thought ; that, namely, of comparing her legal husband to Saint Joseph. The truth is that her grasp of the existing situation was on a very high level of mystery. As to her part in it, she held it almost as a person without sex, the necessary condition of her entering it once overpast.

Transformed in Him, almost the very Christ ;

One with her God, she is almost divine ;

Riches above all riches to be priced,
 All that is Christ's is hers, and she is queen.
 How can I still be sad, despair-enticed,
 Or ask for medicine to cure my spleen?
 The fetid sweet from sin,
 With sweetness overspread,
 The old forgot and dead
 In the new reign of Love.

The tone of complaint in the poem of Jacopone, though it had no meaning in her experience, did not raise the smallest question in her. She knew the treasure of sense within the terms employed. The joy was so intense that it seemed to her quite natural that another should express it, or try to express it, in the language of pain and dismay. In her prayers she was just as likely to pour out volumes of expostulation and injury, frantic and unseemly tenderness, sheer incoherency. In one passage the poem runs :

Thou canst not shield Thyself from love, love brought
 Thee captive by the road from heaven to earth ;
 Love brought Thee down to lowness, to be naught,
 To roam rejected from Thy humble birth.
 No house nor field enhanced Thy lowly lot ;
 Poor, Thou hast given riches and great worth.
 In life, in death, no dearth
 Of love hast Thou declared ;
 Thy heart hath flamed and flared
 With nothing else but love.

This was strong food, and it was devoured greedily. The aliment must be nothing but love :

'Thou wast not flesh,' Jacopone makes Saint Francis break out at the Divine Lover in the passion of his rebuke :

Thou wast not flesh, but love, in frame and brain ;
 Love made Thee man to bear our sins reward.
 Thy love required the cross, the world's disdain. . . .

All through, the phrases of the great Italian song filled her with terrible bliss, ecstatic terror. When an anxiety did not of itself come into her mind, the poem readily suggested it. Her own temper would have been most likely to have sucked the present sweetness, but the untractable companion of Saint Francis would not have it thus. He is full of apprehension. If this little love which, now, at the outset, is vouchsafed to me, so fills all my being, taxes all my strength, how shall I possibly endure the distention when it grows great, as grow it must? The smith's wife saw the force of this question in a manner outside Jacopone's anticipation.

Disregarding dates, hours, lapses of time (she gave little heed ; the Lover dictated season to her and time of day ; it was day or night for her at His bidding, spring or autumn), the time was nigh for the mysterious birth. It rushed upon her suddenly ; there seemed only a few minutes given her in which to prepare the setting of the astounding miracle. The historical circumstances were present to her in a flash, she knew not whence ; but the whole incident, the actual details, had to be animated. She moved about quietly under the sorest stress she had ever known, while the agitated soul of her seemed to be traversing space in all directions in the fervour of the moment ; she was muttering to herself over and over again :

In such a deadly swoon,

Alas ! where am I brought ?

Johann Scheffler has shown the nativity in sentences of tenderness which human speech has poor hope ever to excel, so frail that they cannot be stirred from the tongue in which they were first set ; Friedrich Spe has expressed physical contact with Christ in words which swoon upon his lips ; the English language holds the pomp and glory of song in Crashaw's poem on the circumcision. If these three masters could be distilled into one and their concentrated sweetness impinged direct upon a sensitive heart, the victim might present a parallel to the overwhelmed blacksmith's wife, fallen the most pitiable heap of flesh. The lamentable workman, the words of the doctor fresh in his brain (they had gnawed through into every fibre of it) lifted his wife in his grimed arms ; lifted her, a strange contradiction of terms, into depths. It cannot be told from what vision he aroused her.

It was frightening to a poor man like the blacksmith to see his wife consent to be put to bed without a murmur of protest. Even had she been evidently suffering he would have expected her to deny that anything was the matter with her, and certainly to refuse to go to bed. To every inquiry she returned the same blissful smile, of such candid reassurance that those about her could not believe that she suffered. The news of the mysterious ailment (which was to end in death) ran down the street, and unaccustomed women gathered at the clean bedside, and there remained.

She now lived in the heights. She had now, as she thought, transcended all ; it had been a long fight to break with such clearly justifiable habit as that which kept her the slave of the calls of her house. But love, great love had made wreck of all ; love, tyrannical, had broken down the flesh, even in its purest strongholds :

I have no longer eyes for forms of creatures,
 I cry to Him Who doth alone endure ;
 Though earth and heaven exhaust their varied natures,
 Through love their forms are thin and nowise sure ;
 When I had looked upon His splendid features,
 Light of the sun itself was grown obscure.
 Cherubim, rare and pure
 By knowledge and high thought,
 The seraphin, are naught
 To him who looks on love.

She no longer waked and slept ; night and day alike passed in calm ecstasy. The Beloved could not leave her any more. Seen by none of the busybodies at her bedside, she held at will and laid aside within easy reach the divine Presence come to her with the loving confidence He had Himself taught her. Locality had ceased to have that vital importance which it once had ; great sense of her individuality remained, and stronger still was the personality of the divine Lover. She knew (for ecstasy brought with it supreme knowledge) that her body lay in sheets, supposed to be lingering and ailing ; that it was given over to the care of hands she knew, to which she gave no heed. She knew that her kitchen stood untended by its proper guardian ; but love was grown terrible now, she dared not deny it lest it should crush the universe in despite. The officious woman in the room would bend her ear to the smiling lips when they moved, to hear, low and sweet and distinct :

Love, Love, how Thou hast dealt a bitter wound !
 I cry for nothing now but love alone.
 Love, Love, to Thee I am securely bound ;
 I can embrace none other than my own.
 Love, Love, so strongly hast Thou wrapt me round,
 My heart by love for ever overthrown,
 For love I am full prone.
 Love, but to be with Thee !
 O Love, in mercy be
 My death, my death of love !

‘She is raving!’ But no change of expression answered the opinion, though it was distinctly heard and understood.

On a given day the number of people passing to and fro began to increase. The fire was kept more brisk. There was noiseless hurry going on. She knew quite well that they were preparing for her death. An extra pillow was put behind her, and not half-an-hour elapsed before another was added. Then one beckoned another outside the room, and she supposed that the smith had been sent for.

Not long afterwards, in fact, he arrived. As he came into the room her lips began to move again.

'She is raving!' the leading attendant volunteered, not for the first time that morning. Though the smith had not heard it before, he rejected the hypothesis with a gesture of disdain. The fact was, that the dignity of his wife's appearance filled him with vanity. Not those, he thought of the women who stood round like birds of prey, none of those is my wife, but the serene woman propped up with pillows, who is already half in heaven, on whom I shall set my eyes only once or twice more. He bent to her face, and heard here and there as a syllable was accented :

To Love for ever wed,
Love hath united both
Our hearts in perfect troth
Of everlasting love.

'Her head is as clear as mine,' he said scornfully ; 'she's no more raving than you are.'

'What's she say?' asked the woman, awed.

'I can't say it like her.'

'She's going.'

'Lower her head,' whispered one. The smith looked savage, as though he would defend her from molestation with violence. The women continued to mutter what ought to be done.

She motioned to raise her hands ; the smith took one of them ; her lips moved :

Love, Love, O Jesus, I have reached the port ;
Love, Love, O Jesus, whither . . .

JOHN GRAY.