

of Mr. Herbert darkened the sunlight pouring through the door.

"Pardon me, my dear madam," he said, entering hat in hand, "I must really speak to you."

"I know what you have to say, sir," said Gillian. "You come from the man who calls himself my husband."

"From the man who is your husband, yes. Suffer me to say—"

"I would rather hear nothing from you, Mr. Herbert."

"Perhaps," said Bream, "you had better leave Mr. Herbert and myself together. If he has any message you ought to hear I will convey it to you."

"Thank you," said Gillian; "you are a true friend."

She pressed his hand, and with a formal bend of her head to the vicar left the room, in spite of a remonstrant exclamation from him.

"Pray be seated, sir," said Bream, offering his superior a chair.

"I will not be seated, sir," said Mr. Herbert with indignant anger. "As your spiritual superior I demand an explanation of your conduct."

"The explanation is perfectly simple. I feel it my duty, as a clergyman and a gentleman, to protect that lady."

"Your first duty, Mr. Bream, is to me."

"Pardon me," said Bream, with a fine mixture of firmness and respect. "I acknowledge your superiority so far as the offices of the parish are concerned; but I have sold you my services, not my conscience."

"Does your conscience instruct you to side with a woman against a lawful husband?" asked Mr. Herbert, hotly. "I have just left that unfortunate gentleman. He has—ah—been perfectly frank with me. He admits fully, amply, that his married life was not a happy one, and that he chiefly was to blame. He confessed his errors with a candour, a consciousness, which did him infinite credit, and which moved me profoundly. He is heartbroken, and, being in a very delicate state of health, is scarcely able to bear the sufferings of his present situation. His heart is yearning for reconciliation; he begs humbly, yet tenderly, for an interview with his wife."

"You see, sir," said Bream, stroking his chin thoughtfully, "Mrs. Dartmouth was taken a little by surprise. The gentleman had been so long dead and buried."

"Dead and buried! The man lives, sir."

"Unfortunately."

"Let us have no more, sir, of this revolting cynicism. For my own part I am astonished to find in a lady for whom I have a sincere respect and sympathy, a tone of such bitterness towards one whom she had sworn to love, honour and obey. And I am even more surprised to find a man of your good sense and general right feeling so easily influenced by a mere *ex parte* statement."

"Even if that were so, sir, I might retort that all you have to go on is a mere *ex parte* statement of the other side. But it is not so. I was intimately acquainted with Mrs. Dartmouth—Mrs. O'Mara if you prefer the real name—during the most disastrous part of her married life."

"Do I understand, Mr. Bream," asked the vicar with ponderous indignation, "do I understand, sir, that you were privy to this lady's concealment of her name? You knew that circumstance, and did not report it to me?"

"My dear sir," said Bream, "I am not aware that the circumstance of my being a clergyman absolves me from my duty as a gentleman. Did you expect me to break the confidence this unhappy lady reposed in me?"

"This was so blank an argumentative 'No thoroughfare' that Mr. Herbert could only blink and cough."

"May I ask, sir," continued Bream, "if you have ever been married?"

"I sir?" roared Mr. Herbert.

"Pardon me, I forgot you stand for the celibacy of the clergy. But if the vicar has not been married, the curate has."

"Indeed."

"So you see I approach this subject with a double advantage. I know something about

matrimony in the abstract, and about this particular marriage we are discussing in particular. I have an opinion founded, not as you said just now, on the *ex parte* statement of an interested and prejudiced person, but on actual knowledge—that this new acquaintance of yours is a whited sepulchre."

"Will you explain?"

"A humbug, if you like it better. His debaucheries at the time I knew him were open and shameless. They broke the heart of this unfortunate lady."

"Judge not," said Mr. Herbert, "that ye be not judged. He has repented, and I would stake all I possess that his repentance is sincere. He is a person of refined tastes, and his whole conversation assures me that he is deeply religious."

"Ah! That looks bad."

"Sir?"

"No offence. Our religion, Mr. Herbert, is often merely a cloak."

"In this case I am sure that it is not. I think I know a little of human nature, and this unfortunate man, I believe, is of a most affectionate and devoted disposition. When he spoke of his child he cried, actually cried! He did the same this morning when he first heard her name, before he knew that she was his child."

"Yes," said Bream, "crocodiles cry."

"I myself was deeply affected, sir," said Mr. Herbert, "and I presume that you do not call me a crocodile. I promised as a Christian, as a clergyman, to plead his cause. I feel myself—ah, somewhat compromised. I shudder when I think that I was on the point of pronouncing a blessing on a bigamous marriage."

"And what do you advise this lady to do?"

"To do?" repeated Mr. Herbert. "To do what any self-respecting woman, any Christian, sir, would do under such circumstances—to fall upon her knees and humbly to thank a merciful Providence that she has been spared the commission of an act of abomination; and then to receive with tenderness the gentleman to whom she owes a wife's duty, a wife's obedience."

"I see," said Bream, "kill the fatted calf, and all that sort of thing. My dear vicar, it can't be done, and it shan't if I can help it."

"Those whom Heaven has joined—"

"The other place often puts asunder."

"You are blasphemous!"

"Not at all. I am practical and honest in the avowal of my ideas. If Mrs. Dartmouth—"

"Mrs. O'Mara," said Mr. Herbert.

"As you please. The name does not greatly matter. If that lady ever again avowed allegiance to a cur like that, I, who am her friend, would give her up for ever."

"For her child's sake, Bream—"

"Even a child cannot mend the broken chain of love."

"Put love aside—duty!"

"Is sometimes but another word for immorality."

"Good heavens, Bream!"

"I repeat the word immorality. For a woman under any protest to live in conjugal bonds with a man she does not love, whom she does not respect, from whom she shrinks in actual loathing, is an infamy in the eyes of God and man."

"We are not sent into this world, Bream, merely to follow out impulses and wishes, but to be chastened and made obedient. The carnal love which you would make the final rule of conduct—"

"Is the most divine thing in the world."

"For itself it is nothing."

"It is everything, for it is priceless, and cannot be bought or sold; to the blessing from without it adds the sanction from within; with it, marriage is a pretaste of heaven, without it, veritable hell on earth. I speak from knowledge, sir, from bitter knowledge of what a loveless woman is."

"We are—ah—losing ourselves in generalities, Bream," said Mr. Herbert. "Let us return to the case in question. Mr. O'Mara has undoubted and undeniable legal rights, to put it on the lowest ground. These rights it is his intention to assert."

"Mrs. O'Mara will deny them on her own re-

sponsibility until legal powers can put her beyond his power."

"Legal powers!" repeated Mr. Herbert with a horror stricken aspect. "Do I hear you aright, Bream, you as a—ah—a Christian priest counsel divorce!"

"Most certainly. It is the only common-sense solution of the dilemma."

"And how," asked O'Mara's voice from the door, "does she propose to procure this divorce?"

"By my evidence, Mr. O'Mara," said Bream, calmly, "and by that of one or two other people, who will be easily enough found. Her case is perfect. You have furnished her with everything she needs,—cruelty, unfaithfulness, desertion!"

"Cruelty!" echoed O'Mara, with an abominably acted air of surprise. "What cruelty, in the name of heaven?"

"She spent a month in St. Thomas's Hospital in consequence of your last assault upon her."

"And where is your witness to that?" asked O'Mara. "It is merely an unsupported statement, to which my denial will be a sufficient answer."

"That we shall see," said the curate.

"This is hard," said O'Mara. "After seven cruel years of separation I return with a heart overflowing with affection. I was happy. My nature was full of sunlight and tender anticipations. I know my former infirmities—I have freely confessed them to Mr. Herbert—but, ah! how I loved that woman."

"You proved it among other things by leaving her for seven years, and making no signs all that time."

"I left her—yes, we were penniless, and I could not bear to see her suffer—I said, 'I will cross the seas and labour until I become rich.' I went, I returned to find—"

"He passed his hand across his eyes."

"You have returned, as you say. Rich as you hoped?"

"Alas! no. Fortune has frowned upon me, but I still retain my old illusions. I am a little older, but still the same."

"Yes," said Bream, with a world of meaning in his tone. "That seems the difficulty."

"And all you desire," said Mr. Herbert, "is a perfect reconciliation?"

"Precisely," said O'Mara. "I pass my dear wife's unfeeling reception of the news that I survived, I pass over her *tendresse* for another man, I forget that, with my child's innocent eyes fixed upon her, she was about to marry that person, and I say, 'All is forgotten and forgiven. For our little angel's sake, let us be united!'"

Mr. Herbert blew his nose sonorously.

"You hear, Bream?"

"Yes," said Bream, "I hear."

"Then join me as peacemaker in invoking on these good people a Christian blessing."

"Thank you, thank you," cried O'Mara, pressing his hand. "I shall never forget your sympathy, sir," he continued to Bream. "This torture is killing me. I have an obscure heart affection, and—"

"Possibly an aneurism?"

"I—I fear so."

"Hardening of the great artery. I diagnose dit long ago; but with care cases like yours last for years. Your heart will never kill you, Mr. O'Mara."

"My dear sir," said O'Mara, with a slight impatience of manner, "all this is apart from the point. I demand an interview with my wife. I shall try gentle persuasion to bring her back to ideas of wifely duty. If those fail I must try other means, though I shall be very reluctant to do so. I ask you as a gentleman to leave this house."

Bream considered for a moment with his eyes on O'Mara's face, then, walking to the hall rope, rang. Barbara entered the room.

"Ask your mistress to step this way, if you please," Barbara went. "I will leave you with your wife, Mr. O'Mara, perfectly confident that since my interview with her an hour ago you can do her no harm."

Gillian entered, pale but collected.

"This gentleman," said Bream, "insists on an interview with you. I see no harm in your granting