

All was finished now, and the Advent season, which had witnessed the completion of his task, had been to him a time of great spiritual blessing. The earnest words which he had written had entered again into his own soul and had re-awakened him to fuller consecration of himself, and a more entire abnegation of all that might inwardly militate against the devotion of his life to Christ's service. The last sheet of the manuscript lay before him, clearly written in the fair angular characters that were in themselves a type of the writer: incisive, legible, with a distinctive grace and an individuality all their own—the delight of the printer for their legibility and their unequivocal fidelity to forms.

Leaning back in his chair before the vestry table, he surveyed the finished work with a feeling of intense satisfaction. The pleasant task, entirely congenial, which had yet interrupted other duties less imperative, but to the full as important, done now, while it was yet Advent. Now he could prepare for Christmas with an unpreoccupied and wholly attentive mind. But one thing more remained. To count the pages for the last time, to lay them evenly together, and fasten and address them.

This he proceeded to do, when, to his momentary annoyance, he discovered that the supply of stamps and fasteners, which he usually kept at hand in a drawer of this particular table, had run out, and that he must procure what he required from the rectory study if he would have his work ready for immediate mailing. In any subsequent moment he was never able to reconcile his conduct on that afternoon, destined to end so disastrously after its happy beginning, with his ordinarily methodical habits. He could never account for the carelessness which led him to snatch up his hat and to hasten from the room and across the green that separated the church from the rectory, without having first secured his papers, or so much as closed the vestry door behind him.

It was only a minute's walk and the stamps and fasteners were in his hand, when a vexatious delay occurred in the person of a chance visitor whose importunity refused to be denied. Minutes elapsed, a quarter of an hour perhaps, before he could free himself and return to the church.

It was almost dark in the short December afternoon, and presently the bell would ring for evening-song. He should have barely time to put up his papers and join his curate in the church.

The vestry was bright with the cheerful glow of fire from the open grate when he entered, but the sight that met his eyes seemed, after the first wild glance of horror, in which he comprehended the full extent of his calamity, for the moment to strike him dumb and to deprive him of the power of vision.

On the table before him, just where he had left them, lay the pages of his manuscript—but defaced, obliterated, utterly, irretrievably ruined—in a black pool of ink that spread on every side, com-

pletely saturating the carefully written, precious sheets. The result of weeks and months of anxious toil destroyed forever. And by the table, looking on with a face as white as the linen surplice that enwrapped his trembling form, stood little Ambrose True, the Rector's favorite choir-boy.

This was how the dark cloud rose and gathered on St. Mary's in that Advent time, and threatened to destroy forever the peace and happiness of one young life. When the Rector laid down the rule that no choir-boy was to enter the vestry without his special permission, he had strong reasons for doing so. The claims of a large family and many friends made it difficult at times for him to secure the complete retirement which his studious habits demanded.

Even in the solitude of his study there were occasional distractions which disturbed the current of his thoughts and made it hard, or even impossible, for him to resume the interrupted line of argument. And to meet this difficulty he had had recourse to his vestry, and had found it admirably suited to his purpose. Here he could read and write, and think and pray, secure from all intrusion, for when he had entered in and shut the door there was no one, from the curate to the sexton, who would have disturbed him, except on matters of the gravest necessity. Some of his most valuable books and papers were kept here, and he came and went and found them always untouched, no careless or inquisitive juvenile being permitted to trespass on this inviolate domain.

Hence it was with feelings of horror and astonishment, proportionate even to the shock with which he beheld the calamity itself, that he saw in the intruder, whose unwarrantable presence accounted for the accident, a boy in whom, of all others, he would have had most confidence for obedience to lawful authority and for strict integrity. That Ambrose True had disobeyed him and betrayed his trust shocked him almost as much as the terrible destruction of his manuscript. And it was destroyed utterly. The paper on which it was written was thin and porous, and the contents of the large ink-bottle had been distributed over the surface of almost every page, so that scarcely a line of the writing remained unblotted. And as a climax to the catastrophe, and with a recklessness as out of accord with his usual habits as was the carelessness by which he had neglected to shut the vestry door, when he had finished the writing of his paper, he had crumpled the rough draft in his hand and in utter abstraction had thrown it on the open fire.

Never before, in all his experience, had such a thing happened with him, and now, and now!

He bit his lips till the blood started, and struck his clenched hand upon the table.

"What is this that you have done?" he asked, when he could speak and see. "O, boy, what