

PASTOR AND PEOPLE.

"HAVE YOU—?"

A TRUE STORY

Service was over, and the congregation were dispersing from the door of the village church. Some groups passed quietly homeward, as if conscious of the solemnity of the Presence they had sought; others waited for a few minutes' chat with friends and neighbours; and while tasteful dresses flutter in the breeze, and playful words and soft laughter fill the air, unexpected malignant spirits are flitting with untiring vigilance from heart to heart, eagerly catching away in every idle word and wandering glance some grains of the "precious seed" that has just been sown.

"Come and lunch at the castle, Mr. Vivyan," said a sweet voice, as a tall, fashionable looking young man passed from the door; "you will meet several friends." And the brothers and sisters began to arrange their plans with Mr. Vivyan, but with a courteous "No," to every tempting proposition, he took a hasty leave and was gone. Into the deep shades of his own wooded demesne, and down the broad waste of heather to where the sea dashes against the lofty cliffs, Charles Vivyan wanders.

And what are the words that are ringing through his brain? They are those of the text which had that day formed the preacher's message: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

How strange that words so well known, so familiar, so oft-repeated, should suddenly have power to raise a tempest in the soul! But though the words were familiar, the *meaning* was new, or at least unthought of. It is wonderful, too, with what novelty a thought or fact clothes itself, when, from being a mere abstraction, it becomes, through some change of circumstances, or from looking at it in a new point of view, a matter of intense personal interest; and this was now the case with the words in question.

"If the announcement is for all, then it is for *me*," was the oft-repeated thought. Never had he heard words so penetrating. Truly there is no touch so keen, so poignant, as that of the sharp two-edged sword of the Spirit. And yet it was a very quiet discourse that Vivyan had heard. There had been no bursts of eloquence to captivate the imagination; no impassioned appeals to stir the feelings. It was a scholar-like and finished composition; its theology was clear and perfectly scriptural; its arguments strong and convincing; and although there were those who sighed as they saw how little the truth preached had kindled the preacher's own soul, and who felt chilled by its cold utterance, still they rejoiced that it *was* preached, and prayed that their pastor's lips might yet be touched by a live coal from off the altar.

Long did Vivyan pace up and down the sandy beach wrapped in thought.

"How clearly," he said, "how convincingly Mr. Langdale proved the necessity of regeneration for a race so far gone from original righteousness, if they are ever to be made meet for a world of holiness! And if it be essential for all, it follows that it must be essential for *me*. There is no use deceiving myself; I had rather look the truth in the face, and most certainly I have never known any such wonderful transformation of soul. They talk of baptism and education; well, no doubt the thing varies in various cases—Mr. Langdale said so. In some it may be very gradual, and but slowly progressive. But one thing strikes me, that whenever or however the change takes place, it must be a very *real* change, something that would introduce a man into a new state of things as regards the invisible world, and give him a spiritual sensibility, which I am quite aware I do not possess. Every Sunday I go through the form of deploring my state as a 'miserable sinner,' and yet in point of fact don't care much about it. We call upon God as 'our Father,' and yet entertain no feeling toward Him but that of awe, and except in church, I fear, are utterly indifferent to and forgetful of His existence; at least, I am sure it is my own case. Now, if all that religion teaches is *true*, and I cannot doubt it, this apathy on the subject certainly indicates some great and radical defect in one's own mind. How amazing that the sublime fact of the Atonement, so nearly connected with my eternal destiny, should so little occupy my attention, or command my interest! My mind is quite dead to these things, in comparison with the

lively interest which the things of this world excite, short-lived as I well know they must be. That was exactly what Mr. Langdale was pointing out, as an evidence of the distinction between the carnal and the spiritual mind."

"But after all," Vivyan thought, as he turned homeward, "after all, who ever experienced this wonderful transition? That's what I should like to know. If I could meet with any one who would honestly tell me that he knew what it was, who had actually felt the renewing grace of God in his heart, and really passed into a state of mind very different from that of original nature, why, then I should believe it. Of course, being in the Bible it must be true; but still, somehow, a thing seems so shadowy, so speculative, when you learn it only from a book. I should like to see it carried out. I should like to see a practical example in real life; and as far as my observation goes, I suspect it will not be easy to find one. And then, without this great change, a man *cannot* see the kingdom of God.' Surely, if the words are to be taken literally, that would condemn a vast portion of the community! It would be too dreadful! I cannot understand it; I must think it over."

The Rev. Edward Langdale was in his study, closely engaged in the preparation of an elaborate essay on Faith, when his servant entered with a note. It was from Vivyan, inviting him to dinner on the same day. Mr. Langdale hastily wrote a few lines of acceptance, and then, as the servant left the room, threw himself back and sighed wearily. "What an evening I shall have!" he exclaimed; "what a revulsion after a day of intense study! There will be nothing congenial, nothing to 'refresh the weary brain.' Vivyan is a noble fellow, but his mind is all run to waste. But what's all this?" he added, turning over the second page of the note: "I have to apologize for offering you only my own company; but I am anxious for an opportunity of talking to you alone, on a subject which greatly disturbs my mind." "Indeed! who'd have thought of Vivyan's mind being disturbed about anything beyond his horses or his dogs, and in either case I should be a miserable adviser. What can it be?" And the student indulged in a few turns up and down the room, speculating upon what Vivyan could possibly mean. "Well," he said, at last, "if it is a knotty point in theology that puzzles his brain, he has applied to the right quarter, at all events. Poor fellow," he added, as with a graver countenance he again took his place before his books and papers, "how glad I should be to see him becoming more serious and thoughtful."

A few hours after, and they were at the dinner-table, the pale young clergyman conversing on ordinary topics with scholarly grace, and the host cheerfully doing the honours of his hospitable board. At last, the dessert and wine were on the table, the servants withdrew, and they were alone.

"Now for it," thought Mr. Langdale, as he busied himself with his walnuts, and every moment expected that Vivyan, with his usual straightforward frankness, would enter on the important subject. But not a word was spoken, and, feeling the awkwardness of the continued silence, Mr. Langdale at last said: "You mentioned in your note that there was something you wished to talk over with me."

"I am glad you have asked me about it," Vivyan said cordially, with a sigh of relief; "I should never have been able to introduce it myself, anxious as I feel. Yes, Mr. Langdale, the subject of your sermon last Sunday has occupied my mind ever since, and I am exceedingly anxious to discuss it further with you, if you will allow me."

"I shall be most happy," Mr. Langdale replied with a gratified air. "Was there any point that was not clear to you, or in which you differed from my view?" he added with much interest.

"What I want to know is this," said Vivyan, with abrupt vehemence. "Is it a *real* and *practical* thing?"

"To what do you allude?"

"To regeneration, or the new birth, spoken of in your text, and which you so clearly demonstrated to be essential to salvation. I want to know whether this is a mere shadowy theory—a theological dream—or is it, as I said before, a *real* and *actual* change?"

"Can you doubt it?" Mr. Langdale said, in some surprise. "The word in the original has the force of 'born from above,' as well as 'born again,' which implies that the soul now enters upon a celestial existence, recovers, as it were, its long-lost sonship in the household of God. And it is obvious that no mere

outward reformation ever endued a man with new powers of spiritual discernment, or, in the words of Scripture, led him to 'see the kingdom of God.' Again the figure is repeatedly changed, but never weakened. It always expresses a complete transition from one state of spiritual existence to another and very different one. For instance, it is called a passing from 'death unto life,' 'from darkness to light,' a 'translation' from the kingdom of Satan to that of Christ, and the figure of the resurrection is repeatedly used to illustrate the greatness of the change and its life-giving power to the soul. I cannot myself imagine how, in the face of such a mass of Scripture evidence, any one can attempt to support an opposite theory."

"It is, then, a genuine transformation, which the soul of man actually undergoes while in this world?"

"Unquestionably," Mr. Langdale replied, feeling strangely disconcerted under Vivyan's plain matter-of-fact handling of a subject so refined and abstruse, and the deep, earnest gaze of his anxious eyes.

"And how does it take place?" Vivyan asked, with intense interest.

Mr. Langdale shrank from such close dealing as this. Instantly his sensitive spirit felt keenly that it was experimental religion that was needed here; that without it the most exquisite theological skill was powerless to meet the cravings of an anxious soul.

"There is some diversity of opinion among the schoolmen," he began, thoughtfully; but Vivyan interrupted him—

"Never mind the schoolmen," he exclaimed impatiently; "books, and theories, and speculations are all humbug when a man is anxious." Then, meeting a look of grave surprise and embarrassment, he added in a low tone of deep feeling:

"Excuse me, Mr. Langdale, but my soul is stirred to its depths. Eternity is at stake, and I am groping in darkness, and can see no light. Tell me, I implore you to tell me, *who* has known this wondrous change? Is it a thing that *really* takes place? In a word, HAVE YOU—?"

The table shook with the agitation of his strong frame, and his quivering lips refused to finish the sentence. But it needed not. He was answered in the ashy paleness that overspread his listener's face—in the look of anguish with which he turned away, and buried it in his trembling hands.

Inexpressibly shocked, and deeply reproaching himself for his inconsiderate abruptness, Vivyan rose from the table, and stood leaning against the open window. Lost in thought, he knew not how the time passed, till he felt a hand laid upon his arm, and heard a voice whisper: "My brother, let us pray." Vivyan turned quickly. His young pastor stood before him with so touching an expression in the bowed head—in the pale and thoughtful face—that, strong man as he was, he felt the tears rush to his eyes. He saw it all in a moment. They were to seek together for the grace that both equally needed, to implore the outpouring of that Holy Spirit which alone can change the heart, and which is promised to all who ask it in sincerity. He grasped Mr. Langdale's hand, and said, with a choked utterance: "Let us go to the library, we shall be undisturbed there."

They have entered in, and "shut the door," and now none may know what passes between their souls and God. Let us wait until "He who seeth in secret shall reward them openly."

Sunday after Sunday passed; and, to the surprise of the congregation, the pulpit was constantly occupied by strangers. It was not that the rector was ill, for he was always present, and took part in the service; and many, as they joined in the fervent petitions of their beautiful liturgy, felt that it came home to their hearts as it had never done before. A little child, as she returned home, said, "Does it not seem like *real* praying when Mr. Langdale reads now?" and the mother's heart echoed the thought, for she had felt that day, that such prayers must be drawing down blessings from above.

At length the day came when the pastor again occupied his accustomed place. But oh! how changed was his preaching! It was not less learned—less studied—less finished than before. No; Edward Langdale was not one who would offer to the Lord that which cost nothing; but now his words glowed with life, and were full of unction and power. His mind was a rich reservoir of knowledge; but the fount, though full to the brim, had been valueless, as regarded the strengthening and refreshing of the soul, till a word unheard was spoken, which turned its