

ready to go through it all again if need should be, in order to attain the known end of his high calling."

"But isn't it very presumptuous to assert anything about God which he has not revealed in his word?" said Mary, in a gentle, subdued voice, and looking at me with a sweet doubtfulness in her eyes.

"I am only insisting on the perfection of God—as far as I can understand perfection," I answered.

"But may not the perfection of God be something very different from anything we can understand?"

"I will go farther," I returned. "It must be something that we cannot understand—but different from what we can understand by being greater, not by being less."

"Mayn't it be such that we can't understand it at all?" she insisted.

"Then how should we worship him? How should we ever rejoice in him? Surely it is because you see God to be good—"

"Or fancy you do," interposed Charley.

"Or fancy you do," I assented, "that you love him—not merely because you are told he is good. The Feejee islander might assert his God to be good, but would that make you love him? If you heard that a great power, away somewhere, who had nothing to do with you at all, was very good, would that make you able to love him?"

"Yes, it would," said Mary, decidedly. "It is only a good man who would see that God was good."

"There you argue entirely on my side. It must be because you supposed his goodness, what you call goodness—not something else—that you could love him on testimony. But even then, your love could be of that mighty absorbing kind which alone you would think fit between you and your God. It would not be loving him with all your heart, and soul, and strength, and mind—would it? It would be loving him second-hand—not because of himself, seen and known by yourself."

"But Charley does not even love God second-hand," she said, with a despairing mournfulness.

"Perhaps because he is very anxious to love him first-hand, and what you tell him about God does not seem to him to be good. Surely neither man nor woman can love because of what seems not good! I confess one may love in spite of what is bad, but it must be because of other things that are good."

She was silent.

"However goodness may change in forms," I went on, "it must still be goodness; only if we are to adore it, we must see something of what it is—of itself. And the goodness we cannot see, the eternal goodness, high above us as the heavens are above the earth, must still be a goodness that includes, absorbs, elevates, purifies all our goodness, not tramples upon it and calls it wickedness. For if not such, then we have nothing in common with God, and what we call goodness is not of God. He has not even ordered it; or, if he has, he has ordered it only to order the contrary afterwards; and there is, in reality, no real goodness—at least in him; and, if not in him, of whom we spring—where then?—and what becomes of ours, poor as it is?"

My reader will see that I had already thought much about these things; although, I suspect, I have now not only expressed them far better than I could have expressed them in conversation, but with a degree of clearness which must be owing to the further continuance of the habit of reflecting on these and cognate subjects. Deep in my mind, however, something like this lay; and in some manner like this I tried to express it.

Finding she continued silent, and that Charley did not appear inclined to renew the contest, anxious also to leave no embarrassing silence to choke the channel now open between us—I mean Mary and myself—I returned to the original question.

"It seems to me, Charley—and it follows from all we have been saying—that the sin of suicide lies just in this, that it is an utter want of faith in God. I confess I do not see any other ground on which to condemn it—provided always that the man has no others dependent upon him, none for whom he ought to live and work."

"But does a man owe nothing to himself?" said Clara.

"Nothing that I know of," I replied. "I am under no obligation to myself. How can I divide myself, and say that the one-half of me is indebted to the other? To my mind, it is a mere fiction of speech."

"But whence then should such a fiction arise?" objected Charley, willing, perhaps, to defend Clara.

"From the dim sense of a real obligation, I suspect—the object of which is mistaken. I suspect it really springs from our relation to the unknown God, so vaguely felt that a false form is readily accepted for its embodiment by a being who, in ignorance of its nature, is yet aware of its presence. I mean that what seems an obligation to self is in reality a dimly apprehended duty—an obligation to the unknown God, and not to self, in which lies no causing, therefore no obligating power."

"But why say the unknown God, Mr. Cumberland?" asked Mary.

"Because I do not believe that any one

who knew him could possibly attribute to himself what belonged to him—could, I mean, talk of an obligation to himself, when that obligation was to God."

How far Mary Osborne followed the argument or agreed with it I cannot tell, but she gave me a look of something like gratitude, and my heart felt too big for its closed chamber.

At this moment, the housemaid who had along with the carpenter, assisted me in the library, entered the room. She was rather a forward girl, and I suppose presumed on our acquaintance to communicate directly with myself instead of going to the housekeeper. Seeing her approach as if she wanted to speak to me, I went to meet her. She handed me a small ring, saying, in a low voice:

"I found this in your room, sir, and thought it better to bring it to you."

"Thank you," I said, putting it at once on my little finger; "I am glad you found it."

Charley and Clara had begun talking. I believe Clara was trying to make Charley give her the book he had pocketed, imagining it really of the character he had, half in sport, professed to believe it. But Mary had caught sight of the ring, and with a bewildered expression on her countenance, was making a step towards me. I put a finger to my lips, and gave her a look by which I succeeded in arresting her. Utterly perplexed, I believe, she turned away towards the bookshelves behind her. I went into the next room, and called Charley.

"I think we had better not go on with this talk," I said. "You are very imprudent indeed, Charley, to be always bringing up subjects that tend to widen the gulf between you and your sister. When I have a chance, I do what I can to make her doubt whether you are so far wrong as they think you, but you must give her time. All your kind of thought is so new to her that your words cannot possibly convey to her what is in your mind. If only she were not so afraid of me! But I think she begins to trust me a little."

"It's no use," he returned. "Her head is so full of rubbish!"

"But her heart is so full of goodness!"

"I wish you could make anything of her! But she looks up to my father with such a blind adoration that it isn't of the slightest use attempting to put an atom of sense into her."

"I should indeed despair if I might only set about it after your fashion. You always seem to shut your eyes to the mental condition of those that differ from you. Instead of trying to understand them first, which gives the sole possible chance of your ever making them understand what you mean, you care only to present your opinions; and that you do in such a fashion that they must appear to them false. You even make yourself seem to hold these for very love of their untruth; and thus make it all but impossible for them to shake off their fetters: every truth in advance of what they have already learned, will henceforth come to them associated with your presumed backsliding and impotence."

"Goodness! where did you learn their slang?" cried Charley. "But impotence, if you like,—not backsliding. I never made any profession. After all, however, their opinions don't seem to hurt them—I mean my mother and sister."

"They must hurt them, if only by hindering their growth. In time, of course, the angels of the heart will expel the demons of the brain; but it is a pity the process should be retarded by your behaviour."

"I know I am a brute, Wilfrid. I will try to hold my tongue."

"Depend upon it," I went on, "whatever such hearts can believe, is, as believed by them, to be treated with respect. It is because of the truth in it, not because of the falsehood, that they hold it; and when you speak against the false in it, you appear to them to speak against the true; for the dogma seems to them an unanalysable unit. You assail the false with the recklessness of falsehood itself, careless of the injury you may inflict on the true."

I was interrupted by the entrance of Clara.

"If you gentlemen don't want us any more, we had better go," she said.

I left Charley to answer her, and went back into the next room. Mary stood where I had left her, mechanically shifting and arranging the volumes on a shelf at the height of her eyes.

"I think this is your ring, Miss Osborne," I said, in a low and hurried tone, offering it.

Her expression at first was only of questioning surprise, when suddenly something seemed to cross her mind; she turned pale as death, and put her hand on the bookshelves as if to support her; as suddenly flushed crimson for a moment, and again turned deadly pale—all before I could speak.

"Don't ask me any questions, dear Miss Osborne," I said. "And, please, trust me this far: don't mention the loss of your ring to any one—except it be your mother. Allow me to put it on your finger."

She gave me a glance I cannot and would not describe. It lies treasured—for ever, God grant it!—in the secret jewel-house of my heart. She lifted a trembling left hand, and doubtfully held—half held it towards me. To this day I know nothing of the stones of that

ring—not even their colour; but I know I should know it at once if I saw it. My hand trembled more than hers as I put it on the third finger.

What followed, I do not know. I think I left her there and went into the other room. When I returned a little after, I know she was gone. From that hour, not one word has ever passed between us in reference to the matter. The best of my conjectures remains but a conjecture; I know how the sword got there—nothing more.

I did not see her again that day, and did not seem to want to see her, but worked on amongst the books in a quiet exaltation. My being seemed tenfold awake and alive. My thoughts dwelt on the rarely revealed loveliness of my *Athanasia*; and, although I should have scorned unspcakably to take the smallest advantage of having come to share a secret with her, I could not help rejoicing in the sense of nearness to and *aliveness* with her which the possession of that secret gave me; while one of the most precious results of the new love which had thus all at once laid hold upon me, was the feeling—almost a conviction—that the dream was not a web self-wove in the loom of my brain, but that from somewhere, beyond my soul even, an influence had mingled with its longings to form the vision of that night—to be as it were a creative soul to what would otherwise have been but loose, chaotic, and shapeless vagaries of the unguided imagination. The events of that night were as the sudden opening of a door through which I caught a glimpse of that region of the supernatural in which, whatever might be her theories concerning her experiences therein, Mary Osborne certainly lived, if ever any one lived. The degree of God's presence with a creature is not to be measured by that creature's interpretation of the manner in which he is revealed. The great question is whether he is revealed or no; and a strong truth can carry many parasitical errors.

I felt that now I could talk freely to her of what most perplexed me—not so much, I confess, with any hope that she might cast light on my difficulties, as in the assurance that she would not only influence me to think purely and nobly, but would urge me in the search after God. In such a relation of love to religion the vulgar mind will ever imagine ground for ridicule; but those who have most regarded human nature know well enough that the two have constantly manifested themselves in the closest relation; while even the poorest love is the enemy of selfishness unto the death; for the one or the other must give up the ghost. Not only must God be in all that is human, but of it he must be the root.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE SWORD IN THE SCALE.

The next morning Charley and I went as usual to the library, where later in the day we were joined by the two ladies. It was long before our eyes once met, but when at last they did, Mary allowed hers to rest on mine for just one moment with an expression of dove-like beseeching, which I dared to interpret as meaning—"Be just to me." If she read mine, surely she read there that she was safe with my thoughts as with those of her mother.

Charley and I worked late in the afternoon, and went away in the last of the twilight. As we approached the gate of the park, however, I remembered I had left behind me a book I had intended to carry home for comparison with a copy in my possession of which the title-page was gone. I asked Charley, therefore, to walk on and give my man some directions about Lillith, seeing I had it in my mind to propose a ride on the morrow, while I went back to fetch it.

Finding the door at the foot of the stair leading to the open gallery ajar, and knowing that none of the rooms at either end of it were occupied, I went the nearest way, and thus entered the library at the point farthest from the more public parts of the house. The book I sought was, however, at the other end of the suite, for I had laid it on the window-sill of the room next the armoury.

As I entered that room, and while I crossed it towards the glimmering window, I heard voices in the armoury, and soon distinguished Clara's. It never entered my mind that possibly I ought not to hear what might be said. Just as I reached the window, I was arrested, and stood stock-still: the other voice was that of Geoffrey Brotherton. Before my self-possession returned, I had heard what follows:

"I am certain he took it," said Clara. "I didn't see him, of course; but if you call at the Moat to-morrow, ten to one you will find it hanging on the wall."

"I knew him for a sneak, but never took him for a thief. I would have lost anything out of the house rather than that sword!"

"Don't you mention my name in it. If you do, I shall think you—well, I will never speak to you again."

"And if I don't, what then?"

Before I heard her answer, I had come to myself. I had no time for indignation yet. I must meet Geoffrey at once. I would not, however, have him know I had overheard any

of their talk. It would have been more straightforward to allow the fact to be understood, but I shrank from giving him occasion for accusing me of an eavesdropping of which I was innocent. Besides I had no wish to encounter Clara before I understood her game, which I need not say was a mystery to me. What end could she have in such duplicity? I had had unpleasant suspicions of the truth of her nature before, but could never have suspected her of baseness.

I stepped quietly into the further room, whence I returned, making a noise with the door-handle, and saying,

"Are you there, Miss Coningham? Could you help me to find a book I left here?"

There was silence; but after the briefest pause I heard the sound of her dress as she swept hurriedly out into the gallery. I advanced. On the top of the steps, filling the doorway of the armoury in the faint light from the window, appeared the dim form of Brotherton.

"I beg your pardon," I said. "I heard a lady's voice, and thought it was Miss Coningham's."

"I cannot compliment your ear," he answered. "It was one of the maids. I had just rung for a light. I presume you are Mr. Cumberland?"

"Yes," I answered. "I returned to fetch a book I forgot to take with me. I suppose you have heard what we've been about in the library here?"

"I have been partially informed of it," he answered, stiffly. "But I have heard also that you contemplate a raid upon the armoury. I beg you will let weapons alone."

I had said something of the sort to Clara that very morning.

"I have a special regard for them," he went on; "and I don't want them meddled with. It's not every one knows how to handle them. Some amongst them I would not have injured for their weight in diamonds. One in particular I should like to give you the history of—just to show you that I am right in being careful over them.—Here comes the light!"

I presume it had been hurriedly arranged between them as Clara left him that she should send one of the maids, who in consequence now made her appearance with a candle. Brotherton took it from her and approached the wall.

"Why! What the devil! Some one has been meddling already, I find! The very sword I speak of is gone! There's the sheath hanging empty! What can it mean? Do you know anything of this, Mr. Cumberland?"

"I do, Mr. Brotherton. The sword to which that sheath belongs is mine. I have it."

"Yours!" he shouted; then restraining himself, added in a tone of utter contempt—"This is rather too much. Pray, sir, on what grounds do you lay claim to the smallest atom of property within these walls? My father ought to have known what he was about when he let you have the run of the house! And the old books too! By heaven, it's too much! I always thought——"

"It matters little to me what you think. Mr. Brotherton—so little that I do not care to take any notice of your insolence——"

"Insolence!" he roared, striding towards me, as if he would have knocked me down.

I was not his match in strength, for he was at least two inches taller than I, and of a coarse-built, powerful frame. I caught a light rapier from the wall, and stood on my defence.

"Coward!" he cried.

"There are more where this came from," I answered, pointing to the wall.

He made no move towards arming himself, but stood glaring at me in a white rage.

"I am prepared to prove," I answered as calmly as I could, "that the sword to which you allude, is mine. But I will give you no explanation. If you will oblige me by asking your father to join us, I will tell him the whole story."

"I will have a warrant out against you."

"As you please. I am obliged to you for mentioning it. I shall be ready. I have the sword, and intend to keep it. And by the way, I had better secure the scabbard as well," I added, as with a sudden spring I caught it also from the wall, and again stood prepared.

He ground his teeth with rage. He was one of those who, trusting to their superior strength, are not much afraid of a rox, but cannot face cold steel: soldier as he had been, it made him nervous.

"Insulted in my own house!" he snarled from between his teeth.

"Your father's house," I corrected. "Call him, and I will give explanations."

"Damn your explanations! Get out of the house, you puppy; or I'll have the servants up and have you ducked in the horse-pond!"

"Bah!" I said. "There's not one of them would lay hands on me at your bidding. Call your father, I say, or I will go and find him myself."

He broke out in a succession of oaths, using language I had heard in the streets of London, but nowhere else. I stood perfectly still, and watchful. All at once, he turned and went into the gallery, over the balustrade of which he shouted,

"Martin! Go and tell my father to come