

Then old childish, superstitious beliefs rose to trouble him with supernatural fears. It was awful enough to contemplate his body buried at midnight, at the meeting of four cross roads, with a stake driven through it. But what was that to the further idea that his ghost would ever have to haunt the place, unable to regain the shadow of its earthly tenement; unable, therefore, to appear before the great Redeemer of the world, among hosts of other miserable and wicked spirits, coming to ask for mercy! Such was the sort of story Paul remembered to have been once told by his dear mother about some suicide; and while he laughed at the fancy, in the intense bitterness of his spirit, it not the less tended to paralyse his action.

He fetched a Bible from his trunk, and began, with a strange and peculiar eagerness, to handle it. He did not at first open it, but held it back downward, its leaves upwards, pressed close by his hands on each side, while he gazed intently on the hollow gilt half-circle they thus presented, as if he expected something to issue from them.

"I must mind," he murmured to himself, "not to let the slightest inclination of my fingers determine at what part it shall open, beginning, middle, or end; and when open, my eye must fall accidentally, and rest unmoving, upon the one and only sentence they first see."

"It is a foolish trick, but I will try it." The Bible opened, and the first words he had were—

"Thou shalt do no murder!"

And then Paul began a kind of contention with himself as to whether he had not evaded by a conscious juggle the neighbouring words—

"Thou shalt not steal!"

It was that—he was sure of it, that he had been intended to see; and if so, that was the exact warning he desired! and looked for. He didn't intend to steal. But he had stolen. The logic was irresistible that he might steal again, unless—

At that moment voices called out for him from below.

Paul hesitated no longer. He drew with rapid, impulsive, trembling, but wilful fingers the fatal phial forth, and drained it to the last drop.

"I—I—wasn't afraid to die," he murmured, a minute or so afterwards, as he began to feel sick and dizzy, and was obliged to walk unsteadily across the floor to his bed, and sit down.

"What was it I read? 'Thou shalt do no murder!' George Barnwell again, I suppose. No! Oh, God, I see it now. It is I who am the murderer of myself! Mercy! mercy!"

He dropped back fainting upon the bed, and then, when he revived a little, he heard voices singing in his ears, and his eyes again opened, and he saw, among others, figures that he could not distinguish, a horror-stricken but most lovely face, Christina's, and then the rest was silence—darkness—oblivion.

CHAPTER XLII. PAUL'S VISITOR.

The mercer came that morning into London in decidedly a bad temper. And as it was Paul who was chiefly the author of this state of feeling, it was not unnatural that he should incline to let the full weight of his displeasure fall on that arch though young criminal.

But there was probably something more than anger in the mercer's thoughts when he determined in his own mind to bring Christina with him to London on this particular day, and let her see Paul's humiliation in being returned to the duties of the shop.

Christina did not see that, however, though she was destined to see something far more serious Paul's sensitive fears and his quick eye anticipated, as we have seen, her coming, and sent him away, flying like a madman to his garret.

"Where's Paul?" demanded the knight, as he entered the shop, Christina leaning on his arm, and looking very pale.

Nobody knew. He had been there not a minute ago.

He was sought for, but as nobody thought he

would go to his bedroom at that hour, nobody followed him to the right place.

The mercer looked puzzled; he went to his room, and sat down to his books.

In a minute he got up, and looking, Christina thought, very strangely, went out.

She heard him ascend the stairs, and her heart misgave her as to what might be going to happen.

She listened as well as she could, while keeping herself free from observation, to those heavy, monotonous steps, ascending like a destiny, so it struck her, to influence Paul for the future—perhaps fatally. Unable any longer to resist the temptation to follow, and being accustomed to roam at her pleasure through some of the upper rooms, she followed those heavy sounding steps till they reached the threshold of Paul's garret, and she reached the landing below.

Christina tried to resist the terrible thought that oppressed her—the idea of some great impending calamity—by reminding herself how kind in substantial her father was, and how foolish Paul would be to make too much of a few angry words, even if accompanied by a few angry acts, when suddenly she stood, lips wide apart, her limbs paralysed, her whole attitude like that of one of the heroines of a Greek tragedy at the moment of discovery of a stupendous crime or horror.

What had she heard?

Merely a sort of gasping exclamation from her father, but which sounded like—

"Good God, Paul!"

Then an instant after the mercer came to the stair-head, and shouted—

"Help! Help! Fetch the doctor! Paul is ill—dying! Run, all of you, for the nearest surgeon!"

Christina by this time found her power return to her, and she glided up the stairs whiter than the whitewash on the walls—glided past the mercer, who stared at her in helpless surprise—glided into the room—saw Paul lying there, a picture not much unlike that which a man of genius in our own time has produced of Chatterton; and then the words sprang to her lips, and escaped before she thought of their meaning—

"Oh, Paul! Paul! dear Paul!" and she threw herself, with a cry of anguish, down by the side of his couch, kneeling and rubbing his hands in passionate emotion, to try to bring back warmth and life, both of which had apparently fled.

That sight brought the mercer to his senses.

"Christina," he said, sternly, feeling sternness was kindness just now, "go down-stairs. I will see to him. I will not leave him till he is restored. He is not dead. Christina, guard yourself. Let not others hear what I have now heard."

Christina looked at him in a helpless sort of way, as if trying to remember what she had said, and a slight passing tinge of colour came into her face, and then she was as pale as before, and she murmured—

"Father—I—pitied Paul—no more!" And then she obeyed him, and went down-stairs. And there, in cruel suspense, she had to wait hour after hour, while medical men came and went, and came back again, and while she could hear all sorts of whispers passing about. "He is dead!" "No, he still lives!" and so on, and still there came no satisfaction for her, one way or the other.

But at last the mercer came down, looking very sad and jaded, and said—

"Well, Teena, we've saved the young rascal, at all events."

And Christina said not a word in reply.

Before that evening closed Paul was again sitting up in bed, conscious, though weak almost as an "unborn babe," as the nurse said of him.

He was sitting up for a special reason. There was a visitor waiting to see him, one who insisted on seeing him, alive or dead. The stranger was admitted.

Paul no sooner saw him than he uttered a cry of joy and shame, and flung himself down on his face to the pillow.

The visitor sat down somewhat heavily in the

rush-bottomed chair by Paul's bed, and looking at Paul and shaking his head, said gently—

"By the mass, lad, 'twere better for thee and me had I kept thee scraping chins at Bolton."

Then he sat still, holding Paul's slight hand in one of his, while the other he laid over his eyes, as though the light, which was rather dim than otherwise in Paul's garret, dazzled him.

"I could scrape roads now," blubbered Paul, presently. "God bless you, Humphrey! God bless you for coming!"

"Why, as to that, lad, there is some credit to me, for I have left a very charming woman, who is about to become my wife." This caused Paul to lift up his fevered, dishevelled head, and look in his brother's face.

Humphrey gave him a significant nod. Paul smiled, and told himself he would hear the meaning of this another time.

As Paul slowly recovered strength, his brother explained to him that it was Daniel Sterne who had written to warn him (Humphrey) of Paul's unsatisfactory state. Where was that personage now?

Paul did not know. But the mention of his name, and the recollection of his knowledge of what Paul had done, and of Paul's full confession to him, naturally drove Paul into a similar confession to Humphrey, which was at first hard to make, but which was inevitable, if only to explain this last and terrible incident, the suicide.

Humphrey was shocked—was angry—was a little bitter. He could not help it. And having told his mind, he became kind, thoughtful, and comforting.

"Well, come, Paul, I am truly indebted to our friend Daniel Sterne for having brought me here—in the very nick of time to save you. That is, if you want to be saved. Have you got to the end, the bottom, the very bottom of this perilous slope down which you have been sliding at a precious pace? Have you?"

"I think so! I hope so!"

"Say it shall be so, Paul. Don't talk nonsense. Nothing sickens me more than to hear a young, healthy, clever, energetic fellow like you take it into his head that he is henceforth a sort of moral paralytic—wants to be honest, wants to work, wants to do all sorts of good things, but really can't be sure whether he can or no! For shame, for shame, Paul! Up and at 'em, all these cowardly enemies of yours—fear and shame, and love of indulgence! You indulged in pleasure yesterday, to-day you indulge in grief. My boy, the true indulgence for you is some good, hopeful, manly work!"

"Ah, Humphrey—hopeful work! That would be sweet to me!"

"If you are ready I'll find it for you."

"When?"

"Now, this very instant of time."

"Are you serious? Do you mean you have really something in your mind that—"

"That will make a man of you again? Judge for yourself. Lean back on your pillow; don't try your little strength. You'll have to lie here many days, in spite of all I'm going to say. Mind that, for I expect, when I have spoken, you'll be proposing to get up at once and go about it!"

Paul smiled a little at that, and dropped back, gratefully, thinking to himself—

"Ah, yes, he is strong! If anybody can do the thing for me it will be he." And then he listened, with eager and growing interest, to his brother's speech.

"Paul," he began, "you know I have my eye upon the cotton manufacture as the foundation of a magnificent future for me and for England. Why did I not, then, put you into connection with it in some way or other? Because I don't think it wise to have too many eggs in one basket. What I did for you, was to put you in connection with another manufacture, just as important as cotton—that of silk."

"But I have nothing to do with the silk manufacture," said Paul, faintly and wanderingly. "Haven't you? We'll see about that. Your master is a partner in the silk mill at Derby, and it's about that I want to talk to you. Mind, Paul, this is no new idea, but one I have been