

THE HERMIT

distinctness to that blood-red vision. Hell was like that, only a million million times worse. Now he knew how flesh looked when devil's pincers tore it, how the shrieks of the damned sounded, and how roasting bodies smelled. How could a Christian spare one moment of his days and nights from the long long struggle to keep safe from the wrath to come?

Gradually the horror faded, leaving only a tranquil pleasure in the minute performance of his religious duties. His mind was not naturally given to the contemplation of evil, and in the blessed solitude of his new life his thoughts dwelt more and more on the beauty of holiness. His desire was to be perfectly good, and to live in love and charity with his fellows; and how could one do this without fleeing from them?

At first his life was difficult, for in winter he was put to great straits to feed himself; and there were nights when the sky was like an iron vault, and a hoarse wind rattled the oak-wood in the valley, and a fear came on him that was worse than any cold. But in time it became known to his townfolk and to the peasants in the neighbouring valleys that he had withdrawn to the wilderness to lead a godly life; and after that his worst hardships were over, for pious persons brought him gifts of oil and dried fruit, one good woman gave him seeds from her garden, another spun for him a hodden gown, and others would have brought him all manner of food and clothing, had he not refused to ac-