

CHAPTER LXIV

ONE bright morning in late September, when the sky dreamed as blue as June, and the sun shone August, a stranger passed through into the churchyard by the lich gate, and his reverence the Vicar, having received telepathic intimation of his presence, along one or other of the invisible slender filaments that connect the Vicarage with the churchyard, emerged shortly from his retreat, like a fine full-bodied spider, and captured his prize by the side wicket, with a "Ha!" of agreeable greeting.

"A stranger within our gates!" he observed, in courteous surprise, rocking to and fro upon his legs in the pathway, and balancing the ebony staff across both palms, as though he were weighing theological propositions. He encompassed the sky with a comprehensive circle of ferrule, and thrusting up a rapt nose to appreciation of its beneficent blue, "You bring glorious weather!" he said.

The stranger acknowledged with marked politeness that the weather was as his Reverence had been pleased to state. He was an elderly man, soberly habited in black; had a black Melton coat, not too much worn about the velvet of its collar to be respectable; with greater amplitude about the knees of his trousers than had been allowed for in the cutting, and a compression of mouth that seemed to betoken one whose office exacted of him either deference or discretion, or perhaps both.

"A pilgrim to the old heathen centre of Ullbrig?" his Reverence inquired, with a bland dispersiveness of interrogation that seemed to embrace all eternity, and showed no sharp point of mere human inquisitiveness. "Brig the Bridge, and Ull or Uddle the Idol. The village of idols on the bridge. The bridge and the idols have long ago departed—in fact, the present church is largely built out of the stones of demolished infidel altars—but the heathen remain. Ha! Large numbers of them.

". . . An antiquarian at all? A connoisseur of tablets? or a rubber of brasses?—in which case we've nothing to show you."