

'You *can* make men moral by act of Parliament—by the action of Parliament,' he was insisting; and there was one there who listened with rapt attention and faith, even when he was uttering the most preposterous paradoxes, or giving way to the most violent prejudices; 'and the nation will have to answer for it that proceeds on any other belief. For what is morality but the perfect adjustment of the human organism to the actual conditions of life—the observance by the human being of those unchangeable, inexorable laws of the universe, to break which is death, physical or spiritual, as the case may be? What have all the teachers who have taught mankind—from Moses in his day to Carlyle in ours—been insisting on but that? Moses was only a sort of divine vestry-man; Carlyle has caught something of the poetry of the Hebrew prophets; but it is the same thing they say. There are the fixed, immutable laws: death awaits the nation or the man who breaks them. Look at the lesson the world has just been reading. A liar, a perjurer, and traitor gets up in the night-time, and cuts the throat of a nation. In the morning you find him wearing imperial robes; but if you looked you would find the skirts of them bespattered with the blood of the women and children he has had shot down in the street. Europe shudders a little, but goes on its way; it has forgotten that the moment a crime is committed, its punishment is already meted out. And what does the nation do that has been robbed and insulted—that has seen those innocent women and children shot down that the mean ambition of a liar might be satisfied? It is quick to forgiveness; for it finds itself tricked out in gay garments, and it has money put in its pocket, and it is bidden to dance and be merry. Everything is to be condoned now; for life has become like a masked ball, and it does not matter what thieves and swindlers there may be in the crowd, so long as there is plenty of brilliant lights and music and wine. Lady Sylvia, do you know Alfred Rethel's "Der Tod als Feind?"—Death coming in to smite down the maskers and the music-makers at a revel? It does not matter much who or what is the instrument of vengeance, but the vengeance is sure. When France was paying her penalty—when

the chariot wheels of God were grinding exceedingly hard—she cried at her enemy, "You are only a pack of Huns." Well, Attila was a Hun, a barbarian, probably a superstitious savage. I don't know what particular kind of fetish he may have worshipped—what blurred image or idol he had in his mind of Him who is past finding out; but however rude or savage his notions were, he knew that the laws of God had been broken, and the time for vengeance had come. The Scourge of God may be Attila or another: an epidemic that slays its thousands because a nation has not been cleanly—the lacerating of a mother's heart when in her carelessness she has let her child cut its finger with a knife. The penalty has to be paid; sometimes at the moment, sometimes long after; for the sins of the fathers are visited not only on their children, but on their children's children, and so on to the end, nature claiming her inexorable due. And when I go down to the slums I have been talking to you about, how dare I say that these wretched people living in squalor and ignorance and misery, are only paying the penalty for their own mistakes and crimes? You look at their narrow, retreating, monkey-like forehead, the heavy and hideous jowl, the thick neck and the furtive eye; you think of the foul air they have breathed from their infancy, of the bad water and unwholesome food they have consumed, of the dense ignorance in which they have been allowed to grow up; and how can you say that their immoral existence is anything but inevitable? I am talking about Westminster, Lord Willowby. From some parts of these slums you can see the towers of the Houses of Parliament, glittering in gilt, and looking very fine indeed. And if I declared my belief that the immorality of these wretched people of the slums lay as much at the door of the Houses of Parliament as at their own door, I suppose people would say I was a rabid democrat, pandering to the passions of the poor to achieve some notoriety. But I believe it all the same. Wrong-doing—the breaking of the universal laws of existence, the subversion of those conditions which produce a settled, wholesome, orderly social life—is not necessarily personal; it may be national; it may have been continued through centuries, until the results have