

AUD BLOUNT, MEDIUM.

A Story

OF

MODERN SPIRITUALISM.

" Say ye, ' The spirit of man hath found new roads,
And we must leave the old faiths and walk therein? ' "

Matthew Arnold.

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MAUD BLOUNT, MEDIUM.

CHAPTER I.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

O matre pulcrâ filia pulcrior!—HORAT.

ALL very well, my dear mother; only there are no such things as spirits."

"My dear Maud," replied the lady thus addressed, "say, if you like, that you don't believe in spirits, or that you do not think there are any such things. Don't say there are no such things. It is very dogmatic, and—allow me to add—slightly absurd. There may be a few more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of even in your philosophy."

"Possibly; only spirits are not among them. I can believe lots of things; but,

with Sir David Brewster, I say, Spirit is the last thing I will give in to."

"The last, perhaps; but you will give in, as you term it, nevertheless."

"Never."

"We shall see."

"We shall."

Miss Maud Blount, between whom and her mother this colloquy took place, was a young lady just emerging from her teens, and therefore as a philosopher of course infallible. She asserted her opinions, not as opinions at all, but as the axioms of one who has exhausted truth. It is a phase of intellectual existence we all go through as inevitably as we have the physical measles or chicken-pox. Elderly people, or those whose experience has been precocious, smile tenderly at us, as we smile at foreigners who speak broken English. It is only to bores or very superficial people that such youthful self-assertion is irritating. To the really wise this assumption of infallibility is amusing as an evidence of immaturity. The seventeenth year is about the period when

most young persons suffer from this disease. Maud Blount deferred it until she was, as we have said, standing on the mystic verge of her twentieth year, and consequently she had it more severely than some who were her juniors.

Maud was a splendid specimen of a spoiled child. She was a splendid specimen of womanhood too, and a marvellous miniature of her mother, whose widow's weeds sat gracefully on what we should scarcely yet be justified in calling the remains of a very fine woman indeed. Both mother and daughter were dark, and though a few silver threads streaked the mother's raven locks, while the daughter's were glossy and luxuriant, there were some sly old critics who opined that the widow might be tempted to change her condition yet, and who even regarded the snowy cap and dress of deep mourning as a sort of notification of that fact to all whom it might concern.

Mr. Blount had been a provincial banker of repute and substance, and scarcely a year had

elapsed since his death. His widow and daughter left the little country town of Caverfield as soon as affairs were arranged, and settled down very comfortably in one of those numerous terraces forming the suburb called Maida Hill. In every detail of the house there was evident the fact that Mrs. Blount knew how to make things comfortable, and had ample means for carrying out her ideas. She did not keep a great deal of company; her loss was too recent to allow her to do that as yet; but she had already gathered round her a small select circle of friends. It is astonishing what an excellent centre of such a circle a cosy widow forms with a rich heiress to dispose of. The old men were lured by the widow herself, the young ones by the daughter; and Mrs. Blount had a comparatively small nucleus of lady friends whom she gathered round her by another kind of fascination to be described by-and-by.

“You yourself, mamma,” said Maud, resuming the conversation, after a longish interval, during which she had been holding a

magazine before her, and gazing right above it into vacancy, "say you do not understand what is meant by belief, except conviction upon reasonable evidence."

"I do."

"Well, and you must confess that a good deal of the evidence in favour of spirits is shaky to a degree."

"So is a good deal of evidence in favour of Christianity. I should no more take the mad freaks of Mr. Enoch Trees——"

"The Reverend Enoch Trees, if you please; and write the Reverend in full."

"I should no more take the exercises of Bethabara Chapel as an instance of the civilising effects of Christianity than I should ask you to accept the idiotic freaks of some table turner in the same way as I should the higher manifestations."

"I protest I have never been able to see anything at all worthy to be called higher manifestations yet. They seem all lower and no higher."

"Now, if you are going to condescend to

argument, I shall be very glad to enter upon the matter with you, Maud," said Mrs. Blount, putting aside some fancy work in which she had been engaged, and settling herself for a disquisition. "You know that, for many years, I had been curious about this so-called spiritualism; and, since your dear father's death"—here the widow's eyes sparkled with a rising tear—"the curiosity has deepened into belief, and belief into almost a religion."

"Only almost?"

"We may even leave out the reservation as you suggest. I own that for some time I kept my convictions a secret, and was perhaps a little ashamed of them; but since our great sorrow, and especially since Mr. Ball has declared from the pulpit his belief in these manifestations, I have no longer any compunction in avowing myself a spiritualist, and my one only wish is that you, dear Maud, may share my happy belief."

There was just a twinkle in Maud's dark eye, just the tiniest curl of her perfect mouth, and the faintest possible elevation

of her pretty pug nose. She said nothing; but her mother had been too accustomed to watch the changes of expression that flitted over her daughter's face not to be quite aware that Maud was thoroughly unconvinced, and, not only so, but dreadfully inclined to laugh at her mother's conviction, had not a sense of filial respect prevented her mirth.

"Putting aside all external evidence, Maud," said Mrs. Blount, "you cannot surely think that we are juggling with one another when you and I sit alone at yonder little table and get such charming messages."

"Unconscious cerebration."

"But the table has no brain."

"We have—or are supposed to have," rejoined Maud; "and we do it all by involuntary muscular action."

"Really, Maud, I am astonished to hear you, a girl of good common sense, talk such uncommon nonsense on this one subject."

"Thank you for a left-handed compliment, mamma."

"And you so excellent a medium, too!"

"My dear, good, mistaken mother, what do you mean? I a medium! Now there, if that were the case, if I could only get raps myself without damaging my knuckles or cracking the joints of my toes; if I could be tied into the cupboard in the breakfast-room, and then something would come and make faces at the hole you have had cut in the door; if I could go into trances, sing hymns, and deliver inspirational addresses, then I should——"

"What?"

"Give in. I couldn't doubt then."

"You would say it was self-delusion, just as Dr. Mason says it is only abnormal excitement of the faculties, and compares it to fever."

"Or worse."

"Or any other nonsense. You would say it was all hysteria."

"But hysteria could not get somebody else—Katie, or John King, or Peter—to come and play Punch and Judy out of the peephole in the corner cupboard whilst I was tied into my chair like a female Guy Fawkes down below."

"Then I can only pray that such power

may be given you, Maud. Nay, I am sure you have it if you would only be developed."

"There again. That is a process I never could understand. Mrs. Pugsby says I am to be developed, and all she does is to wriggle and talk copy-slips to me. Professor Buncombe says I am to be developed; and he takes my hand—squeezing it unmistakably, let me tell you, *par parenthèse*—and makes me write or draw in a most effervescent manner; but directly he lets me go again I stop dead."

"Because you don't persevere."

"I'll persevere to any extent if you will agree to accept me as a final test. If I become a medium, then, as I said, I must give in. If, on the other hand, I promise to hold myself perfectly passive, and to submit to all Mrs. Pugsby's wriggling and Professor Buncombe's hand-squeezing, and still do not become a medium, will you—I do not say give up all belief or inquiry—but will you admit the probability, or even the possibility, that you are mistaken?"

"I am so convinced of your mediumship

that should a fair course of development fail to certify you a medium, I must feel that there was a good deal to think about——”

“That there was a screw loose somewhere?”

“I hate slang, as you know, and wish you would give it up—not only on this, but on all topics.”

“I will try; though I love it as much as you do a dark séance. Is that a bargain, then? I submit myself to the manipulations of the developer; you are to be swayed in your judgment by the result?”

“Yes.”

“You do not answer as heartily as I should like, and I have half a suspicion that you are Jesuitical, you dear old soul; but I do believe that the result will be I shall convert you to common sense.”

“Exactly what I want to do with you.”

“Only that—and nothing more,” said Maud, mimicking the refrain of Edgar Allan Poe’s poem.

“Now let us sit down and have a cosy tête-à-tête séance,” said Mrs. Blount. “You

know there is nothing I enjoy more. We can certainly trust one another."

"But can we trust ourselves?" asked Maud, as she laid aside her magazine and drew a little round table up to the sofa on which Mrs. Blount was sitting. The widow had already disposed of her work, and laid her plump white hands on the table, like a very prepossessing nineteenth-century version of the Delphian priestess presiding at the sacred tripod.

Then Maud placed her slender palms upon the table too, with just the tips of each fourth finger touching those of her mamma.

While they are "waiting for the spirits to come" is a good opportunity for us to sketch the portraits of the fair mother and fairer daughter.

Mrs. Blount was past the heyday of life, of course; but her charms had only mellowed into mature beauty. She was above the middle height, somewhat slenderly built, and almost as swarthy as a gipsy. Maud was slight too; and her eyes were sloe-black as her mother's, her complexion nearly as dark; though, as we

have said, just emerging from her teens, she was a model of rare, ripe womanhood. Her mind, perhaps, had scarcely kept pace with her physical growth. She was an only child, and had been treated so literally as a child by her mother, and also by her father in his lifetime, that she was just the least bit hoydenish in her ways. She loved slang, as she had confessed, and altogether needed a little fining down, as the phrase goes. She was heart-whole as yet. Wait, dear friend, until the soft passion comes to suffuse with its chastening influence the now somewhat incongruous elements in that warm heart of yours. As yet she knew no love but for her mother. She had had her *affaires* of course, and never went to a ball without being "desperate" for some one; but none had ever gained more than a twenty-four hours' hold on her fancy. If the destined cavalier was saving up somewhere, he would, as far as present appearances went, find a clear stage and no favour—that is, no favour on Maud's part for any possible rival.

Presently the table began to gyrate under

the manipulations of the two ladies; and Mrs. Blount said—

“They are here. Dear spirits, can you answer our questions?”

The table gave three tilts or lifts to signify assent; and Maud laughed, and such a queer significant laugh, as she re-echoed her mamma’s assertion.

“Yes; they are here.”

As she so spoke, anybody who looked at Maud would have been inclined to endorse her mother’s opinion as to the girl’s mediumship—whatever that may mean. Her always bright eye flashed with a new light; her face, which seldom admitted any but its down warm olive tint, was flushed with a deep rich crimson, and the veins in her forehead stood out prominently, showing intense cerebral excitement. Whatever the Sibylline enthusiasm was, clearly Maud was one of the initiated.

“Dear spirit,” continued Mrs. Blount, “will you give your name?”

Three tilts. She ran quickly through the

alphabet, and the table lifted at each of the letters—R O B E R T.

“Do you hear, Maud?”

“What?”

“Your dear papa’s name. Robert Blount, of course, is it not?”

Three violent tilts.

“See how you beg the question, mamma,” said Maud almost angrily. “Now of what use, let me ask you, would this be as evidence, when you put a leading question like that?”

“I was not seeking evidence, Maud,” answered Mrs. Blount, sadly. “I wished only to enjoy the knowledge that your dear father was near me.”

“But does it make him a bit nearer to you, or certify his nearness any the more clearly, because a little stupid table that a child could influence tips up and tells you so? Mamma, it really does seem to me sacrilege to connect the spirits of the departed with such nonsense as this.”

“You said there were no spirits just now,

Maud. But do not let us quarrel over this. We will leave off at once. It annoys you."

Then the table lifted beneath their hands, and gave one violent thump, which was intended to signify "No," according to the telegraphic code of signals used at sittings.

"Mamma! Did not you do that?" cried Maud.

"Most certainly not, my dear. Do you suspect me of playing tricks under such circumstances as these?"

"I don't know what to suspect; don't know whom or what to believe or disbelieve," rejoined poor Maud; and then, as if by way of solving the difficulty, she cried: "Oh, if I only could believe dear papa was near me!" and then threw herself on her mother's bosom and sobbed hysterically. This brought the séance to an end abruptly. The widow was annoyed, and clearly thought Maud's interruption was intentional. Any unprejudiced person would have understood that the poor girl's feelings were overtaxed, and that it

would have been cruel to prolong the cause of her excitement.

Mrs. Blount placed her daughter kindly on the sofa, restored the little table to its place, and resumed her make-believe work.

"Come, darling," she said, "whatever else we do, let us refrain from letting this matter cause even the shadow of difference between you and me. It would, as I have told you, and as you knew perfectly well before, be the greatest comfort to me if you could share my belief on this point; but belief is not a matter of will——"

"It is not, indeed, mamma."

"I am sure it would be a comfort to you too if you could—I will not say believe, but *know* as I do—that the dear dead saint your father is by and communicating with us almost as of old."

Maud's tears had dried now, and she looked up with really almost a waggish expression on that changeful face of hers as she said—

"Oh no, not as of old, mamma. Dear papa

never knocked the furniture about, or rapped like an auctioneer——”

“Let us change the subject at once, Maud,” said Mrs. Blount. “Not another word in that strain, if you please. Go upstairs and cool your eyes, dear,” she continued. “Dr. Mason, Mr. Ball, and Mr. Campbell have promised to come in to afternoon tea; and, dear me! it’s close upon five o’clock. It does not seem an hour ago we had luncheon.”

“Mr. Campbell! Is Mr. Campbell coming?”

“Yes, darling. Why?”

“Oh, nothing. Only—I’ll go up and cool my eyes.”





CHAPTER II.

AFTERNOON TEA.

He that complies against his will
Is of the same opinion still.—*Hudibras*.

WHEN Maud descended to five o'clock tea, all signs of her recent emotion had disappeared, and she received her mamma's visitors with her accustomed girlish vivacity.

"Miss Blount," said the Rev. William Ball, the Broad Church clergyman under whom Maud and her mother "sat," "let me introduce to you my friend and former pupil, Campbell, who is going to help me at St. Thomas's. Campbell, Miss Blount."

The two clergymen were broad in every sense of the word. They were muscular Christians, physically as well as in their theology; and Maud Blount at once decided

that William Campbell was the finest man she had ever seen. She had thought the same of a hundred Herculean sons of Mars; so there was nothing very exceptional in the long, steady glance she gave at the big bearded parson who handed her to a chair and sat next her.

"Another sceptic joining the shrine of St. Thomas, surnamed Didymus," he said.

"And a pretty nest of sceptics and heretics you are there," said Dr. Mason, an old medical man that looked as though he belonged to the last century; one of those regular property old men they put on the stage in modern comedies like *Still Waters Run Deep*.

"Heretics, but not sceptics, I hope," sniggled somebody or something from a chair far out in the distance.

"Heretics, but not sceptics, I hope. He! he! he!" cackled the still small voice once more, finding nobody paid any heed to it the first time.

Then everybody looked round and were made aware of a remarkable phenomenon in

the background. A youngish, pale-faced man, seated on the very edge of an easy-chair, with his coloured cotton pocket-handkerchief spread over his knees, was eating violently of muffin and imbibing cup after cup of tea. His mouth was so full that it was with difficulty he could manage a final "He! he! he!" when he saw everybody looking at him.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Blathersby, I'm sure," said the hostess, introducing her incongruous guest severally to each of the others. "Mr. Blathersby," she continued, "is the editor of the *Anti-Christian*, and proprietor of the Supernatural Lyceum. You had got into such a corner, that I did not see you, Mr. Blathersby."

"I've been uncommonly well employed," answered the editor. "He! he! he!" And so he had.

He then rose, and wiping the superfluous muffin from his face with the cotton pocket-handkerchief, joined the circle of guests as quickly as his weak knees would enable him to cross the spacious drawing-room.

“Always ready to combine business with pleasure. He! he! he!” And he handed to each of those present, except Mrs. Blount and Maud, a copy of the *Anti-Christian*, and a programme of the Supernatural Lyceum. The way in which they received the little donations was characteristic. Old Dr. Mason threw them from him as though they had been some venomous animal. Mr. Ball looked at them decorously for a moment, then put them aside, and continued a conversation in which he was engaged with Mrs. Blount; while Mr. Campbell held his at arm’s length, and looked inquiringly at Maud.

“I cannot think why mamma asks that creature, I am sure,” she said, reddening, and answering the silent appeal. “Isn’t he odious?”

“He seems a little eccentric,” answered the new curate.

Before he had well got the sentence finished, Blathersby made a dive at him, and, destroying all Maud’s hopes of a comfortable tête-à-tête, said—

"I see you are inter-*est*-ed in that periodical, sir; and though you are, I regret to hear, a sceptic, you will, I think, like the account on page 4 of a séance with Red Indian spirits and lots of genuine war-whoops."

"Thank you, I will read it," replied the curate, and buried his face in the periodical.

"And how is Miss Blount? He! he! he!" said the editor. "Are *we* less sceptical, too?"

"Not a whit, Mr. Blathersby. I never did believe in your sort of spirits, as you know."

"What! the Red Indians? Oh, you only believe in black spirits and white, blue spirits and grey. Is that it?"

"I don't believe in spirits that never manifest until they have sent the hat round. It is not red, blue, or black I care about; but I hate the *£. s. d.* sort."

"But mediums must live, Miss Blount."

"So must editors, I suppose," retorted Maud; and turning upon her heel walked straight to the other end of the room, and flounced down on a chair, scowling. Mr.

Blathersby was not in the least discomposed, and only answered Maud with his wonted sniggle. This stood him in stead on all occasions.

"Why, you've driven Miss Blount to the extreme edge of civilisation, Mr. Blathersby," said the incumbent of St. Thomas Didymus. "I must go and reclaim her. I had left her to Campbell, hoping he would be able to tone down some of her terrible heresies."

Mr. Ball crossed to where Maud was still pouting, and taking the chair beside her, said, tenderly—

"Maud, dear Maud—I may call you so, being an old grey-headed man—have you thought over what I said at our last conversation? Are you more settled in your mind?"

"Only so far more settled that I now believe nothing at all, Mr. Ball. Do not stare at me, or reproach me. You are largely responsible for it."

"I!"

"You preached over and over again from your pulpit that we were to pin our faith to

this wretched misnamed spiritualism. You told us, did you not, that the Sacrament was simply a magnetic process? You——”

“Stay, stay, Maud; but you believed in none of these matters before.”

“I believed little enough then, but less since—nothing now.”

“You pain me, really you do. If I thought that any of these theories of mine were calculated to disturb the mind of one person to whom they are imparted, believe me I would keep them to myself.”

“Take my advice, then, and keep them. They are *most* disturbing.”

“But it seems to me, especially in a case like yours, where some strong tangible evidence is so clearly wanted, that it would be most desirable to reduce the Christian evidences to matter of demonstration.”

“Decidedly, if——”

“If what? Do we not, by these manifestations, always supposing them genuine, really rest on experiment as much as any positive science does?”

"Genuine! Look at *that*," said Maud.

Mr. Blathersby was shambling across the room preparatory to making his exit. There was nothing more to eat or drink, and he had given away all his copies as advertisements, so the proceedings ceased to interest him.

"Wait one moment, please, Mr. Blathersby," said Mrs. Blount. "I want you all—you especially, Mr. Ball, if you will cease flirting so violently with Maud—to come to me to-morrow evening for a dark séance. Mr. Blathersby *thinks* he can get Mrs. Pugsby——"

"For a consideration. He! he! he!"

"For a consideration, of course, and a commission," repeated Mrs. Blount, a little snappishly. "Will you all come, Mr. Ball? Mr. Campbell?"

The incumbent assented, and Mr. Campbell said he had no idea what a dark séance was like, but he had no engagement, and——

"Do come," said Maud, "it's such fun."

"Will you come, Mr. Campbell?"

Mr. Campbell would be most happy. Had

not beautiful Maud Blount told him it was "such fun?" Decidedly he would come.

"I'll run in to supper after the hocus-pocus is over, madam, if you will have me," said old Dr. Mason; "but I've no time to waste on the spirits——"

"Only the alcoholic ones at the light séance. He! he! he! Very well, I'll bring Mrs. Pugsby. You will allow a cab, of course." And out went the weak-kneed editor, and drove a bargain with a Jehu on the next rank to take him and Mrs. Pugsby at a reduced fare on the following evening.

"Mind, I don't ask you to dinner," continued Mrs. Blount, feeling, it must be confessed, rather relieved at the absence of her eccentric guest. "Maud and I will dine early, and I advise you to do the same. The manifestations are always better when the circle have been fasting."

"I advise you all to have a good sleep in the afternoon," added old Dr. Mason, "or there will be some inevitable cases of coma before you've been sitting an hour in the dark.

Take my advice, Mr. Campbell, and be forearmed as you are forewarned. Have forty winks in the afternoon."

"Thanks, doctor, I don't think I shall need them. You said it was fun, didn't you, Miss Blount?" he said to Maud, who was next him again in the sorting of the guests which had followed Mr. Blathersby's departure.

"Now, I must be off and see some half dozen patients before dinner," said the energetic old doctor, "and you can talk heresy as much as you like. You are come into a fine school at St. Thomas Didymus' and here, Mr. Campbell. The lady of the house and your incumbent believe too much; and as for this little rogue, Maud, she believes too little, I'm afraid."

"I don't know the meaning of the word belief, doctor," said Maud, making Mr. Campbell open his eyes very wide indeed.

"Maud simply means, Mr. Campbell, that, with our new revelation supplementing the old," said Mrs. Blount, "we no longer believe—we *know*."

"I didn't say so, mamma."

"No, dear, but you meant it;" and her mother looked so much in earnest that Maud could not find it in her heart to gainsay her.

She took her revenge, however, in a mild form by returning to the attack on the subject of Mr. Blathersby. That was always a sore subject between the widow and her daughter.

"Why *do* you tolerate that creature Blathersby, mamma?"

"The cause must use all kinds of machinery, my dear. It requires the sinews of war."

"Yes; but we don't generally have machinery in a drawing-room; and as for sinews, that is exactly what Mr. Blathersby seems most to lack."

"Spiritual," suggested Mr. Ball.

"No, it's not spirituality. It's flabbiness," replied Maud.

"You are uncharitable, child," said the widow.

"And you far too promiscuous in your charity, dear mamma. We shall want a

Charity Organisation Society for drawing the line somewhere in the ranks of mediums. I verily believe if you met with an inspired knife-grinder you would ask him to tea."

"Inspiration knows no distinction of rank, does it, Mr. Ball?"

"None. The original Twelve were probably all, more or less, men of exceedingly humble rank."

"Do I understand you to say, Ball, that you put these so-called manifestations on a par with Primitive Christianity?" asked Mr. Campbell of his colleague.

"I dislike that phraseology, because every fanatic claims Primitive Christianity as his monopoly; but, in the sense I know you attach to the expression, I do."

"These modern miracles then you take to be evidential just as those we find in Scripture."

"Sometimes evidential; sometimes the signs following belief."

"But surely they are grotesque—they are

utterly *infra dig.*," suggested the younger clergyman.

Maud and her mamma stood quite aloof, and let the two parsons argue it out; but it was quite evident that the mother inclined to the opinions of the incumbent, while the daughter was disposed to sympathise in every respect with the curate.

"I cannot see it. At least I can only see it just in the same way as the Pharisees saw grotesqueness in the events of Pentecost and its sequel. They accused even Apostles of worse than grotesqueness, you know."

"I am quite disposed to concede a good deal to the traditional reverence we have for sacred records, and I am as liberal in my opinions as you yourself, Ball—you know that well enough; but, for the life of me, I cannot see that there is the smallest analogy between the two classes of events."

"And I fail as utterly to discern the difference. Possibly, therefore, we are in no position to argue about them; but I am sure, if you had looked into the matter as deeply as

I have under the auspices of our dear good friend here, you would see that, after making all deductions, there is a solid substratum of truth in this matter which we, the clergy, are bound to examine."

"What deductions?"

"Take off a large percentage of alleged manifestations as being mere charlatanism. You have seen something of that element to-day."

"Blathersby?"

"I am the soul of discretion, and name no names. Then suppose, as I am quite ready to suppose, that diablerie has something to do with it——"

"In the way of Red Indians and war-whoops."

"In the way of Red Indians and war-whoops, yes; there still, I submit, remains a mass of evidence which you cannot dispose of in either of these categories. Some of the communications I have had with these two ladies only—no professional medium, mind—have been of the very highest order."

"But did not these come from yourselves?"

"Utterly and entirely so, I believe, Mr. Campbell," said Maud, unable to restrain herself any longer.

"You see one of your witnesses is turning against you already!"

"Scarcely so," replied Mr. Ball. "I am only anxious to get at the truth, and I feel that Maud's scepticism is most useful to us in our investigations. I dislike the very name of Spiritualism, because it appears to me to beg the question at issue."

"Have you learnt any new facts from the revelation you claim?"

"I cannot say that we have; but old facts have been put in a new and very striking light."

"But does not this circumstance differentiate your revelation from that technically so called—I mean the Christian Revelation—with which you ask me to consider this identical? There a new fact *was* communicated—a new series of facts which revolutionised the world."

"As this is destined to do, I verily believe," said Mr. Ball.

"Does it appear so at present? There has been a pretty long spell of manifestations, and the present tendency seems rather in the direction of the Red Indian and *Anti-Christian* developments."

"Hear him!" exclaimed Mr. Ball, with a hilarious laugh. "He is going to talk orthodoxy, unless I am vastly mistaken. The disciple I have reared at the shrine of Didymus is going to talk orthodoxy to his Gamaliel, and to quote his arguments from the columns of the *Rock!*"

"I am not going to do anything of the kind," answered Campbell, really beginning to wax somewhat wroth; "but I do ask you one plain categorical question: Has not the tendency of the revelation you claim as superior—I mean as opposed to the Blathersby and Red Indian developments—been to teach Pure Theism?"

"Honestly, it has."

"Then do you not think that you, as a

Christian minister, no matter how Broad you may claim to be, are somewhat exceeding your *métier* in taking up this matter?"

"Shall I relegate it to Voysey?"

"It would certainly be more in keeping with this last new heresiarch. But I believe he scouts you, does he not?"

"Utterly."

"He has no spirituality in him," said Mrs. Blount. "He has sat here and heard the most edifying discourse on the subject, but sternly declined to look into the manifestations."

"The matter is largely one of temperament, I feel sure," continued Mr. Ball. "With some people the mere mention of spiritualism acts like the process of shaking a red rag at a bull. It is so few people who, like myself and Mrs. Blount, can keep our heads cool on the subject."

"Now *you* are begging the question with a vengeance; because that is exactly what I believe you do *not* do. I am quite 'equal to either fortune.' If the thing be true, no doubt it can be utilised; if false——"

“The sooner it is exploded the better, and you can only explode it by seeing it first. Let us go now; we are victimising these ladies, and prolonging Afternoon Tea to close upon their dinner hour. Come to the Dark Séance to-morrow, and if you are unconvinced then I shall consider you——”

“What?”

“A bigger sceptic than I meant to make you.”

So the hierophant and the neophyte made their salutations and retired.





CHAPTER III.

A DARK SÉANCE.

LUCIFER.—I call on spirits, and I make them come,
But they depart according to their own will.—*Festus.*

IF mediumship consists, as some very irreverent persons are disposed to think, of a certain want of balance in the mental powers, there seemed some reason for supposing that Mrs. Blount's assertion was correct, and that Maud was, if not already a medium, certainly "mediumistic." A sharpish line is drawn by the initiated between the two conditions. Most of us are, it would seem, more or less mediumistic; but it is not until we have been submitted to a certain process, termed "development," that we are qualified to take our places in the ranks of the noble army of mediums. There is a good deal of vagueness as to what the

process of development actually involves—almost as much as attaches to the initiatory rite of Freemasonry; but some mystic process has to be gone through, and Maud Blount had not yet undergone this, so that her mother's attribution of mediumship was, to say the least, premature; but the young lady displayed sufficient absence of equilibrium to justify the fondest parental hopes as to her mediumistic qualities.

She had, as we have seen, displayed a certain amount of scepticism as to Modern Spiritualism, yet with this she combined a very palpable interest in the matter. Of Mr. Blathersby and Mrs. Pugsby she had spoken with the utmost scorn; yet when she descended from her room to the mysterious chamber where these two were to be the presiding geniuses, there was a glow on her face and an energy in every movement, which showed that she was far from being a disinterested participator in the approaching séance.

“That's right, Maud,” said her mamma.

"I am glad to see you yourself again. I cannot understand why people—why you of all people—should understate their belief in this matter, as though a full confession bespoke some kind of mental inferiority. I claim that we are the most practical, hard-headed, common-sense people going. We believe only what we see."

"Then we shall believe uncommonly little to-night, mother dear; you have got the room so excellently darkened."

The back drawing-room, which was generally separated from the front by a heavy curtain only, had now been divided from it by a canvassed screen, which fitted exactly into the space usually occupied by folding doors. This Mrs. Blount had ordered to be specially constructed for the purpose. It was made in separate pieces, hinged together, and in the centre was an aperture very much like a Punch and Judy show. At this the spirits appeared when the circle sat for a materialisation séance; but it was now covered up with a thick drapery, and all the windows were

swathed in black American cloth, so that, though it was a bright summer evening, not a ray of sunlight entered except through the door, which was kept open in anticipation of the sitters. A single candle, too, was burning on the table, which shed a weird and ghostly kind of light on the two ladies. They were arrayed in evening costume, and took their places at a large round table, where Maud had placed six chairs.

"Now everything is ready; and I wish they would come," said Mrs. Blount.

"So do I," said Maud; and, as rapidly as though the spirits had been laid on, there came a rap at the street-door.

"How extraordinary, is it not, dear Maud, that at the very instant we made that observation the raps should come!"

"Scarcely so very extraordinary, mamma, considering that the hour for our séance is already past; and certainly that wasn't a spirit-rap."

"I guess it is the medium," said Mrs. Blount; and, sure enough they heard Mr.

Blathersby sniggling on the stairs. He had got rid of a suspicious sixpence in paying his cab fare, and was telling Mrs. Pugsby with glee of his success.

"Now, is not that very extraordinary again, dear Maud, that I should have said it was the medium?"

"Not so very, when there are only four folks expected. Would you consider it very extraordinary if I opined that this knock" (one had just resounded) "belongs to Mr. Ball and Mr. Campbell?"

"Why no, considering that there is no one else to come, Maud."

"And considering, moreover, that I can hear those two loud-voiced ecclesiastics talking in the street."

Mrs. Pugsby had now come upstairs duly escorted by the *Anti-Christian* editor, who was unrolling her from the interior of a capacious cloak. There seemed a good deal more cloak than medium; Mrs. Pugsby being a very minute person indeed, about whom Mr. Blathersby made his accustomed joke.

“I’ve brought you something in a cloak, Mrs. Blount. He! he! he!”

Mr. Ball’s salutation of the medium was scarcely more respectful. He called her a “dear old corkscrew,” and patted her so affectionately on the bare—very bare—back with his broad palm, that he seemed in danger of knocking this slender little woman all to pieces.

Mrs. Pugsby, however, was not discomposed. She had that peculiar expression common to so many mediums who are continually engaged in dark séances, which is best described as a far-off, *distract* look. She seemed to be gazing at something quite a long way off, and to be comparatively blind to what was passing around her. Mrs. Blount kissed her tenderly; and even Maud saluted her with some warmth. Decidedly Miss Maud Blount had strong proclivities either to the spiritualistic inquiry in general or, at all events, towards this one séance in particular.

“We all seem to be here,” observed Mrs. Blount, after the usual greetings had taken

place. "Shall we begin at once, or would you like to take something first, Mrs. Pugsby?"

Mrs. Pugsby did not seem to care particularly whether she did or not, but Mr. Blathersby gave it as decidedly his opinion that she had better have a glass of wine and a snack. She was, he knew, apt to feel a sinking which might interfere with the manifestations. They adjourned, therefore, into the garish light of day in the front drawing-room, and Mr. Blathersby was just getting out his cotton pocket-handkerchief to spread over his knees again by way of an extempore table-cloth; but Blobbs, Mrs. Blount's particularly wide-awake footman, knew his man, and after helping Mrs. Pugsby and Mr. Blathersby to two sandwiches and a glass of sherry each, carried all the refreshments bodily off. Mr. Blathersby and Mrs. Pugsby exchanged looks of dismay, but Mrs. Blount and Maud were much too busily engaged with the two clergymen to notice their discomfiture.

"We shall have supper directly the séance is over, and an interval for refreshments

between the dark and light portions of it," said the hospitable lady of the house.

Then they retired to the séance room, closed the door, which Mr. Blathersby also covered with black oilcloth, and then all seated themselves at the table, the same gentleman carefully arranging the seats.

"Mrs. Pugsby would like me to sit on one side of her and you on the other, I think, Mrs. Blount. Miss Maud, will you be on my left, Mr. Ball next, and, excuse me, I don't know that other gentleman's name—he! he!—we shall have no difficulty in disposing of him. He must sit between Mrs. Blount and Mr. Ball."

They sat as directed; but Maud pouted visibly. Not only had she wished to be next Mr. Campbell, but she had a particular objection to sitting hand in hand with Mr. Blathersby. He always placed her next himself, she noticed.

"Do the conditions seem good, Mrs. Pugsby?" asked the widow, as soon as the candle was put out and Mr. Blathersby had taken possession of the matches.

"Yes; I think we all seem in love and 'armony. That's the principal thing, isn't it; Mr. Blathersby?"

"He! he! he!" was all the reply that came ringing through that Egyptian darkness.

Then there was a long pause and a little general conversation, but no manifestations—not a tilt, not a rap. Everybody observed that they felt a cold air over their hands, which Mrs. Pugsby said was a sure sign that spirits "was about;" but they gave no further evidence of their presence for the time being.

Then it was proposed that there should be some singing; and, after considerable hesitation, Mrs. Pugsby struck up, in a sepulchral key, "Shall we gather at the river?" Mr. Blathersby joining with the air about a quarter of a tone sharper, and showing considerable talent in preserving that slight divergence all through the hymn. The rest warbled mildly; but the two professionals threw their whole energies into the melody, and worked with a zeal worthy of a better cause.

Still no spirits came; and Maud hazarded a

conjecture that they were not sitting properly. Three raps instantly followed, expressive of assent to this proposition, followed by five which were understood to signify that the alphabet was to be called over. This was done, and the message given was—

“Maud and Ball change places.”

Maud and Mr. Ball obeyed, and proceedings commenced forthwith.

“There seems a good deal more love and 'armony now,” said Mrs. Pugsby, innocently.

“I made up my mind nothing should occur while I sat next that Blathersby,” remarked Maud, *sotto voce*, to the two clergymen.

“Can you control the power?” asked Mr. Campbell.

“Anybody can,” replied Maud, “who has a will of their own.”

So then Maud had a will of her own, had she? Why should that remark make such an impression on that very strong-minded parson, Mr. Campbell?

Everything went on beautifully now. A handbell that had been placed on the table

rang at intervals in a way that suggested muffins. Ever and anon somebody declared they were touched by hands. Then the voices came. Peter spoke in a squeaky treble, John King roared through a paper tube that had been placed in readiness for him, and Katie simpered soft nothings in the very faintest of whispers. Nothing very much to the purpose was said, but everybody declared it to have been a most successful séance by the time Dr. Mason's ring was heard, and he himself, after trying the back drawing-room door, which was locked against all intruders, thumped and banged at it with utter disregard of spiritualistic proprieties.

"Come out and stop that hocus-pocus," he said. "I want to see some faces."

"Shall we make a break and sit for materialisations?" asked Mrs. Blount.

"I think we might as well," replied Mrs. Pugsby. "That knocking 'ave a drove 'em all away."

"What do you think of it all?" asked Maud of Mr. Campbell, when they had broken up

and gone into the next room, all winking and blinking as they came into the unfamiliar light.

"Really, I don't know how to answer you," he said. "You believe in it, don't you?"

"To some extent; but that need not affect your answer. This is your first experience, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Then do you not think we are all lunatics?"

"That is rather an extreme way of putting it, is it not?"

"Or tricksters?"

"Frankly, Miss Blount, if what has taken place here had taken place anywhere else——"

"*Chez Pugsby or Blathersby, to wit?*"

"Precisely. I should have said it was rather third-rate conjuring. I cannot, however, for one moment think that you and Mrs. Blount, who have seen so much more than I have, could be constantly hoodwinked. Of course this is to me, as you suggest, the very alphabet of my spiritualistic experiences; you have got on much farther."

"Excuse me, Mr. Campbell, there you are wrong. We never get on in this matter. We began just where you found us to-night, and have worked at it for years, yet we get the same thing over and over again. Peter squeaks, John King roars, Katie whispers; hands touch us, and voices bandy poor jokes. *Toujours perdrix !*"

"It must be slightly monotonous, is it not?"

"Sometimes a very rebellious sitter thinks he would like a change; but in the main we are conservative, and any such notion is poohpoohed by the majority, who declare it was a splendid séance, and ask what in the world we wish for more."

"Now, Mrs. Pugsby, shall we sit for faces?" said Mrs. Blount.

Mrs. Pugsby having guarded anew against any symptoms of sinking, graciously consented, and withdrew behind the screen. Mr. Blathersby seated himself solus in front of the same, just about in the position the man with the Pandæan pipes does at a Punch and Judy

exhibition ; the rest formed a small semicircle in front of the aperture, from which the curtain had now been removed, and waited for the spirits to show themselves.

Presently there was a sort of scuffling noise heard behind the screen, which Mr. Blathersby stated to be due to the presence of Peter, and added that Peter would like some music. The *répertoire* seemed to consist of nothing but "Shall we gather at the river?" So they sang that again ; but as Maud led the melody this time, it was rather less lugubrious than before. Dr. Mason did not improve matters by grunting a note every now and then, which he stated to be an extempore bottom bass, and disturbed the gravity of the circle by the remark.

"Too much trifling," squeaked Peter from within ; "and too much light at first."

"Old Corkscrew is a long time getting her togs on," pursued that incorrigible Dr. Mason, heedless of the thunder Mr. Blathersby was looking at him. "Do you know, Mrs. Blount," he added, "I am puzzled whether we most

resemble a knot of gentle lunatics at Hanwell on a high jinks night, or one of those sage assemblies of old men you see sitting inside an enclosure in the Champs Elysées gravely witnessing the performances of Polichinelle."

"It is rather like a pious Punch and Judy, I must confess," said Mr. Ball, who, however, was, on the whole, singularly reticent. Perhaps he was doubtful whether Mr. Campbell had been educated up to a point sufficiently advanced to enable him to bear these somewhat astounding exhibitions. Mr. Campbell, however, was seated with Maud on a sofa rather out of radius, and the two seemed to await the manifestations with a good deal of exemplary patience.

By-and-by there surged up to the aperture something white, which Blathersby, who occupied, as we have said, an advanced position, declared to be Katie King's face. Presently it came pretty well into view, though it had not, the showman explained, sufficient power to bear the magnetic gaze of so many pairs of eyes.

"There!" exclaimed the widow, full of excitement. "Do you see that? Dr. Mason, do you see that beautiful face?"

"I see old Corkscrew a little overpowdered, and with half a yard of sixpenny calico tied over her chignon."

"Silence, scoffer. May we come a little nearer, dear spirit?"

Three raps.

Then, one by one, each went up and had a good close look at the face. Dr. Mason came last, and, as he approached, he said, quite loud enough for every one to hear, though he spoke in a stage whisper to Blathersby—

"Corkscrew, or I'll eat her."

Then an uncontrollable impulse seemed to seize this wicked old man. He lifted his profane hand, and made one vigorous grab at the spirit's nose. There was a suppressed scream, the noise of a chair overturned in the next room, and a considerable amount of scuffling. Mrs. Blount in real terror exclaimed—

"Dr. Mason, what have you done? You

have killed the medium. Mr. Blathersby, do rush behind and see whether Mrs. Pugsby is safe!"

But Blathersby showed no sign of hurry. He had no doubt, he said, that the escapade had seriously, it might be fatally, hurt the medium, but it would hurt her still more if they rushed in in a body. He would go and calm her first.

"All right, Blathersby, go and tidy up a bit before you let us in," said the doctor. "By Jove, ma'am," he continued, "I am sorry to have made a *fiasco*, but I could not help it. The face was a facsimile of Corkscrew's."

"The spirit face is always moulded from the medium's."

"But listen, I had the most splendid test."

"What was that?" asked two or three voices.

"The nose melted away in my grasp, and I know old Corkscrew's to be gristle of the most uncompromising character."

"There, do you hear that? Mr. Ball, Mr. Campbell, Maud, do you hear that? The

testimony of an adversary ! The nose had no gristle in it."

That adroit remark saved the doctor's credit, and made the good widow quite happy. Mrs. Pugsby was too agitated to reappear or to stop to supper ; so, much to his disgust, Mr. Blathersby had to see her home without regaling himself. But he had his revenge. As the widow was shaking hands with him the chink of gold was heard, and she whispered—

" I've made it three, instead of two, on account of the *fracas*."

" All right ; and you haven't forgotten the cab fare, have you ?"

So the medium went, and the ordinary mortals devoted themselves to supper.





CHAPTER IV.

SUNDAY SPIRITS.

Thou art a day of mirth :

And when the week days trail on ground,
Thy flight is higher, as thy birth.

Oh, let me take thee at the bound,
Leaping with thee from seven to seven !

GEORGE HERBERT.

THE Rev. William Ball's church, dedicated to the memory of Thomas surnamed Didymus, the first Christian Doubter, was not situated in the most fashionable quarter of London, but had still acquired a kind of *ton* peculiar to itself. Very strong-minded ladies and gentlemen, who were used-up in reference to ordinary places of worship, frequented the shrine of St. Thomas, and some of them divided their attentions between it and St. George's Hall, at which latter place Mr. Voysey was then holding forth. There was a good musical service at

St. Thomas's. The prayers were judiciously abridged; and the one end and aim of the ritual seemed to be the doing as wholesale defiance as possible to the provisions of the rubric. The Public Worship Act had not been passed at the time of which we write, so Mr. Ball took it out on the rubrics and the Thirty-nine Articles. The Athanasian Creed, when it did come round, was singled out for special objugation; and the principle on which many of Mr. Ball's congregation sat under him seemed really to be in order that they might hear what he would say next. "Ball's last" became a favourite topic for young men to start with their partners in a quadrille, and the good things from St. Thomas's became quoted by the gentlemen over their wine at dinner parties, after the ladies had gone to the drawing-room. Among the very original topics treated by Mr. Ball in the pulpit, had been, for instance: "The New Jerusalem viewed in the light of a real Hygeiopolis." He had delivered a course of Sunday evening lectures on Physiology, selecting

especially those portions usually slurred over by discreet lecturers. He was a musical man, and gloried in having a full band in his church. He could not, for the life of him, he said, see why a fiddle or a kettledrum was not just as religious as an organ. A bassoon, he declared, put him quite in mind of Oliver Cromwell and the Roundheads; while as for the trombones and the rest of the brass, he should like to know what they would do without that ingredient in any institution that had to make way in the nineteenth century.

The very latest novelty had been Spiritualism. There was a period when it was fashionable. It had been patronised at the Tuileries, and the Czar of Russia was reported to have given rich presents to Mr. Home the medium. Then came the *Lyon v. Home* case, and perhaps the system had never quite recovered the shock given to it by that *cause célèbre*. Still it flourished. Young ladies called it "charmingly dreadful." Scientific men scoffed at it, and clergymen said it was either conjuring or the devil. Consequently,

being a tabooed topic with a spice of heterodoxy about it, Mr. Ball took it up and made it his own. He sat with commendable diligence and pertinacity at every séance in London, and readily yielded himself up as a proselyte to Mrs. Blount, whose aspiration was to convert the Anglican clergy and the medical profession. She secured Mr. Ball by way of a sort of representative man of the former; but with the latter, typified in old Dr. Mason, she made no headway whatever. They would not condescend to argue. They jeered. It was only, Mrs. Blount said, to cover absence of argument that they laughed; but it was infinitely annoying, and she half resolved to give up the consecration of science altogether, and devote all her energies to the re-consecration of theology.

“You have only the dry bones at present in your signs and ceremonies,” she observed at an early stage in Mr. Ball’s conversion, “but dry bones are better than nothing at all. It is spiritualism alone that can clothe them with real living flesh and blood.”

The idea struck Mr. Ball as an original one, and he improved greatly upon it. Christening a baby, he discovered only meant mesmerising it. Public worship was just a big séance; at the Communion the elements were magnetised, and so was the congregation by a preacher. "Very often," he said, "if you would check my theory, you have only, as Wren's epitaph said, to look around you. Many and many an one is in a deep sleep, whether magnetic or merely physical I will not pretend to say." Mr. Ball liked to have his little joke now and then.

Mr. Ball was fond of ignoring texts before his sermon, or of taking them from some secular work, which was generally as incongruous as possible—half a dozen lines from Bailey's "Festus" or Butler's "Hudibras," to wit. On the Sunday preceding Mrs. Blount's séance, however, when he had announced by advertisement in the previous day's *Times* that he would take Spiritualism for his subject, he selected a passage from Isaac Taylor's "Physical Theory of Another

Life" as the basis of his remarks. It runs as follows :—

"Should a rational and laborious examination of the Scriptural evidence relating to invisible orders lead to a revival of the belief of Christians and to the refreshment of their fading impressions—fading, because in their original state, superstitious and exaggerated—should this take place, and in connexion with a better understood theory of intellectual existence, very important consequences might be the result ; and all religious minds awakened to a sense of the simple reality of the spiritual dangers we are exposed to as tenants of this *haunted planet* would be impelled with undiverted anxiety to seek safety where always and only it is to be found."

On this passage by way of text Mr. Ball managed to build up a tolerably orthodox and possibly edifying discourse. He was a fluent speaker, and used neither MS. nor note in the pulpit. He glanced lightly at the History of the Supernatural in all Ages, and drew special attention to the fact that false and true

miracles had always gone together. The very prevalence of false miracles proved there were true ones too. It was futile to say that any line was laid down as to where and when miracles should cease. If they ever existed, they certainly would exist now. If they were denied now, it would be very difficult to get men to believe that they ever existed. If you forbade men to accept a miracle which recommended itself to sight and sense, you could not reasonably ask them to believe on the testimony of a book, however good, that the same miracles happened hundreds of years ago.

"Besides," he continued, "there it is in your creeds and formularies. The ministry of angels, the communion of saints, what are they but what these poor, benighted spiritualists are pleading for? Once the Christians were benighted; now they are triumphant and call those darkened who are, I verily believe, only reverting to the faith of the nascent Church.

“Only a few nights ago,” he continued, lowering his voice to a mellifluous whisper, “I sat, along with some who are now listening to me. There, under conditions which forbade the suspicion of imposture or delusion, we felt the soft hands of those who came back to greet us ; we heard the loving voices of those we had deemed lost, but who, we knew now, were not lost but gone before. Their breath fanned our cheeks, our hands. We even looked upon the dear familiar faces, took the hands in our own, looked long and lovingly into the eyes that had once filmed in their solemn sleep, but were now bright and full of expression again. All this we had done, and more——”

“Even to breaking the spirit-nose,” suggested Dr. Mason, who was in the Blounts’ pew, and made Maud gurgle with suppressed laughter.

“Did not the *Westminster Review*, then, speak fittingly of Spiritualism as the Religion of the Future? On what, if not on demonstrative evidence like this, could men of edu-

cation in the nineteenth century pin their faith?"

That, in fact, he said, is the meaning of faith; not blind credulity, as the orthodox seem to think, but belief upon sufficient evidence. Where else do you get such evidence—the same class of evidence by which Christianity made its way at first—except in these spiritualistic manifestations?

This was a tremendous dose for the more orthodox of the St. Thomas surnamed Didymus people to gulp down; or, rather, it would have been if any of them had retained the least fragment or shred of orthodoxy. One or two did indeed give it out that Ball was "off his head" on this subject; and really Mr. Campbell was beginning to incline to that opinion too. When he heard the squeak of Peter and the roar of John King described in the glowing terms quoted above, it was all he could do to refrain from smiling. He dared not look to the pew where Maud was sitting, biting her lips, or there would have been a simulta-

neous explosion. If the congregation could only have been present, and listened to the squeak and the roar, and gazed on the counterfeit presentment of Corkscrew's face!

What did it all mean?

In another part of town that same question was being debated before a very different congregation in the evening. At Bethabara Chapel, down East, the Rev. Enoch Trees enunciated to an expectant and sympathetic audience his doctrine of Diabolism. It was all the Devil. Samuel Taylor Coleridge said that the Devil, as the personified Vice of the Mysteries, was the *fons et origo* of Modern Humour. However that might be, he was certainly, according to the Rev. Enoch Trees, the source of Modern Spiritualism. Mr. Trees was quite as fluent as Mr. Ball. His English was more homely, it is true; but there was lots of it. He had a fairly good case, and he made the most of it. He was great on the Red Indians and the war-whoops. The whole thing was a concoction of hysterical females (he

anticipated in that remark Professor Clifford's comprehensive diatribe against all religion), but it was hysteria *plus* the devil.

The Rev. Enoch Trees, too, strange to relate, was a disciple of Mrs. Blount, though he might seem at present to be doing little honour to her gentle propagandism. But, when we come to think of it, these Diabolists are the most thoroughgoing of all Spiritualists. They not only decide that spirits are at the bottom of the phenomena, but profess to identify the communicating intelligence. He is our old familiar friend, or rather enemy: call him Lucifer Son of the Morning, Mephistopheles, Auld Reekie, Satan, or what you will. The name only differs; the intelligence is the same.

For some time Dr. Mason had promised to take Mrs. Blount and Maud to hear their quondam friend and disciple demolish mamma's favourite tenets. There was a good deal of plausibility and not a little quiet humour down below the bluff exterior of the Rev. Enoch Trees's quaint oratory.

“What denomination does your early Gothic friend belong to, Mrs. Blount?” asked the doctor, as they travelled home by rail from the East-end to Maida Hill.

“Do you know, doctor, that is a remarkable fact, but I never once asked him the very natural question you suggest. I approached it several times, but we always seemed to wander from it.”

“Yes; it’s a way those gentry have when their antecedents won’t bear looking into.”

“But, after all, what matter ‘orders,’ as we use the term? The original qualification of the prophet or prophetess (inspiration knows no sex) was magnetic power. Saul was a physical medium; David, a spiritual; Solomon, an intellectual one. In those days even kingship was bound up with mediumistic power.”

“Then mediumship must have gone down in the market considerably. There is very little of the kingly or queenly about Blathersby or Mrs. Pugsby.”

All this time Maud listened silently. She

was lost in thought. Thinking of what—of whom? Time was when she would have joined eagerly in such a disquisition as this. She would have defended that dear old fogey against her mother if only for the sake of contrariety. Now she spoke no word. It seemed to her as though all these arguments were concerned only with the outworks of faith, neglecting the citadel itself. Her doubt had taken a wider sweep. Once she felt that if these manifestations could be proved genuine there would be a panacea against all doubt. Now, it sometimes struck her that even their authenticity would not guarantee the truth of ordinary revelation. It might all be Psychic Force from the lowest rap or tilt up to the loftiest energy of the Supreme Intelligence itself. Mother and daughter seemed to develop their faith in inverse proportion. While, every day, the widow's credulity became more boundless, Maud's faith—perhaps by a natural recoil and reaction—became equally shrunken and dwarfed. It was no vulgar precocious girlish

scepticism. She did not doubt for the sake of doubting. It was just this: Mr. Ball had taught her to believe that revelation might be reduced down to a matter of positive experimental science just like chemistry or electricity. Now she was not satisfied with the results of her experiments. If they were properly performed, they seemed to her to signify that the next step in the progress of existence was rather a retrogressive one than one in advance. Peter, John King, even quiet Katie, would not have been tolerated in her mamma's drawing-room whilst in the flesh. Was there the faintest glimmer of evidence that the process of death had exercised the slightest refining influence over them? On the contrary, the clown, the buccaneer, the frivolous woman, were just as coarse and clownish now, always supposing these manifestations to be genuine. But were they genuine? There was the question.

"My dear Maud, what are you thinking about?" asked the widow, as they neared their destination.

"Has anything you've eaten, darling Popsy, disagreed with you?" added the doctor, quoting from one of Gilbert's supremely funny "Bab Ballads."

"I really think we have had enough to make us thoughtful for one day, mamma; what with Mr. Ball's spiritualistic optimism and Mr. Trees's pessimism."

"And shall we add," said the doctor, "that interesting Mr. Campbell's halting betwixt two opinions? Ten to one you two ladies do not convert that young man, though you have succeeded in turning the heads of Ball and Trees."

"Done," said Maud.

"In gloves."

"Sixes."

"Right you are."

It had been a day of strange experiences, truly. Not strange in the sense of being altogether new; but strange because Maud saw them all now in a new light. How would they strike the mind of Mr. Campbell—a mind she saw to be constructed

largely upon the same lines as her own? Hitherto she had never been able to disentangle this matter from a mesh of prejudice. She herself was prejudiced, no doubt, sometimes *pro*, sometimes *con*. It would be a great boon to have found one who could hold the scales equally poised and balanced between the two extremes. Had she found such?

She fancied, really fancied so far, that it was only as an interesting alumnus in matters spiritualistic she regarded Mr. Campbell. Is there any occult influence, magnetic or otherwise, called into existence at these dark circles, and quickening into dangerous energy any latent sympathies between those who share in them? The question is worth agitating at a time when dark circles are attaining the dignity of a mania. We have heard that in certain quarters the influence therein excited has trenched upon the grounds of recognised moralities. The sitting has degenerated into a Witches' Sabbath. Of no such results have we had experience; but in this young and

not peculiarly susceptible girl's case there was a marvellous quickening of sympathies, an almost indecorous haste manifested to feel interest in this young curate. But, there—Love laughed at locksmiths long before the date of the Rochester knockings; and many young ladies fell in love with attractive young curates without the intervention of any dark circles, or of any influence more occult than the ordinary ones of Cupid or Hymen pure and simple.





CHAPTER V.

AËRIAL FLIGHTS.

O what a dainty pleasure is this,
To sail in the air,
When the moon shines fair !

LOCKE'S *Macbeth*.

SO matters progressed ; or shall we say stagnated ? In proportion as Maud drifted more and more from recognised standards of faith, she felt her strange spasmodic attachment to this new system recur more frequently. So true it is that when we once abandon the old moorings, we often beat about without chart or compass. Happy if we do not finally make shipwreck of faith altogether.

But, through all, her interest in their new acquaintance Campbell remained fixed as the pole-star. In him she saw all her own crude

theories met with the inherent force of a thoroughly masculine mind. Though not exactly what would be described as a strong-minded woman in the offensive sense of the term, Maud had a good many of the elements of strong-mindedness in her composition. You could see that in the flashing eye which showed when she felt interested in an argument, and still more in the firmly compressed lip with which she clinched that argument at its climax. But in William Campbell she owned a master. He had not the intellectual gifts of his incumbent; or, if he had, Maud had scarcely the opportunity of testing them; for Mr. Ball monopolised the pulpit at St. Thomas Didymus. He engaged his curates simply to sing the service for him; and satire whispered that, on previous occasions, he had not selected the most favourable specimens even of the "inferior clergy" for his assistants. People did say that he chose them as a sort of foil to himself. His congregation bore this up to a point; but some of the embodiments of the Anglican priesthood, which he installed

as temporary occupants of the reading-desk, were so extremely objectionable that he found it advisable to change his tactics, and, accordingly, engaged his friend and quondam pupil, William Campbell, to help him. There were many advantages attending this selection. Campbell had money, was a thorough gentleman, and did not in the least object to play an efficient second fiddle to the Rev. Mr. Ball. In church, therefore, the ladies never had an opportunity of gauging the mental powers of their new friend; and, up to the present time, he had never once visited them except in company with his incumbent.

"I am sure, mamma," said Miss Maud, "they cannot say that our clergy are troubled with dissensions, as they are elsewhere. Mr. Ball and Mr. Campbell regularly hunt in a couple. They are never apart. Do you notice that Mr. Campbell has never called here by himself?"

"I had not noticed it until you mention it. But surely that is much better than cackling one against the other as incumbent and

curate often do, especially when they are of different ages, and both bachelors. I used to think you were setting your cap at Mr. Ball, Maud. Now I fancy you have transferred your fancies to Mr. Campbell."

Maud blushed most unmistakably; but her mamma was so busily engaged in directing envelopes to her friends for a soirée at the Supernatural Lyceum, that she did not notice any such sublunary matters. It was a speciality of the Supernatural Lyceum in particular, and, to some extent, of London Spiritualism in general, that somebody was always in difficulties, or a fund was being got up for somebody or something, to which Mrs. Blount was expected, not only to contribute pecuniarily, but also to devote her energies as secretary. Now it was some poor spiritualist who was being persecuted by an Evangelical clergyman for whom the hat was sent round; anon a medium was going to America or coming from America, and, in either case, a soirée was got up which involved subscriptions and correspondence, and Mrs. Blount

always had the secretarial duties thrust upon her, the editor of the *Anti-Christian* much preferring the more congenial occupation of treasurer.

The summer had waned to autumn-tide. The season was dead and gone beyond hope of resuscitation, and Mrs. Blount, in the intervals of her somewhat extensive preparations for "recognising" the great Professor Buncombe from America, had formed plans for a brisk winter campaign in favour of "the cause." Maud was to be developed, and sit as often as possible for the preliminary conversion of the Upper Ten. When they had passed the period of initiation, and all the scepticism was pretty well stamped out of them, they were to be handed on to the professional skill of Mrs. Pugsby and Mr. Blathersby. There is nothing more curious than the tacit concession that is made to professional over amateur qualifications. A lady may know ten times as much music and have a tenfold better voice than some sixteenth-rate professional; but because the latter makes a living—often a very precarious

one—by her slender gifts, *ergo* she, beyond question, must be superior to a mere dilettante. The born artist, who does not paint for pay, must hide his diminished head in presence of some poor professional brother who daubs night and day for the picture-shop windows. Such are some of the pleasant fictions by the adoption of which society hangs together.

There had been one or two more séances with Mrs. Pugsby, but none presented sufficiently definite features to call for notice. Perhaps Mrs. Pugsby's game was getting just a little stale; but Mr. Blathersby assured Mrs. Blount that the lull was only temporary. A "great tidal wave of influence," he said, was coming. Where he got his information he did not say; but he spoke with all the authority of a Zadkiel. Old Dr. Mason, who was by, and who never lost an opportunity of a fling at the *Anti-Christian* editor, said, "That means, my dear Maud, that he and old Cork-screw are getting up some new piece of devilry."

There had been, in fact, quite a pause in the

history of spiritualism for some weeks when, one night, as Maud and her mamma were seated in the drawing-room enjoying the last remains of the lingering autumn at the open window, they noticed a little crowd gradually assemble in front of their house, and by-and-by saw a policeman stalk over to the door with all the majesty of the law embodied in his single self. He put aside the small boys, and rang a tremendous peal at the visitors' bell. It would never do for a policeman even to ring a bell quite like other folks.

"My dear Maud, what can be the matter?" said Mrs. Blount; and Maud ran to the top of the stairs to see.

Blobbs had just got the door open, and there, coiled up on the top step and in the very corner of the vestibule, sat Mrs. Pugsby, looking in the most dishevelled condition. She had no bonnet or shawl on, and in her hand was a volume of a popular novel; but she appeared to be half asleep.

The opinion of the populace was that she was, as they expressed it in the vernacular,

“mops and brooms—rather;” and the policeman gave it as his opinion that he had better go for a stretcher; but Blobbs, who had seen something of Mrs. Pugsby in the “superior condition,” said it wasn’t worth while to trouble. The person was known, and was not tipsy, but probably mesmerised. Maud ran back and fetched her mamma, who made a few passes over the prostrate form, when Mrs. Pugsby “came to” at once; desired to know where she was, and finally, amid the jeers of the populace, who were disappointed at not seeing the end of the little game, she entered the house, was taken upstairs, and partook of a refresher. She was sinking, and no mistake, this time.

She then stated that she was sitting at her lodgings in Camden Town, reading aloud to Mr. Blathersby, when all of a sudden she became unconscious, and when she regained her faculties she was on Mrs. Blount’s doorstep under the circumstances they had just witnessed.

"What o'clock is it now?" asked Mrs. Pugsby.

It was just a quarter to eight.

"How very extraordinary! The clock at the church near my lodgings in Camden Town chimes the quarters, and I remember hearing the half-past seven chime long before I became unconscious. I remarked to Mr. Blathersby how long the days kept for the time of year, and that it would scarcely be dark by eight o'clock."

"Then it's quite certain that Mrs. Pugsby must have been transported through the air from Camden Town to Maida Hill. Maud, you do not seem to realise this very extraordinary fact. Mrs. Pugsby has been wafted to us in an incredibly short space of time."

"It is very curious."

"Curious! It is a miracle, a genuine miracle. What else can it be?"

"What, indeed?"

"Here is the book open at the very page where I was reading," observed Mrs. Pugsby.

"Yes; but what makes me angry with Maud and you is that you both take it so much as a matter of course, just as if you were in the habit of making these aërial transits every day of your life."

While the ladies were discussing matters a hansom cab drove violently up to the door.

"I do hope this may be Mr. Ball," said Mrs. Blount. "I should like him to hear of this at once."

It was not Mr. Ball, but Mr. Blathersby, who rushed in, exclaiming—

"It isn't often I go to the expense of hansom cabs, but really such an extraordinary thing—— What, Mrs. Pugsby here? Well, this does beat everything. I came to announce Mrs. Pugsby's wonderful disappearance, and here I find her. How did she get here before me?"

"She has been transported through the air, Mr. Blathersby."

"What? He! he! he! You don't mean to say that! I thought I must have dropped off to sleep while she was reading to me, and

then she must have come away; but I found her bonnet and shawl were in their usual place, and was not conscious of having forgotten myself for a moment. In fact, one instant she was reading to me, and the next, startled by the sudden silence, I looked at the chair where she had been sitting, and saw it standing empty."

It was then discovered that Mrs. Pugsby was becoming violently agitated, and seemed likely to "go off" in a trance. It was resolved, therefore, at once to hold a séance, in the hope that some explanation would be vouchsafed of the late marvellous event.

After a good deal of preliminary shivering and contortion, Mrs. Pugsby did go off, and forthwith delivered a most magniloquent address. The "sperrits," as she always would insist upon terming them, had been accumulating force for a long time. That accounted for the lull in the manifestations. They had determined on a grand *tour de force*, which should defy competition and set all scepticism for ever at rest. They would have liked some

one a little more bulky for their manipulations, as the transference would then be even still more wonderful; but failing a stout medium, they made use of their dear old Cork-screw. The transit, they said, had been instantaneous, and their only regret was that Mr. Blathersby had not looked at his watch so as to be able to certify this.

Pressed as to the *modus operandi*, the invisibles said, through Mrs. Pugsby as their mouth-piece, that the transit was effected by the etherealisation of Mrs. Pugsby's not very solid flesh, her removal from the house while doors and windows were closed being brought about by the disintegration of intervening obstacles.

"Why did you not deposit her safely in the drawing-room here, dear spirits?" asked Maud, "instead of dropping her in that undignified way on the doorstep?"

"The power was exhausted," was the reply.

"Awkward! May I ask another question?"

"Yes."

"Will you take her back again as you brought her?"

"No. One test should suffice."

"My dear Maud," said Mrs. Blount, "what a most inhospitable suggestion to make."

Inhospitable or not, it was quite evident that the suggestion would not be complied with. Mrs. Pugsby began to move her hand violently backwards and forwards like one writing.

"Does the spirit wish to communicate by writing?" asked Mrs. Blount.

Three violent thumps with poor Mrs. Pugsby's lean fist on the table.

"The writing is for Maud alone," said the medium—that is, presumably, the presiding intelligence speaking through the medium's organism.

"For me?"

"For you alone."

"Very well. Write."

"You must keep secret what is written."

"From mamma?"

"From every one, for the present. Do you promise?"

"Shall I promise, mamma?"

"By all means, my dear. Never oppose the spirits in anything."

"Very well. I promise."

Mrs. Pugsby thereupon took pencil in hand, and, after an immense amount of flourishing on a large sheet of paper, wrote a few words and pushed the document hastily over to Maud Blount.

Maud read them, and a burning blush suffused her face from forehead to chin. The words were—

"W. C. loves you."

Maud rose indignantly, and said, "I am sure this is juggling. I demand some test of genuineness, or I shall believe it is a random shot of the medium's."

Again her hand moved as before, and the words written were—

"Coming now. All will be known to-morrow."

"There, Maud, you will not have long to

wait for your test. Now, who is this?" added Mrs. Blount, as a knock and ring were heard at the front door; "how annoying that we should be interrupted by——"

"Mr. Campbell, ma'am," said Blobbs, ushering in the curate of St. Thomas Didymus.

Maud's blush, which had continued to mantle in her cheek, changed to a hue of ashy paleness at this singular coincidence.

The widow, in welcoming Mr. Campbell, warmly said, "It is so curious, Mr. Campbell; Maud was only this evening saying you never called on us alone."

"I have the strongest possible objection to prematurely wearing out my welcome to a pleasant house; but I am flattered by the knowledge that Miss Blount has even noticed my absence, and will take care that she has not to do so again."

There was a pleasant evening, made up partly of spiritualistic and partly of more mundane matters. If the truth were to be told, Mr. Campbell enjoyed the natural even

more than the so-called supernatural element ; though he was considerably interested in the latter too, especially when he found that Maud was an automatic writer herself.

"The sperrits have a private message for you, Mr. Campbell," said Mrs. Pugsby, after she had informed him, as she did about every third person, that he was an undeveloped medium.

"Indeed ! Let me have it."

Then, with the accustomed prelude of spiral flourishes, the message was written—

"Come to-morrow afternoon. Tell her what you wish. She will say 'Yes.'"

He said nothing, but looked archly enough around at the small circle as much as to say, "Are you poking fun at me ?" But all were so thoroughly grave and unconscious, that he felt his passing suspicion was unjust, and only wondered how anybody in the flesh or out of it could know that he had anything he wished to say ; but he thanked the communicating intelligence, and said he would certainly act upon the instructions he had received.

What would not Maud have given for one peep at Mr. Campbell's paper! He folded it with the utmost complacency, put it in his pocket; and for the rest of the evening kept them all amused by the way he fixed his eye upon Mrs. Pugsby, with the object, as he said, of detecting any incipient attempts to vanish up the chimney. None such were made; but she and Blathersby went off like ordinary mortals in a growler from the neighbouring stand.

There was no reason to believe that Mrs. Blount possessed any clairvoyant power; but she could see as far into the interior of things as most sensible women can, and did not fail to draw her own conclusions from the private communications that had been bandied about during the evening. She was not, therefore, at all surprised when, as Mr. Campbell left, he announced his intention of calling the next day. She simply contented herself with saying that she—and Maud—would be very glad to see him.

The colloquy between mother and daughter

which succeeded might have been embarrassing under the circumstances ; indeed Maud was beginning to feel it so ; but Mrs. Blount said very quietly—

“ Observe in the most punctilious manner the injunctions to secrecy which the spirits have laid upon you. I am not without curiosity ; but I can wait.”

So Maud kissed her mother, and withdrew to her room.





CHAPTER VI.

THE SWEETEST SPIRIT OF ALL.

Love is the most reasonable thing in nature.
What can we do but love? It is our cup.
Love is the cross and passion of our heart;
Its end—its errand.—*Festus.*

WILLIAM CAMPBELL had experienced a somewhat hard battle of life, with very varying success, but prided himself on having come off conqueror at last. His victory had consisted in the attainment to what might have been called cynicism but for the addition of a certain *bonhomie* which leavened it very agreeably. Still it was his boast that he was case-hardened and inaccessible to many of those weaknesses which he saw to be the principal sources of his fellow-creatures' misery. Above all, when he cast in his lot with the Muscular Christians, without in any

way adopting an ascetic rule of life, he forswore *la belle passion*. He would never have joined Mr. Ball had that clergyman been a Benedict with the inevitable quiverful. As he too was a sworn bachelor, he shared his house as well as the ministry of St. Thomas's Church, and the kalends of March were never to have any meaning at all for either Cælebs.

He had scarcely been three months in his new sphere, and was it possible that a change was coming over the spirit of his dream? Before he had been there as many weeks he found his courage faltering in presence of beautiful Maud Blount. Even Ball had twitted him with his palpable admiration, and steadily refused to believe his asseveration that he was heart-whole. Why should he not marry? He was young, fairly rich, and in many respects an eligible suitor; while Maud Blount was the very woman for his wife. It was in vain he protested that he had not a thought or wish beyond their bachelors' castle. Mr. Ball was the most determined sceptic on this point, and concluded every

debate on the topic with the enigmatical remark—"We shall see what we shall see."

As the younger son of a landed gentleman in the West of England, William Campbell felt he would have to make his own way in the world, and the easiest and most agreeable way of doing that seemed to be the method suggested by his father—namely, that he should go to college at the same time with his elder brother, take orders, and in due course succeed to a family living at present in the possession of a wheezy old parson who would be certain to make room at no very distant date for a successor. The arrangement had been carried out to the letter; but the old squire's plans were modified by the death of his elder son, which took place abroad soon after William had taken orders. The father followed the son at no distant date, and William found himself in the somewhat unusual position of a country curate with a rent-roll of some thousands. His rural position was so incongruous that, at the bishop's request, his rector allowed him to resign at once. But he had

got to love his sacred calling, and resolved to take some light work in London until the vacancy occurred in the family living. The wheezy old parson hung on after the manner of his kind; but William Campbell was in no hurry to occupy his place. In the meantime a proposal was made to him by his friend and former tutor to come to St. Thomas Didymus, and remain there just as long as suited his purpose. The suggestion exactly squared with his views, and accordingly, as we have seen, he fulfilled his evident destiny by coming thither and so falling over head and ears in love with beautiful Maud Blount, like a good, broad-shouldered English parson as he was.

"I am rejoiced to observe, my very dear William," said the incumbent of St. Thomas's, in his most sententious tone, "that you have not, on this eventful day, followed the exceedingly evil example of Mephibosheth, who neither dressed his feet, nor trimmed his beard, nor washed his clothes, in deference to David's absence. You look remarkably spruce this

afternoon, as behoves a rich lover going to make the great experiment of life."

So the murder was out. William Campbell never asked him how he found it out, but owned the soft impeachment by his silence.

"Do you feel a very withering contempt for me, Ball?"

"My boy, I envy you very much. She is, as I told you, an exceptional girl in all respects."

"But wait until I come back. She is not mine yet."

"I have no misgivings."

No more, as a matter of fact, had William Campbell. Surely it must be a man's own fault if he is ever refused. Love is proverbially blind, it is true; and young ladies occasionally trifle with men: but if they have not sufficient discrimination to detect such capricious beauties, they deserve their fate, and will, at all events, have gained experience by their failure.

It was with a good heart, then, that the Rev. William Campbell presented himself at

the hospitable widow's door. He did not knock as though the dentist dwelt there. Blobbs declared afterwards that there was no perceptible tremor in his voice when he asked whether Mrs. and Miss Blount were at home, nor was there even the suspicion of a flutter about his heart when he found Maud alone in the drawing-room.

As for the young lady herself, she was a shade paler than usual. Could a young lady be otherwise under the exceedingly unusual circumstances in which she was placed? But there was a perceptibly merry twinkle in her dark eye, and just the suspicion of a smile at the corner of her mouth, which would have emboldened a less confident lover.

"I am very much tempted to adopt the phraseology of the Attorney-General in the Tichborne case, and say, Would you be surprised to hear me call you 'Maud,' instead of 'Miss Blount,' on this particular occasion?"

"No."

"Would you resent the familiarity if I did?"

“No.”

“Then — Maud — will you show me the private message Mrs. Pugsby wrote to you from the spirits last night; and will you read the one she wrote for me at the same time?”

They exchanged documents; and Campbell could not help observing that Maud did not take hers from her pocket, as he unromantically did. She had placed it much nearer her heart.

“Then Maud—dear Maud—the spirits have obviated the necessity of a very embarrassing avowal on my part; but I endorse the few most true words they have written. What is your reply?”

She pointed in silence to the last word on his communication. It was the significant monosyllable “Yes.”

William Campbell took the fair white hand that was extended towards him, printed on it the first kiss of love, and then, folding Maud in his arms, sealed their mutual contract on her red lips.

"We ought to be exceedingly obliged to the dear spirits, and to their mouthpiece, Mrs. Pugsby, for the way they have smoothed our paths to-day. But your mamma, Maud? Did she know of the messages; and will she, think you, endorse your reply?"

"She knows nothing of the messages, for certain; but—Willie—I think she guesses, and I am sure she approves."

"Then, darling, now the ice is so satisfactorily broken—say, rather, is thawed in the sunshine of your dear smiles—let me tell you that, from the first moment I set eyes on you, I felt this must come. I felt all the cold cynicism of which I have boasted pass clear away from me. Did you know this?"

"I thought it; I *hoped* it."

"When my hand met yours at that delightful dark séance, did you feel that thrill which, far more perceptibly than the cold air the other sitters experienced, assured me that one spirit at least was present?"

"Do you not remember that I would not let other manifestations occur until we were, at all

events, *posed* for that one? And, tell me—Willie—did it ever occur to you that I planned to-day's dear event when I did it?"

"If I had been conceited enough to think so, this dear event, as you so kindly call it, would have happened before—might even have happened then. No; I never guessed it—dared not believe such happiness in store for me. What an admirable institution dark circles must be for lovers circumstanced as we were!"

"I believe this—that in that darkness and silence—possibly in that magnetic contact—the real self comes to the surface. I think I knew you loved me then, though I could not have told you how or why I knew it."

"Bless you for these words, darling. You do not know—you will not, for a long time, until you know me through and through, be aware—*how* blessed they are to me. Mine has been, to some extent, a loveless life, Maud; so that now the happiness of realising your love seems almost too intense for me."

"May I ask you—Willie—one thing?"

"You seem to have considerable difficulty

with my Christian name, Maud ; but keep on repeating it, and it will soon grow familiar. You may ask me anything, of course."

"Have you ever loved before?"

"Never—absolutely never—not even with a boy's silly love. That was partly what I meant when I said my life had been comparatively loveless, though I was thinking rather of your mother's love. Mine died before I knew her. And you, Maud, have you lost your heart before?"

"Never lost my heart, Willie, I assure you. I have flirted desperately, but never loved."

"Then each of us might quote to the other Tennyson's beautiful words, 'My heart was ever virgin save to thee.' Is it not so?"

"It is a case of first love on both sides."

"And last—please God."

"Amen."

"Are you two young people engaged in private devotions?" said Mrs. Blount's cheery

voice outside the door; "and shall I be accused of brawling if I come in? I heard Maud saying 'Amen.'"

"Really, my dear madam, I do not think you could have described our position more accurately. I commenced private devotions, and Maud fell in with them."

"Mr. Campbell, do you call my daughter 'Maud?'"

"Have you any objection?"

"Considering that you addressed me as 'madam,' I don't quite see why you should call her by so familiar a title."

"Then, instead of calling you 'my dear madam,' have I your authority to call you 'my dear mamma?'"

"With all my heart, Willie. I need not ask what Maud's answer has been."

"Need not. Why, indeed?" said the young lady.

"You dear transparent creature, I am not as young as I once was, but I am not so old as to be stone-blind yet. I am not in love, you know."

"You would not have the heart to say that if Dr. Mason were here, mamma. But how long have you been aware of this interesting fact, pray?"

"I do not at all see the necessity for going into chronology; but if you insist on doing so, Maud, let me tell you I found out you were in love with Willie—it's difficult to get that Christian name out at first—long before I had the faintest suspicion that he was in love with you."

"Am I *so* transparent?"

"Pellucid to the last degree. And then I watched him come round beautifully. It was all the dark séance, you know."

"A good deal, but not all. The light séance had something to do with it too;" and then they handed the scrolls of paper to Mrs. Blount for inspection.

"And yet people ask the *cui bono* of spiritualism! Now you two silly children would have gone on for months longer without telling the truth, if that dear old Cork-screw, as you call her, had not sailed all the

way down from Camden Town to Maida Hill just to tell you each of a fact which was patent to everybody but your two silly selves."

"And now, mamma," said Mr. Campbell, lolling in an easy-chair as though Maud and he had been engaged for years, "are there not some business matters to be settled? Don't you want to see my lawyers, or my bank-book, or something? Are there not some documents to be signed with big seals?"

"I fancied you had probably got all the sealing done before I came in. No, Willie, happily there need be no discussion on these matters. You are not a poor curate, or Maud a penniless girl. The most vulgar element in love-making is fortunately dispensed with. I hope you know Maud is not a religious young lady, though."

"On the contrary, when you looked in upon us, you heard her saying 'Amen' like an awakened parish-clerk."

"But seriously, Maud, have you told Willie about your opinions?"

"He has never asked me, mamma."

"The more reason you should tell him."

"He would stoutly refuse to listen if Maud did tell him, mamma," replied Mr. Campbell. "Were you a pretty pagan, Maud, I would marry you first and convert you afterwards."

"Now that's nice, mamma; isn't it? Do you know I have a problem to put to you, mamma and Willie?"

"What is it?"

"I want to ask you whether you think it possible that London contains three happier people than ourselves to-day."

"I hardly think it possible. And I should not be so happy as I am, did not my new and most comfortable creed inform me that your dear papa knows all this. O, that you could only have been acquainted with him here, Willie! But we shall all be together yet. We all are much nearer together than we used to think. Do you not feel that it would be a comfort if you could get to think as we do, Willie?"

"Who?"

“Maud and I.”

“Does Maud quite share your belief?”

“I think so,” replied Maud, timidly. “That is, I fully believe in all the phenomena which occur when mamma and I are alone. I do *not* believe that, under those circumstances, we are practising *diablerie*; but when I gaze on the flabby form of Blathersby or——”

“You dare not say Pugsby to-day, Maud.”

“Well, say on Blathersby only; then I feel that our holiest aspirations are being degraded to a matter of £ s. d., and I sometimes am illogical enough to let my objection to individuals extend to the creed they profess.”

“Is it more than a profession, do you think?” asked Mr. Campbell.

“In Blathersby’s case I am sure it is the emptiest profession,” replied Maud. “Do you know, Willie, I am sure the odious creature was in love with me.”

“I can quite believe it.”

“Under existing circumstances, I suppose you could scarcely say less?”

"But don't you think his love was professional too?" said Mrs. Blount.

"Hearken to mamma. In order to deal a side blow at me she demolishes her idol."

"He is no idol of mine, love. My regard for him may be said to be professional too. I only use Blathersby in the interest of the cause. But come, little ones, this is far too happy an event to mix up Blathersby with. Let us have some tea, and toast our new alliance in that most delightful of all beverages."





CHAPTER VII.

PROFESSOR BUNCOMBE.

A huge translation of hypocrisy
Vilely compiled.—SHAKSPEARE.

MAUD'S engagement, which might have been expected to put an end to spiritualistic pursuits, really had quite an opposite effect. It gave a new impetus to them in that family of which Mr. Campbell had become a member-elect. In the first place, he himself could not help feeling something very like gratitude to the system which, whether true or false, had given him his future wife. He had not much doubt that all Mrs. Pugsby's "sperrit-writing" meant nothing more than that she had, perhaps by constant practice, seen a little way farther into futurity than her neighbours, and wrote according to her lights.

If you poke your nose persistently enough into other people's affairs, gradually you will get to know those affairs as well as, or even better than, your own; and this was his very simple solution of Mrs. Pugsby's vaticinations. His own arrival on the evening when she predicted it, on the occasion of her nocturnal Hegira, must have been a coincidence, he argued. That was curious; but the love matter was nothing beyond the ordinary observation of a shrewd woman with her eyes open. The very fact of Mrs. Pugsby pretending to keep hers half closed was in itself suspicious. Her dazed air might only be assumed in order to get people to speak freely in her presence, and to secure for herself quiet opportunities of observation.

Maud, he could see, had no suspicions of this kind, and he felt himself almost ungrateful for harbouring them. She looked upon the matter as genuine from beginning to end; and as for Mrs. Blount, she would as soon have thought of doubting her own existence as of questioning the Sibylline power in Mrs. Pugsby

—her dear, darling Corkscrew, as she always called her now.

“You men and your logic,” the widow used to exclaim, if Mr. Campbell suggested any of his common sense views of the subject, “into what *il*-logical conclusions will it not lead you! Just as half of the wicked persecutions on record are due to religion and to an alleged desire to do good for God and man, so half of the absurdities extant are attributable to this same vaunted common sense, which I generally find to be the synonym for its exact opposite—arrant nonsense.”

“Well, mamma,” rejoined Willie, ignobly recanting his heresy, “I suppose for a man in my position, very much engaged, spending his days in toying with this white hand and smoothing these Madonna braids of hair, common sense is rather out of the question.”

Maud and he were on a settee in the drawing-room, with Mrs. Blount playing propriety, and he suited the action to the word as he spoke.

“Do you really, Willie, feel that your

engagement to me has concluded the régime of common sense in the constitution of your being?"

"A pleasant interregnum, Maud. We shall revert to the manners and customs of ordinary individuals anon. It is only the *reculer pour mieux sauter*."

"So, then, I am to expect you to be a shade more cynical by next spring than you were, or professed to be, when I first knew you."

"You are right in saying 'professed to be.' Do you think I ever was cynical, Maud?"

"No, I don't; but you assumed that virtue if you had it not."

"The assumption is over, and I don't think it is likely to recur."

The engagement was not to be a long one; why should it? And in the meanwhile the Rev. William Campbell did seem to be dawdling away his time in a very Samson and Delilah fashion. He was such a very voluminous ecclesiastic that he looked more than usually out of place lolling about all day in a drawing-room. Broad Churchman

though he was, he always dressed in the extreme of clerical fashion. He wore, that is, the very longest of coats composed of dead black serge, coarse as the material of a friar's gaberline, with cassock waistcoat to correspond, and he was one of the very first to adopt the ecclesiastical wide-awake with wide brim and tassels. He looked every inch a priest, though he was not all shaven and shorn—very far from it; and he carried his ecclesiastical adornments into such minutiae as jewellery. He forswore golden appendages of all kinds, and substituted silver, because he said gold was the symbol of divine glory, and therefore inappropriate for him; while silver typified human purity, and at this he aimed. A heavy silver watch-chain, with a tolerably large pendant cross, therefore, formed his only decoration, and it harmonised well with the dead black of his garments. He justified this exceptionally correct dress by saying that he wore it as a soldier wore his uniform when on parade. Why should he be ashamed of the service?

Mrs. Pugsby was, of course, high in favour with the Blounts and Mr. Campbell. Not so with the editor of the *Anti-Christian*. She had, he felt, spoilt his game with Maud. He never had much chance, perhaps; he did not lay to his soul the flattering unction that he had; but whatever he had, Mrs. Pugsby had effectually spoiled. He owed her one for that; and he had not the tact to see that it was not exactly wise to cast suspicion on an event in which, if it was not genuine, he must have played a traitor's part, or that Mrs. Blount's house was not exactly the place where it was prudent to suggest such an explanation of things. One evening, however, when some reference was made to Mrs. Pugsby's aerial flight, he actually hinted that he must have dropped asleep, and that Mrs. Pugsby simply hired a swifter cab-horse than he, and so got to Maida Hill first and deposited herself on the doorstep. His idea was so scouted by the ladies, and Mr. Campbell looked so very muscularly inclined on the occasion, that the flabby little editor veered round on the spot,

and declared—he ! he ! he !—that he was only joking. But he resolved to play a trump card against Mrs. Pugsby for all that.

Professor Buncombe was his trump.

It became necessary for those *entrepreneurs* who catered for the spiritualistic tastes in England, to keep their eye constantly upon the American medium market, and ever and anon import some distinguished specimen of the class from beyond the Atlantic. Now it was an inspirational speaker ; now a healing medium ; now a trance-speaker ; anon a materialising or other physical medium that was selected. A certain Professor Buncombe—faculty and university not specified—had been starring it in the States ; and Mr. Blathersby felt that he was the man for the English market, and also best calculated to put an end to Mrs. Pugsby's reign at Maida Hill. Consequently this enterprising little man wired a message per Atlantic cable to the Professor suggesting that an opportunity, which might not recur, offered itself for a European campaign.

The Professor was over like a shot ; and

the *Anti-Christian* puffed him as successfully beforehand as the *Critic* of old did Alexander Smith. It is an amazing instrument of success this preliminary puff. People have no chance of correcting you, or checking your assertions, and your hero comes accredited at once, and with any amount of stock in the way of popular fame to draw upon. Professor Buncombe had no speciality. He absorbed all the gifts of mediumship; was a magnetic healer, a trance-speaker, a physical medium—in short, a sort of supernatural Admirable Crichton. He was a plausible, handsome, well-educated old man, with a smoothly shaven face, and long grey hair arranged *à l'artiste* a good way down his back. On the whole, he was a taller model of the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, whose pulpit effusions the Professor's Sunday trance-addresses were said to resemble very much.

Such was the bright and particular star whom Mr. Blathersby wired over to irradiate the spiritualistic world in the forthcoming season, and who, he felt sure, would

prove a formidable obstacle to Mrs. Pugsby's progress in the affections of the Maida Hill family.

"There is not the slightest reason, Professor, why you should not marry that Maida Hill widow, and live independently of mediumship for the rest of your life," said Mr. Blathersby very soon after the great Buncombe had landed on European soil.

Buncombe, however, for some reason or other, threw cold water on all matrimonial schemes. He preferred mediumship to matrimony, he said. As for Blathersby, he had no idea that anybody could take up Spiritualism except for the sake of living by it. It was a mere matter of chance that he was in this particular line himself, and not in the Woman's Rights or Anti-vaccination agitation. There seemed an opening for the *Anti-Christian* in the world of Spiritism, so he started that organ. He would make it represent Materialism in its next issue if he thought that would pay better.

Of course, an introduction to the very pleasant house at Maida Hill was among the

very first of the Professor's London experiences; but from the earliest appearance which that distinguished alien made in Mrs. Blount's salon, Blathersby could see that he was a failure.

"Trumped higher!" he said to himself, "and by that confounded old Corkscrew. I shall lose a pot of money if Buncombe don't take with the widow."

Buncombe did not take with the widow. He was a big medium, not a doubt of it, and for the sake of that abstraction which she called "the cause" Mrs. Blount felt bound to open her house and her purse to any medium who could promote its interests; but she was not bound to open her heart. Blathersby was far too dense to see that, though Mrs. Blount was severely bitten by spiritualism—though it was, in fact, to her a religion because she thought it put her *en rapport* with her dear dead husband—still she was a thorough woman of the world, and reserved a wide margin of common sense alongside all her transcendentalism.

It was perhaps the glaring contrast between Buncombe and Mr. Campbell that prejudiced the widow and her daughter against the former. Of course Mr. Campbell's star was in the ascendant; but that was not all. Buncombe entered the drawing-room with a bumptious air, and though he did not talk with a Yankee brogue, or eat his dinner with his knife (a luxury in which poor Corkscrew occasionally indulged), he was forward and pronounced—in fact, he was all that a refined English gentleman would not be, and Mr. Campbell was not; so after a few hospitable dinners and several séances, more or less successful, the widow rather gave Blathersby and the Professor the cold shoulder. In anticipation of a certain event in her family, she feared she should not be able to hold any séances at her house for some little time; but she attended the inevitable welcoming soirée which was got up for the Professor's benefit, and subscribed liberally to instal him in a triple line of business at the Supernatural Lyceum. He healed during the day at five shillings ahead,

gave a séance à la Davenport in the evening, and delivered inspirational addresses after the manner of Mesdames Emma Hardinge and Cora Tappan on Sundays. Altogether he netted a fair income, but failed on the whole to make the *coup* Blathersby had expected.

'Cute as he was, the Yankee overacted his part in the theological line. His instructions from Blathersby in reference to Mr. Ball and Mr. Campbell were—

“Two Broad Church parsons who go in for Muscular Christianity and shave the edges of Infidelity. The more heresy you can give them, the better they will like you.”

But, to use a vulgar though expressive figure, Buncombe laid his heresy on too thick. Possibly those muscular parsons, too, felt that they could do their heresy for themselves, and declined to accept it filtered through the mind of a coarse American adventurer. As long as he talked of wonderful cures he had performed, or the successful way in which he vanished from his cabinet, leaving not a wrack behind, they listened courteously and with attention ;

but as soon as the Professor wandered on to his Sunday services, and spoke words depreciatory of a Name they held in highest reverence and of a Church to which, with all its possible faults, they still belonged, they discovered that it was time to join the ladies in the drawing-room, or to break up for the evening; and the Professor felt himself shut up in that consummate way, the accomplishment of which, without violating the bounds of good-breeding, is so essentially the accomplishment of the English gentleman.

"I say, Blathersby," the Professor observed in the sequestered retirement of the Supernatural Lyceum, "you misled me in the matter of them parson cusses. They riled up like lightning when I attacked the venerable establishment as you told me."

"I s'pose they think it'll last their time," answered Blathersby, again regarding the matter from his own peculiar standpoint; "so they don't want to bust it up just at present. But I thought they could have stood it as hot as you gave it 'em."

One of the Professor's most celebrated feats, more popular in England than America, illustrated curiously the combination of the sacred (so-called) and secular elements in his craft. He received at a charge of twenty-one shillings sterling, current coin of the realm, any one who wished to consult him on affairs of business or pleasure, appertaining to this world or the next. He produced a Family Bible, and requested the applicant to state his case. This done—and the applicants were, as a rule, very communicative—the table was turned, and the Professor passed into a semi-comatose condition. He then took the Family Bible in hand, made a dive at its closed pages with his index-finger or a paper-knife, opened it wherever it so chanced, ran his finger down the page, and stopped at a particular verse, which was always found, either directly or indirectly, to bear upon the question at issue.

Some of the communications thus obtained were indeed exceedingly curious; others required considerable exegetical adaptation. Mrs. Blount believed thoroughly in the reve-

lation, and Maud was open to conviction after the Professor had dived into a passage in Solomon's Song which made a graceful and unmistakable allusion to her Willie; but her Willie and his incumbent did not favour this particular kind of manifestation.

"Given a good big Family Bible," Mr. Ball said in his terse, dry fashion, "and a fair knowledge of the consecutive order of the Scriptural books, it was fairly easy to hit upon Ezekiel or Canticles, and there was a good deal to be made out of these with a little adaptation; while if all else should fail, there was always the Apocalypse to fall back upon."

Poor old Corkscrew, directly she went in for this method of communication, got a crusher in the shape of a comparison between her and the Witch of Endor. Mrs. Pugsby had her way to make in the world too, and saw so completely through their devices, that she had no difficulty in prejudicing Mrs. Blount against the American medium. She was perfectly conscious of the *coup* she had made in bringing about Maud's engagement, and had

not the slightest intention of abandoning the advantages it conferred upon her. She had carried that point by acting independently, and against the interests of Blathersby. Those, therefore, would be her tactics for the future. This was ungrateful of Pugsby, it is true; but then mediums are men or—worse still—women. Blathersby went so far as to threaten her if their interests should clash; but she proved herself equal to the occasion, and retorted—

“Don’t be rash, Blathersby. It’s best we should hold our tongues. I *could* say a word, you know, that would not only shut Mrs. Blount’s doors against you, but open some others as you wouldn’t like quite so well.”

“But you won’t say that word, Pugsby. He! he! he!”

“Don’t be too cocksure,” was that lady’s elegant reply.

So the weeks sped swiftly by under the influence of a sweeter spirit than any of those that rapped or squeaked at séances. The winter came and went, and with the spring

Maud's marriage drew nigh. They still "sat" sometimes, but it was only with Mrs. Pugsby, who, since the happy result of her revelations, seemed to own a prescriptive right to preside in the widow's circle. She was, in fact, installed there almost as one of the family, and even the imputation of being the Witch of Endor did not shake her in the regards of her friends.

"I really think you are becoming less sceptical, Campbell," said Mr. Ball, after one of these sittings. "What a potent spirit that Dan Cupid is, after all!"

"I never doubted that there was some truth in these matters; but it seems to me deeper down the well than ever."

"And in the meantime you find the operation of perpetually letting down the bucket to no purpose somewhat irksome; so you are half inclined to abandon the operation and devote yourself to love-making. Perhaps you are wise, Willie—perhaps you are wise."



CHAPTER VIII.

BRIARWOOD.

Oh that the desert were my dwelling-place,
With one fair spirit for my minister,
That I might all forget the human race,
And hating no one, love but only her.

Childe Harold.

THE early summer loomed in the immediate distance, and Maud Blount's wedding-day was imminent. The plans of the young people did not involve any separations at present. They were to take up their residence at Maida Hill, and Mrs. Blount planned a series of visits among her friends.

"Don't protest, Willie, dear," she said. "I know you love me very much at present. Wait until I am a mother-in-law in reality instead of only in prospect, and you will be

thankful enough to anybody who will take me off your hands."

"Very well—wait," said Mr. Campbell.

"Only then one doesn't like exactly to be ordered out of one's own house, you know," replied the widow.

"Mamma!" said Maud, deprecatingly.

"You needn't trouble yourselves, any of you," rejoined Mrs. Pugsby, who was present at the soliloquy. "The plan won't be carried out."

"You enigmatical old Corkscrew," said Mr. Campbell, "what plan won't be carried out? Is Maud going to jilt me?"

"I wish you wouldn't make one's blood run cold, Mrs. Pugsby," continued Maud. "I declare you quite frighten me."

"You surely don't mean to say that the wedding is—is going to be put off?" asked Mrs. Blount, in real alarm. "Do consult the spirits, and tell us."

"I don't know about the wedding being put off. That I can't see clearly; but there's a cross somewhere. The plan won't be carried

out as you were arranging it now; that's all I know. At least, all I can tell you besides is that it won't be long before you know all about it."

"That's comforting, any way," replied Mr. Campbell. "Shall we cease discussing our plans, then, mamma?"

"No, dear Willie. I do not find that our invisible friends are by any means infallible on these matters of common life."

"You dear inconsistent old creature. How refreshing it is to find your strong common sense cropping up above all your nostrums."

"And pray, sir, which are the nostrums and which the common sense?"

"Oh, you pay your money, and you take your choice."

Though the preparations for the great event, then, went on as actively as ever, there was an uncomfortable undercurrent of nervous anxiety in everybody's mind in reference to Mrs. Pugsby's prophecy. She had laid in such an immense stock of prophetic popularity by her prediction of the engagement that she

seemed able to trade to any extent upon it—perhaps was trading upon it now when she acted the seer on the subject of the marriage.

“My heart is so bound up in you now, dear Maud ; you have so completely metamorphosed that once cynical member of mine, that even a dubious prophecy from Mrs. Pugsby alarms me,” said Mr. Campbell, at one of his frequent *têtes-à-tête* with his beloved.

“So it does me, Willie. She was so curiously right about your offer, that I am full of fear lest she prove right again.”

“Your own heart is true, Maud?”

“Dearest, can you ask me such a question *now*, when I am as much, body and soul, yours as though we had been married for years? No; it is nothing in which my will plays a part that can influence our plans. Is it not strange that, in these spiritual communications, one never gets anything tangible? There is always the element of doubt.”

“Does not that shake your faith in their being spiritual at all?”

“No ; I remember once putting the ques-

tion as to why the spirits did not help to reveal undetected crime."

"What did they say?"

"They said—'If by our aid crime was certain to be punished, earth would be what it was never meant to be, a perfect sphere.' Curious, was it not?"

"Curious, but eminently unsatisfying. I fancy this woman has nothing more than strong presentiment. Do you remember Alexander Smith's prognostication as to his own life—

Before me lies a road of toil
With *my grave dug across!*"

"And was that realised?"

"To the letter."

"Yes'r—letter for you, sir," said the discreet Blobbs, who had knocked before entering the drawing-room, but the lovers were too busy to hear or heed him.

"A letter forwarded by Ball," said Mr. Campbell; "and look, Maud, what a deep black border. Now, if I had a single soul in

the world I cared about besides you and your mamma, I might be alarmed."

He broke the seal, and read his epistle after leave asked and obtained from his fiancée.

"Ha, ha," he laughed, "the murder is out, and Pugsby scores another point."

"How so?"

"Poor old Hobbes, the rector of Briarwood, our picturesque family living in Surrey, has wheezed his last, and, egad, I *shall* have to change my plans. I must present myself, or put in somebody to keep it warm for me, which I don't like at all."

"Oh no, let us go to Briarwood at once."

"Say you so, Maud? I was afraid you would scarcely be able to face life in a country rectory."

"With you, Willie?"

"Even with me, charmer. You do not know what an amount of still life appertains to such a state of things."

"I should like it beyond all."

"Then so it shall be."

Mrs. Blount came in hastily, having been apprised by Blobbs of the arrival of a letter for Mr. Campbell, "with such a deep black *ledge*, ma'am."

"Mother-in-law elect," exclaimed Campbell, "salute with proper reverence the prospective rector of Briarwood."

"Is it possible?"

"So you see our plans *are* changed."

"And Pugsby is right again. How very extraordinary! Is she not a capital medium, Willie?"

"She seems able to see into that particularly opaque object, a milestone, farther than most of us, I must confess."

Mr. Campbell had to run down to Briarwood at once, and arrange for taking the duty: then to see the bishop, and so on. He began, all of a sudden, to be a busy man, and was absent from Maud more than he had ever been since his engagement. Old Hobbes had been as complete a Cælebs as Campbell had purposed to be, but was not. Nothing, therefore, had to be done in the way of ousting his

belongings from the rectory. They had only to bury the old man decently, and fit up the rectory somewhat more suitably for its new occupant, and then—as the rector phrased it—matrimony stared him point-blank in the face.

Briarwood was a sweet spot ; a tiny village with the greenest of trees and the whitest of cottages nestling amid the recesses of the sunny hills. It was perfect in its rustic retirement, yet sufficiently near town to be accessible to friends, and to afford frequent opportunity for visiting the great metropolis. There were plenty of good houses dotted about here and there ; so it would not be like going to the Land's End or John-o'-Groats.

“Willie,” said Maud, as they were strolling hand in hand through the mazy gardens of the comfortable rectory, after inspecting the little church, “I have a fancy about our marriage.”

The rector-elect struck an attitude, and called loudly to Mrs. Blount, who was looking up the flower beds.

"Mamma!" He had anticipated events so far as to call her by this name.

"Yes; what is it?"

"Another point scored by Pugsby. Maud *has* changed her mind about the marriage."

"What?"

"I don't exactly know what the change is to be; but she tells me there is to be a change, and you may as well hear it, since you are an interested party."

"I did not say there was to be a change. I did not even use the word change. I said I had a fancy about our marriage."

"Well, what is it?"

"Let us be married here, instead of at St. Thomas Didymus'."

"How nice!" exclaimed the widow.

"Jolly!" added the bridegroom-elect.

"Then shall it be so, since you both approve?"

"Decidedly," said Mr. Campbell. "I will write at once to Ball, and book him. Shall we name an earlier day than we had fixed upon, and get it over?"

"No," said Maud, firmly.

"Why?"

"No," repeated her mamma, with greater firmness still.

"What is the just cause or impediment?"

"Dresses."

"Oh! I forgot. But as we are to be married quietly, does it matter much about the dresses?"

"This may be Paradise, my dear Willie, but allow me to observe we cannot introduce the costume of that period."

"No; I forgot."

Never within the memory of living man had that little Surrey village been so stirred. Not only was that big bearded gentleman coming to be the new rector, but he was going to signalise his advent by marrying a beautiful wife. He could not have taken a step more calculated to render him popular with his few simple parishioners. The rumour got abroad, too, that he was rich; and already large vans of furniture had come down from London to the little rustic parsonage. All that was now wanting was the great event itself.

It is the eve of the festival, and the new rector, having read himself in on the previous Sunday, has come down with the clergyman who is to perform the ceremony, his old friend and former incumbent at St. Thomas Didymus'. The two ate their last bachelor dinner together in Mr. Campbell's new home.

"Upon my life, Willie," remarked Mr. Ball, "this kind of thing is contagious. If there were another Maud Blount we would make a double-barrelled affair of it to-morrow, though I should not have such a rural Paradise as this to bear my bride to."

"Never too late to mend. There's time," he added, looking at his watch, "to get a special licence."

"But the lady?"

"There's Mrs. Blount."

"A very fair imitation of the daughter, but not the facsimile I seek."

"Try Pugsby."

"I believe that is out of the question. I have been informed that there is a male Pugsby in existence somewhere, who occasionally pays

domiciliary visits to our poor Corkscrew, and beats her if she does not shell out to him. Besides, you would hardly like me to say that Maud bore any striking resemblance to Pugsby?"

"Perhaps not."

It is the eventful morning, and the widow and Maud, duly convoyed by Dr. Mason, have come down betimes. Mrs. Pugsby is present, too, to sign the register as second witness when the old doctor shall have given the beautiful bride away. Blobbs and Maud's maid constitute the sole retinue. The other servants are kept on from old Hobbes's *ménage*.

The bells rang out cheerily for Maud's arrival, as they had done on the previous evening for the rector's. Indeed, those bells had little rest, for anon the simple ceremony was over and they rang again. Yet once more; the breakfast was concluded, and the rector and his bride set out for their brief honeymoon. Soon that waned too, and they came back to commence life in real earnest.

Then the bells rang out again. But this was the final peal, so far as his reverence was concerned. Then ensued the "to-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow" of clerical life in the country. But they were all in all to each other. There could be no monotony; for every day the rector discovered some new attraction in the beautiful woman he had made his wife. Mamma would come down and spend a week or two. Mrs. Pugsby came and gave them a week's séances; Dr. Mason rusticated, and tried to take off the effect of the medium; but Maud was still a good deal biassed in favour of the old faith; and when Mr. Ball came in the late summer and completed the series of guests, he found that Maud had regularly taken her place as medium, and they got beautiful manifestations.

"Well, old fellow," he said to Mr. Campbell, "of course your wife has converted you."

"Of course, I know that whatever Maud does is genuine. There is nothing of the Blathersby—shall I add, nothing of the

Pugsby—element in what occurs with her. But I don't like it. I frankly confess to you, Ball, I doubt the source."

"You think it diabolical."

"I don't know that I even dignify it so far as that; because, of course, to call it diabolical is to concede that it is, at all events, spiritual. I rather think that it is a dangerous excitement of the normal faculties, which is most perilous to Maud under existing circumstances."

"Indeed!"

"Dr. Mason was here, and warned me solemnly against letting her sit at present."

"Mason is prejudiced."

"Perhaps so; but I am not, and I see it myself. I see that Maud believes much more than she tells me."

"Does she indeed? I fancied the reverse."

"Fancied that she overstated her belief? Oh no!"

"Ah! you are speaking about spirits, are you not?"

"Of course. Of what are you speaking?"

"Oh, nothing! Never mind. The fact is, I was speaking rather at random."

Mr. Ball saved himself adroitly, but he roused the demon of suspicion in his friend. What was it that Maud had confessed herself incredulous about? And why, if she confessed to anybody, was it not to himself?

"I find about all these spiritualistic folks," he said, "a tendency to double-dealing, a hesitancy in speaking out the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It is painful in the extreme for me to have to say so, but I find even Maud, who is the soul of truth in every other respect, inclined to prevaricate on the subject of spiritualism."

"Do you indeed? I had not observed that."

"I think you must have, my dear fellow. In fact, there is a sort of reserve in your manner now which, if I did not know you as well as I do, would incline me to think that you were trifling with me. Ball, I really believe you are playing with edged tools in

encouraging this spiritualism, especially in the case of girls like Maud."

"Girls! You forget, Willie, your wife would be very scandalised if she heard you call her a girl."

"In her case, depend upon it, the thing is still more perilous. She has gone to bed to-night tired and done up, and I feel sure she has been doing this automatic writing by herself. I am sure," he added, with something very like a tear in his eyes, "you would not encourage Maud in anything that you knew would be prejudicial to her health. I solemnly believe, Ball, it would kill me with anxiety if I saw her in the least affected by what I must call this horrid spiritualism."

"I think you are unjust; indeed I do, old fellow; but I am sure you know that, as far as I am concerned, the subject shall, if you wish it, be a tabooed one. It is her mother against whom you will chiefly have to take precautions."

"But if she knew it was doing Maud harm——"

“ She would be slow to realise the fact ; and even if she did, why——”

“ What?”

“ A very determined spiritualist would say it was better that physical health should suffer than the highest truth be neglected.”

“ What utter infatuation!”

“ Possibly. But it is true, nevertheless, that they do say it, and act on such a principle too.”





CHAPTER IX.

COMMUNING WITH THE DEAD.

How pure at heart and sound in head,
With what divine affections bold,
Should be the man whose thought would hold
An hour's communion with the dead.

In Memoriam.

MAUD CAMPBELL was, of necessity, a good deal alone during the day in her new home. The quondam rector had not had much opportunity for working the parish well in the intervals of chronic bronchitis, and his successor was not a man to do anything in a slipshod way. He had taken Briarwood in hand with a due sense of responsibility; and he would, God helping him, make it a model parish in every respect. It should be a little Hygeiopolis to begin with. Mr. Campbell thoroughly believed in the close connexion between cleanliness and

godliness, and it was a sight to see the new rector ferreting about among the cottagers and advising them as to the arrangement of their pigstys, at the same time as he suggested to them that they might with a little judicious economy of time manage to get to morning church. An hour or so less at the public-house after market on Saturday would insure them all the rest they required. He did not rail indiscriminately at all public-houses, nor would he promise that his Sunday sermon should afford them opportunity for refreshing sleep. He would make the Sunday services bright, and the discourses short and as interesting as possible. Gradually he got the folks to see things in his light, and even the landlord of the "Dog and Duck" was glad to be able to shut up early, and so avoid the risk of losing his licence.

On all hands it was agreed that the parson was a rare good fellow, who did not interfere with his parishioners one whit beyond what they could see was for their good. He looked up Peggy and Bobby and hauled them into

school, instead of allowing them to scare birds precociously ; and, somehow or other, the poor parents were no losers by the change. When Peggy and Bobby were astonished by the arrival of a new brother or sister, which was very frequently the case, there came a mysterious box from the rectory with all sorts of creature comforts for mother, and ever and anon the beautiful young pa'son's wife flitted in and out like a good angel. Altogether the pastor and flock had a good time of it. There was just enough work to keep an active man employed, and the Rev. William Campbell did that work vigorously and well.

In her peregrinations among the poor, Maud was astonished to find how largely her spiritualistic views were shared by the peasantry, though they had never heard of the Modern Mystery, and were innocent as to all knowledge of historic Rochester knockings. But their faith in ghosts was firm and unquestioned ; so that Maud found herself really in an atmosphere of unconscious spiritualism, and the confirmation which her previous views re-

ceived from this circumstance was very strong indeed.

Her husband, to whom she mentioned the matter, said—

“Yes, that is the only thing that beats me, the dense mass of ignorance one has to combat. But I trust to the Elementary Education Act to remedy all this.”

“But is it ignorance?”

“This prevalent Bogeyism? Of course it is. Can you ask such a question?”

“Mamma believes in Bogey, as you term it. I believe in Bogey to some extent.”

“Yes, but——”

“We lived before the days of School Boards, and want brushing up in the three R’s—is that what you mean to say, sir?”

“Not exactly; but the excess of civilisation often curiously lands people in the very same errors as a defect of that commodity would.”

“And you think that our spiritualism, technically so termed, is just the same as the Bogeyism of these simple villagers?”

“Precisely.”

“Then that is the strongest proof you could give me that spiritualism is true.”

. This was a colloquy that, under slight variations in detail, constantly took place between the rector and his young wife; and it generally ended in the same way—namely, by his begging her to shelve Bogey, and put on her hat and come for a walk, or sit by him and read Bailey’s “Festus” aloud.

“We wont argufy about it, Maud, as the poor old folks here say. I trust to the new Board Schools to root out your spiritualism.”

“And yet you teach it in every formulary of your Church and every sermon you preach.”

“What, Bogeyism—necromancy?”

“Yes; necromancy pure and simple, only not called by that name.”

“Not if I know it.”

“Then perhaps you do not know it; but you certainly do it.”

“I only object to Spiritualism because I see that it spoils sober judgment, runs counter to common sense, and is, I believe, morally and physically bad for those who practise it. I

have no other fear of Bogey. But come; it is a delicious evening, and I decline to say one more word about that most objectionable gentleman at present."

But during those hours of loneliness Maud resigned herself entirely to the old spell. Perhaps it was that her faith in the ordinary truths of religion was not firm, and therefore she laid hold with the greater tenacity on what purported to be a new revelation. She wrote much to her mother, who, of course, encouraged her in the pursuit of these manifestations in so far as she could engage in it without neglecting her duty to her husband. Alas! that reservation was a very elastic one. Maud had most of the day to herself; her household duties were light and soon over; the few parishioners who required her aid were rapidly attended to, and then she resigned herself to what she called, and thoroughly believed to be, "an hour's communion with the dead." She fully accepted the doctrine which had been carefully instilled into her by her mamma, that her dead father was constantly

by her side, that he influenced her hand to write automatically; that those good impressions which certainly became every day more definite were really impressions in the most literal sense of the term—sweepings of unseen fingers on the sensitive nerves of her being. She felt sure that she needed only to become clairvoyant in order to see a beloved form always near, only to become clairaudent to hear a familiar voice. So she would quietly sit every day and write, or even resign herself simply to the manipulations of those on the other side of the mystic frontier line. They had told her they could do all that was necessary; only she must be passive, and not oppose her will to their influences.

So nervous did she become when thus sitting alone that she started at the commonest sounds, and even sometimes thought she heard a footfall on the floor, and answered in articulate language her own thoughts as though they had been promptings from without. For a nervous excitable woman such an experience was fraught with peril. It threw her

dangerously back upon herself. She lived in an ideal world, and, dearly as she loved her living husband, it really seemed as though at this time she loved her dead father with a deeper, even if less demonstrative, affection.

Nor was this automatic writing the only method she adopted of obtaining her hour's communion with the dead, as she deemed it. Some years before, when the study of Spiritualism was new to her, she sat next an old gentleman at one of Mrs. Emma Hardinge's soirées in the Beethoven Rooms, Harley Street, and entered into conversation with him on the general subject of Spiritualism. He asked her if she was a medium, and she told him she had done a little writing, but always doubted whether the communications did not come from her own brain; she was perfectly able to stop the writing by the exercise of her will.

"Possibly," he replied; "but if you take my advice you will never write again."

"Why?"

"Because it is neither more nor less than possession. You resign your organism to a

spirit, who may be a pure and good one ; but when that spirit goes the channel is still open, and another of a very different order may take his place."

Maud smiled.

"You may smile ; but I am a Spiritualist of forty years' standing—long before it was called by the special name of Spiritualism ; and I have seen such disastrous results from this possession that I never fail to advise everybody I can against it."

"Then what mode of communication do you approve? Any?"

"Certainly. I live in daily communication with the world beyond."

"How?"

"By means of the crystal or the magic mirror."

This opened up quite a new world to Maud ; and the old gentleman explained to her and Mrs. Blount, who had now joined them, that the mode of communication he approved was safe, because purely objective. It involved no surrender of the organism.

"Come to my house," he said, "and you will see my speculatrix, a child of thirteen, seated before the consecrated mirror in which she reads the communications which I transcribe. I have no power of seeing myself, but I have many large quarto volumes that I have received through this child. Here is a crystal, which is more convenient, because more portable;" and he produced a small egg-shaped piece of rock crystal from his pocket. "I will lend it to this young lady, and I think she will obtain visions in it. When she has done with it, you and she can bring it back; and if you favour me so far as to visit me in the evening you can see me at work with my little seeress."

Of course Maud and her mamma went violently in for crystal-seeing, but with only partial success. The visions they obtained (for each of them "saw") were meagre, and not nearly so exciting as the freaks of John King and the Davenport spirits. So they rather laid this phase on one side for future examination; but the old man gave Maud the crystal;

and now, in her new home and renewed study of the subject, she reverted to this method of communication, though even now not to the exclusion of the automatic writing.

While her husband, then, was scampering up and down the parish on foot, or riding his parson's cob over the breezy heaths, Maud sat thus within her enchanted chamber; and he might never have known anything about it had it not been for a new "development," which caused considerable alarm for some time at the rectory.

Maud had now a definite plan of action. Every day—sometimes twice a day—she would retire to her little boudoir dressing-room, opening from her bedroom, and lighted with a tiny latticed window over which the ivy and creepers drooped so as to form a "dim religious light." Here she would lock herself in, and read some passage from a work bearing either directly or indirectly on Spiritualism. The vulgar literature of "the cause" she eschewed; but she would take up Tennyson's "In Memoriam," Isaac Taylor's "Physical Theory," or

Bailey's "Festus," and from one of these select a passage which seemed to suit her purpose. On the day in question she read from the first-named work, in a monotonous voice, the lines—

Dare I say
No spirit ever broke the band
That stays him from the native land
Where first he walked when claspt in clay?

No visual shade of some one lost,
But he, the Spirit himself, may come;
Where all the nerve of sense is dumb,
Spirit to Spirit, Ghost to Ghost.

* * * *

Descend, and touch, and enter; hear
The wish too strong for words to name;
That, in the blindness of the frame,
My Ghost may feel that thine is near.

The particular date of this occurrence was Hallow-e'en; and Maud and her mamma had always observed those three days—Hallow-e'en, All Saints', and All Souls'—with peculiar honour. They had a theory that the spirit-world impinged more closely upon the natural just then, or that the associations inspired by

our surroundings at those particular times were likely to bring us more easily into communion. Sitting by herself in the sombre light of her little room, with the ivy and red Virginian creeper flapping at the pane in the October breeze, Maud felt the *genius loci* full upon her, and resigned herself gladly to its influence.

"Dear, dear papa, are you with me?" she asked, in a subdued tone.

Immediately her hand was moved violently, and she made a succession of spiral marks on the paper. Then, while she stared into vacancy, she wrote in a perfectly legible shape the words—

"I am with you always—now especially. I am going to try a new kind of control. I shall seek to entrance you to-day."

"And then, instead of your coming to me here in this dreary wintry world, I shall be with you in your bright summer land. Oh, dear papa, do!"

She said no more, but fell back placidly in her easy-chair, and became as one dead.

An hour—two hours—passed, and no one

noticed her absence; for it had become her constant custom thus to lock herself in her dressing-room. Her servants had orders not to disturb her on any account, and did as best they could without her. Only Blobbs, who was rustivating at the rectory while Mrs. Blount paid country visits, guessed what was going on. He said nothing to the other servants; for he had a calm and supercilious contempt for country-folk, whom he regarded as benighted pagans. But he told the rector what he thought, and asked him if he had not noticed that Mrs. Campbell looked "dreamy-like."

He *had* noticed it; but he laughed it off, and said young ladies, married as well as single, often did look dreamy-like.

Maud was generally waiting in the porch to receive him when he came in at luncheon or dinner-time; and when he did not see her on this occasion, a passing thought crossed his mind as to whether the time was coming when the *petits soins* of married life would be given up between them. It was, he had heard,

inevitable that they should fall into desuetude ; but it seemed early just at present.

“ Where is Mrs. Campbell, Blobbs ? ” he said, as he came through the garden.

Blobbs was in waiting for him there.

“ Don’t say nothing to the women-folk, sir ; but Miss Maud—I mean the young missis—is still locked in her room. I have found out that from her maid. Go you up, sir, and see that all is right. If not, call me quietly.”

Mr. Campbell went up, but returned in a few minutes with a face of blank dismay.

“ The door of my wife’s dressing-room is locked, Blobbs, and I can get no reply. I shall break it open. Come up with me, and prevent anybody entering the bedroom if I make a noise. Take care my wife does not see you.”

The door yielded easily to Mr. Campbell’s powerful shoulders, and he found his wife lying as if dead. She was pale and rigid ; but a glance at the table showed him in a moment the secret of her condition.

“ All right, Blobbs,” he said ; “ it is as we

suspected. She is in a trance. Thanks to my spiritualistic and mesmeric experiences at Maida Hill, I know how to manage that. Go downstairs, and tell them to get luncheon ready. We shall be down directly."

He then locked the bedroom, and by the help of his tool-chest repaired the damaged hinges of the dressing-room door. A few vigorous mesmeric passes over Maud's face restored her to consciousness, and, as she came to herself, he kissed the red lips and said, in a tone of banter—

"A nice wife, indeed, Miss Maud! The honeymoon has newly waned, and here you are in a deep sleep instead of coming down to welcome your liege lord."

"My dear Willie, how did you get in?" asked Maud, very naturally.

"Through the door, Maud."

"I locked it."

"Love laughs at locksmiths. If Mrs. Pugsby can sail up through a ceiling, why should not a fairy-like creature like me manage a door?"

"How very ridiculous!"

"I wish I could get you to see it in that light. You waste a deal of valuable time in this development, as you call it. But come to luncheon. I am hungry as a hunter, and you certainly look as though your sleep had done you good. Come downstairs."

Maud hid the papers that were on the table, flattering herself that, in his anxiety about herself, her husband might not have read them. He had, however, and their contents filled him with an anxiety which he only dissembled when he spoke in a sportive tone on the subject of this developing process.

Wherever Maud had been in her two hours' sleep, she certainly came back radiant, ate a hearty luncheon, and consented to make her infatuated husband happy by taking a drive with him in the pony-chaise all the afternoon.






CHAPTER X.

A NEW IMMORTAL.

O change, O wondrous change!
Burst are the prison bars;
This moment here, so low,
So agonised, and now
Beyond the stars!

O change, stupendous change!
There lies the soulless clod:
The sun eternal breaks,
The new immortal wakes—
Wakes with his God.—BOWLES.

HRISTMAS was a pleasant time at the rectory. Mrs. Blount, of course, was to be a guest, and constitute the party a family gathering. Dr. Mason accompanied her as her cavalier; but was only permitted to do so on condition of sitting at séances whenever desired or permitted to do so, and of never calling them hocus-pocus.

Mrs. Pugsby, who was still held in double honour as the prognosticator of the marriage and the presiding genius of Briarwood, was also welcomed with all enthusiasm; and Mr. Blathersby might have been included but for that lady specially requesting he might not be. He was displaying considerable personal enmity to herself, and she did not believe he was a Spiritualist at heart at all. There was some talk of his selling the *Anti-Christian* to the Secularists.

"You dear old Corkscrew," said Maud, "you must let me call you by that name, though it doesn't sound respectful. It puts one in mind of old times, and I always feel as though I owed my husband and he his living to you."

"I was only the mouthpiece of the sperrits, Mrs. Campbell," she replied.

"Mouthpiece or not, I don't believe that dear reticent old boy would have got his proposal out by this time if you had not written it down for him on a piece of paper. Would you, Willie?"

"I expect you would have brought me to book in some way or other, in any case. If not, there was that match-making old mother of yours, who would not have let you miss such a chance."

"Chance, indeed!" replied Mrs. Blount, taking up their tone of badinage. "I don't call it much of a chance to bestow one's daughter upon a wretched Bluebeard who would make her look twenty years older in—let me see, how long is it?—about seven months."

"Thank you, mamma."

"Come here, Maud," said her husband, and taking both her thin white hands in his, he looked straight into her lustrous eyes, "are you so old and haggard as they say? I had scarcely noticed it. You do look older. Either matrimony or Briarwood doesn't agree with you. What do you say, doctor; can we screw a prescription *gratis* out of you?"

"By the terms of my agreement with Mrs. Blount," answered the old doctor pompously,

"I am forbidden to tell you what is the cause of Mrs. Campbell's illness."

"I beg to say I am *not* ill," said Maud.

"I mean Mrs. Campbell's elderly and haggard appearance."

"What does the dotard mean by saying I forbid him to speak plainly? What is the matter with Maud, you most incompetent of general practitioners?"

"Spiritualism—neither more nor less—you most charming of homœopathic ladies," replied Dr. Mason, referring in his reply to Mrs. Blount's last new mania. She had become a determined homœopathist, and added another bone of contention to those already existing between herself and the doctor.

"Back you go, sir; back home at once," said the widow. "Though it wants not an hour of the Christmas dinner, and I know you have an empty larder at home—off you pack, bag and baggage—for you promised not to say a word against Spiritualism, and you begin to cackle forthwith. I suppose you will want

to forbid our Christmas Day séance next, when Mr. Ball is specially engaged to come down after his afternoon service for it."

Everybody laughed to see the doctor's pretended dread of his fair assailant's invectives; but he diverted attention from himself by saying—

"Goodness gracious! what is the matter with old Corkscrew? She's got spasms."

Mrs. Pugsby was writhing about in a way that certainly would have suggested to an outsider that she was violently ill. The doctor knew as well as the rest that it was only the sign of a spirit "assuming control." In a few minutes she became calm, and made indications that she wished to write. Paper and pencil were brought, and, to the amazement of the ladies, this illiterate female wrote—

"Gloria in excelsis Deo, Pax——"

Here she came to a dead stop.

"Extraordinary!" said Mrs. Blount, as is the custom with Spiritualists on every occasion.

"Surely," added Maud, "you will confess this curious, Willie. What do you say, doctor?"

"*Ben trovato*. I daren't say more."

"A very neat way of stopping all discussions," said the rector. "If you attended to my sermon this morning, which it seems pretty clear you did not, you will remember I suggested that on this one day of the year, at all events, everything in the shape of disagreement should be held in abeyance. Let us act on that principle; or, as Mrs. Pugsby put it in three letters, let there be 'Pax.'"

"I observed it, dear Willie, and knew exactly what you meant. You intended delicately to hint that such was the only method of securing 'conditions' for my long-expected Christmas séance. Surely the angels must be nearer to us to-day than at other times."

"Have a care, doctor," continued the rector, "Mrs. Pugsby has more mischief on hand. She will pair you off with Mrs. Blount to-day, as she did me with Maud, if she doesn't appropriate you herself. But here is Ball coming.

I have got so familiarised to the sounds of this place that I can catch the sound of wheels at a fabulous distance."

"Clairaudient, dear," said Mrs. Blount.

Mr. Ball came in to complete the party, and seemed to bring the fresh, clear, crisp Christmas weather with him. Snow was beginning to fall heavily outside, he told them, and everything looked as seasonable as possible.

Mrs. Pugsby "came to" opportunely, and there was a suspension of all reference to Spiritualism while justice was being done to Mrs. Campbell's excellent Christmas fare.

It was deep in the evening before the members of the circle could be got together, but then they sat down determinedly in the drawing-room for a long evening's table-rapping. It was not thought desirable to attempt any higher form of manifestation because Dr. Mason and Mr. Campbell were to be sitters, and each of these was regarded as somewhat sceptical, though the rector was almost considered a proselyte.

There was the usual amount of pirouetting

on the part of the table. There were raps and tilts, and a good deal of not very edifying exercise with the alphabet, when suddenly Mrs. Pugsby showed symptoms of going into a trance again.

"Corkscrew in spasms," exclaimed the doctor. "She feels sinking, and wants something comfortable."

"She's going to hand you or Mr. Ball over to Mrs. Blount," said the rector.

"Maud, dear, have you paper and pencil? You look tired, child; shall we break off?"

Mrs. Pugsby took the pencil, and wrote violently on the paper—

"Stop at once. Maud is ill."

Before she had finished, Mrs. Campbell had settled the matter by fainting in her husband's arms.

There was a commotion, amid which Maud was carried to her room by her husband, and nobody noticed that Mrs. Pugsby went on writing. These were the words—

"Maud will not sit at any more séances for a long time."

When the medium recovered consciousness she was, or, at all events, professed to be, greatly alarmed and astonished to find herself alone. She rang the bell, and when Blobbs tardily appeared, inquired what was the matter.

Blobbs, in a tone of virtuous indignation which he evidently could not control, answered—

“Missis is very ill—and will be worse, Mrs. Pugsby; and I can’t help saying as it is you have a done it with your horrid spirit-rapping. Rapping, indeed! I wish I had the rapping of some of you.”

His speech was cut short by the entrance of the two clergymen. Maud had recovered from her fainting-fit, and wished to be left alone with her mother. Dr. Mason joined them in a few minutes. Blobbs lingered at the door to hear what his report was.

“Mr. Campbell,” said the old man, in a tone of unwonted solemnity, “I must speak seriously. Your wife is very ill, and I decline the responsibility of the case. There will be a

premature event, and I should wish the regular attendant to be called in."

Blobbs took his cue, and was off immediately for the village doctor.

"You seem, Dr. Mason," said the rector, when the man had left, "to speak in a tone almost of asperity to me. I cannot imagine for what reason."

"Can you not, Mr. Campbell? Then I will tell you; and I will fearlessly use words which will sound very bold. I consider your wife's life is in peril by her practice of spiritualism—a practice, allow me to suggest, which you could have prohibited."

"I excuse an old friend of the family for using words which in an ordinary medical attendant I should, of course, resent as an impertinence."

"I am no medical attendant at all in this house. I desire that the gentleman who acts in this capacity may not be informed that I am a medical man, because he would expect me to tell him that which I am pledged not to divulge."

"But you surely do not suspect me of encouraging Maud's spiritualistic pursuits. I have always set my face against them. I hate and detest the subject. My dear friend Ball, here, will confess it is about the only point on which we differ. I will tell the medical man all the truth. I have perhaps been culpable in not forbidding Maud to pursue the subject at all."

"Frankly, I think you have, Willie," said Dr. Mason, addressing the rector for the first time by his Christian name. "Forgive me if I have said anything to wound your feelings; but I love that dear girl, and cannot bear to see her suffering as she is. It is no use to talk to her mother. She is simply a monomaniac on the subject of Spiritualism; but I do ask you to use your influence—your authority, if necessary—to prevent Maud from dabbling in this dangerous pursuit for the future. Now, you wretched old Corkscrew, what do you want? The first thing I shall do will be to have you packed home by an early train to-morrow morning. If devils have anything to do with this matter you bring them."

Poor Mrs. Pugsby was shut up, and simply handed them the paper on which she had written after Maud fainted.

"For a long time indeed! I hope, Mr. Campbell, you will make it a very long time. The idea of writing these messages, as though they came from my dear old friend Blount. I am sure he has something much better to do where he is now than attend to the likes of you, you old witch."

Mrs. Pugsby was astonished to find herself thus made the object of vituperation; and, not knowing exactly what else to do, snivelled into a dirty white pocket-handkerchief.

"Doctor, go upstairs; you are wanted—immediately," said Mrs. Blount, entering with a face full of dismay.

The old man shambled off, looking daggers at the widow, and mumbling, "I wish that village doctor would attend to his patients."

"Mother," said Mr. Campbell, with tears in his eyes, "there must be an end of this."

"An end of what, Willie? I fear there is an end of poor Maud. What do you mean?"

"I agree with Dr. Mason that the spirits, as you term them, are responsible for all this."

"The spirits! Oh, Willie! The only chance of dear Maud pulling through is by the help of the spirits. Poor Dr. Mason is useless. If you would only let Mrs. Pugsby go up now——"

"I forbid it sternly. I will not allow that woman to see my wife again if I can help it."

Pugsby snivelled afresh.

Dr. Mason reappeared, and told Mrs. Blount she could go upstairs again.

"Campbell," he said, "I wish I could congratulate you. A son is born to you; but it would be hard to say whether the mother or child has the feebler hold on existence."

After a protracted delay, during which the local leech had been entertaining his family with snapdragon, that functionary made his appearance, and Dr. Mason forthwith retired into the background. He went up to the sick-room with the air of an *Æsculapius*; and after a prolonged absence returned with the welcome intelligence that Mrs. Campbell was better, but

that he thought the rector had better christen the baby.

"Oblige me by calling him Mason, after me, Campbell," said the old doctor, "if only to show that you have forgiven my warmth."

"I forgive you anything that you said in your love for darling Maud," replied Mr. Campbell.

The rector accompanied the village leech upstairs; and the latter said, as soon as they left the room—

"I did not like to ask you before your friend—sad break-up of a Christmas party, indeed—but has your wife had anything to agitate her during the last few days?"

"I fear she has."

"Ah! I should have been at a loss to account for this mishap in any other way. You will control yourself if I let you see her, and take care to have her kept very quiet."

Mr. Campbell wondered whether the man thought he was going to introduce a party of Ethiopian serenaders, or fire off a gun in the

bedroom. But he knew it was the ordinary verbiage of his craft, and simply assented.

Then he bent over and kissed his wife's white lips, as she lay moaning, and asking whether her baby was going to die.

"Dear Maud," he said tenderly, "we hope he will live; but we must prepare for any emergency. You would like him to be christened in any case, would you not?"

"Yes, Willie, and give him—give him papa's name."

"What was that, darling? I have forgotten whether you have told me."

"Thomas."

So the poor little fragile creature, as it lay hovering between death and life, was christened in Maud's little-dressing room by the name of Thomas Mason. Five minutes after the brief ceremony was over it breathed its last.

"Willie, Willie!" said Mrs. Blount, as the stricken father buried his face in his hands and wept, "don't do that. Let me take it down to Mrs. Pugsby, and ask her to mesmerise it."

"I forbid you to touch the poor darling," answered the rector. "It is one of God's own little ones now. It would be sacrilege for that woman to look upon it. Let me never see her again."

"I cannot hear all you are saying," moaned poor Maud, from her bed; "but I know the poor little one is taken from me. Is it not so, Willie?"

"Only for a little while, Maud."

"But he is taken. Oh, what have I done to deserve this?" Give me back my baby. Give him to me, dead or alive. He would not have died if you had left him with me. You have killed him between you out there. Give me the poor little body, even if the spirit seems to have fled from it. I will not believe that he is dead. He cannot be dead. Give him back to me, I say."

With much difficulty they persuaded Mr. Campbell to go downstairs. Pugsby had been sent to bed with something comfortable; and arrangements were made that she should leave by the first train in the morning. She ran

hourly risk of being lynched as long as she remained at the rectory, or even in the parish.

Maud had a long, hard battle for life ; but youth carried her through at last ; and, certainly, if good wishes and heartfelt prayers could avail anything, her recovery was a foregone conclusion. The great difficulty was to reconcile her to the loss of her child. Could that have been spared to her, she might have recovered more speedily.

In a few days the rector's first grave was opened in the village churchyard, and that little seed was sown for immortality on the earliest day of the New Year. Mr. Ball officiated at the funeral ; and it was a long time before anybody knew who raised the tiny cross of marble at the grave-head, with the child's two Christian names, and the simple legend, "Of such is the kingdom of heaven."





CHAPTER XI.

WIDOW HUNTING.

Widowhood, more worthier than wedlock !

Piers Plowman.

WHEN the widow returned to her solitary house in Maida Hill, after a long spell of visits to her friends and her attendance on Maud during her illness, there seemed, at first, some danger that she would find that hitherto lively spot very much like a howling wilderness ; and it was really only a strong sense of duty to herself and her children—as she termed Mr. Campbell and Maud—that made her refuse the invitation of the rector to take up her residence at Briarwood.

“No, Willie,” she said ; “I made up my mind I never would assume the position of the

ordinary mother-in-law in reference to you and dear Maud ; that is reason Number One why I must decline your tempting offer. I will visit you as often as you like, but I will be in your house on sufferance, not as a matter of right. Then, again, dear Maud's long illness" (it was waxing towards the early spring when she spoke) "has been very trying to me."

"And to all of us, dear mother."

"Yes ; but you, Willie, have got youth on your side, as dear Maud herself has. I am getting an old woman."

"I should not like to have made that assertion while you were within earshot."

"You might have done so with perfect safety. No ; it will be convenient for you and Maud to have a London as well as a country home ; indeed, as soon as our dear girl is well enough to leave, and the weather is at all warm, I should suggest that she comes to me for awhile, even before going to the seaside."

"I think it would be wise."

"Besides this—but you will laugh at what I am going to say now."

"Perhaps; but do say it. It is a long time since we have had any laughter in this house."

"What I was going to say is, I cannot do without my Spiritualism; and I believe you accept that dear idiotic old doctor's assertion that this is at the bottom of Maud's illness."

"I make no sweeping assertions, and am about to issue no imperial commands on the subject. As Maud was then situated, I think it was imprudent for her to sit so much; but for that I was greatly responsible in leaving her so much alone. I have advertised for a curate, who will be in sole charge here while I take Maud for a long holiday in the summer, and whom I hope to retain as my coadjutor afterwards. I began too fiercely at parochial work and neglected my wife, who took to this kind of spiritualistic dram-drinking in order to make up for my absence from home."

So Mrs. Blount left Briarwood soon after Maud was able to come downstairs. The

poor young wife had suffered relapse after relapse, and apparently tried every method of escape from this sublunary sphere; but her physical constitution was excellent, and the constant care of those about her pulled her through. She was now beginning to regain her old look and her former spirits, and was quite reconciled to the change when she saw her mother depart with faithful old Blobbs in attendance.

“Good-by, darling,” she said; “mind you let me know the latest news from spirit-land as soon as you get to town; and be sure you give my love to dear old Corkscrew.”

Mrs. Pugsby had felt considerably out in the cold of late, and had to undergo a good deal of sinking; for the London business was sadly monopolised by Professor Buncombe. Foreign talent is as much preferred before native industry in spirits of Mrs. Pugsby’s kind as in those of an alcoholic character, and Buncombe for a time carried all London before him.

As soon, therefore, as Mrs. Blount returned to town, Mrs. Pugsby gladly accepted

an invitation to come and stay at Maida Hill. The first salutation she received there was an ample apology from Mr. Blobbs, who excused the warmth of his language on a certain memorable occasion to the devotion he felt for his young mistress.

Mrs. Pugsby received the communication with becoming hauteur, and requested Mr. Blobbs to "keep in his place," or she should inform his mistress.

"Take my umbrella, sir, and show me upstairs at once," she added.

From his Oriental retirement, too, the Reverend Enoch Trees felt it incumbent upon him to issue forth and convert Mrs. Blount from the error of her ways. It seemed dreadful, he said, that the comely widow should be left as a brand for the burning. What, though he might have to sacrifice himself on the altar of Hymen to prevent the burning of that brand, he could face even such a contingency as this for the truth's sake and the good of his fellow-creatures. That was how the Reverend Enoch Trees put it exoterically. In the secrecy of

his own consciousness he could not but acknowledge that his Transfordanic Bethabara did not answer. The congregation were enthusiastic, but needy. He wanted a better sphere for his energies; and a West-end chapel, with a well-to-do widow to back it up, struck him as a contingency that might induce him to face even Hymen himself for its accomplishment.

Next to the source of Mr. Trees's "réverence," which nobody had ever been able to sound, the greatest mystery attaching to him was the exact character of his religious opinions. His own statement that he was made all things to all men, that he might by all means save some, seemed vague and elastic enough; and when supplemented by his impartial award of utter condemnation to all who differed in the slightest degree from himself; rendered him a somewhat denunciatory person. His hand was against every man and every man's hand against him. What he wanted at the present moment, however, was not a man's hand, but a woman's. In

a word, he resolved to try his fortunes with the fair widow at Maida Hill.

When he arrived there, he found, as we have said, Mrs. Pugsby installed as sole visitor. Indeed, the two ladies were just regaling themselves with some table-turning after luncheon, and Mrs. Blount was by no means well pleased that Blobbs had not denied her to "that odious Mr. Trees," as she openly termed him.

"Never mind, let him come up," she said. "Keep your hands on the table, Mrs. Pugsby, and let us hear what he will say. We shall have some fun."

When Mr. Trees entered and beheld the Delphic priestess at her tripod, he seemed to debate with himself for a moment whether he should not beat a hasty retreat; but no, virtue prevailed. He had a mission to fulfil; and he would fulfil it with all the boldness of a John Baptist at the Court of Herod. Mrs. Pugsby's nose must be put out as a preliminary measure.

"I am truly sorry, my dear madam," said Trees, opening fire at once, "to see the nature of the avocation in which you and this—this 'person'—are engaged." Mrs. Blount had asked his permission to reassume her place at the table, where she could talk to him quite well; indeed, he might sit himself if he liked; but this was declined. "Are you aware that you are practising necromancy?"

"Quite, Mr. Trees," said the widow, disconcerting her interrogator by the reply. "Yes, we are prophesying by means of the dead. Quite so."

"By means of the devil, madam," replied Trees, who did not know so well as the widow did what necromancy meant.

"And by means of the devil too, perhaps. Why not? I daresay he would be able to tell us a great many interesting things, and possibly we could reform him."

Mr. Trees shivered, or pretended to shiver, inside his Blucher boots and capacious dress-coat. He was a large, flat-faced, oleaginous man, with lank, straight hair, and hands like

paddles. When he did shake, it was as the quivering of a blanc-mange.

“Reform Satan, Mrs. Blount, Oh!” And he lifted up both paddles in dismay.

“Yes, that is the characteristic of Spirituallism, that it gives hope to everybody. Your *ism*, whatever it is, and I have never been able quite to learn, seems to have a hope for nobody.”

“And is that the kind of teaching you derive from that—that person—opposite. I see she is writing something now.”

“Yes; that is the kind of teaching I get from my very excellent friend Mrs. Pugsby. She is possessed by a spirit now, and writing a message. Would you like to see what it is?”

“Oh no!” said Trees, shrinking from the sheet of paper as though it smelt of sulphur. It was as well he did perhaps, for on it was written—

“Trees is no parson.”

The widow laughed heartily, and concealing the paper, said, “I am sure you would con-

sider this communication Satanic. I quite believe it."

As the subject of Spiritualism did not promise to be a very amicable one, Mr. Trees thought he had better change it, or he might defeat his object. It would be time enough to snub the comely widow's penchant for that pursuit when he got possession of her; if he ever accomplished so very desirable a result.

Mrs. Blount appeared to take the same view of things, and suggested that Spiritualism should be a tabooed subject between them, and that Mr. Trees should stop to afternoon tea.

This was exactly what Mr. Trees wanted, and he resolved to be civil to Mrs. Pugsby forthwith, since he could see she stood high in the widow's estimation.

"A delightful part of town this, my dear madam. It is not for me to repine at my lot, but I could sometimes almost wish that the lines had fallen unto me in these pleasant places, that here I might have my goodly heritage."

"Why not migrate, Mr. Trees? You are hiding your light under a bushel out at the East-end of London."

"Ha!" said the oleaginous one, pronouncing the interjection so very nasally that it sounded more like "Ma."

"If I saw a very favourable opening hereabouts I might feel a call," he added, on reflection.

"If you do I will come and hear you sometimes; but you must know I generally go to Mr. Ball's in the morning, and to the Supernatural Lyceum in the evening."

"Do they, then, have Sabbath services?"

"No, not Sabbath—Sunday services. We have a good many Jews in Maida Hill, and they go to synagogue on Sabbath; so do the Seventh-day Baptists out in your neighbourhood, I believe."

Trees did not, or would not, see the point of the correction, but proceeded: "Mr. Ball is a very Broad Churchman, is he not?"

"Delightfully latitudinarian. One of his enemies spoke censoriously of him as being

‘slightly tainted with orthodoxy,’ but there is really no foundation for the rumour.”

“Ha!”—which sounded again as though he addressed the widow in the capacity of his maternal parent.

“Now who, in the name of goodness, is this?” said Mrs. Blount, as a knock and ring came at the street-door. “Just as I wanted to have a nice tête-à-tête with Mr. Trees, we must be interrupted. Pugsby, would you mind going down and warning Blobbs that I am not at home to strangers? We can have a tête-à-tête for so long at all events,” she added, quite coyly, to Mr. Trees.

Trees thought it was something to eat, and looked in vain for the servant to bring it in on a tray. He had no notion of drinking tea without some cold meat and pickles, or a bit of German sausage, or something toothy.

“Go in, you dreadful old Sycorax,” the cheery voice of Dr. Mason was heard exclaiming, “and don’t try to corrupt Blobbs by teaching him to tell lies. The morals of you Spiritualists,” he went on, as he entered

the room and shook the widow heartily by the hand, "are something dreadful to contemplate. I hope, by the way, this reverend gentleman is not one of the craft."

"Oh no, sir; very far from it," exclaimed Enoch.

"I am glad to hear it on all accounts. First, because—if our fair hostess will excuse my saying so—there is one fool less in the world; and, secondly, because any reverend gentleman who goes in for ghosts, draws upon this good lady's affections to such an extent as to leave me no chance. Now, look here, sir; will you allow me to speak plainly?"

"Oh, certainly," said Trees, not knowing in the least whether the facetious old man was in joke or earnest. In fact, he was anxiously awaiting the tête-à-tête, and wondering whether it would be nice when it came.

"Very well, then. After an absence of I don't know how many months from this fair lady, I come back and find her en tête-à-tête with—you will pardon me for saying—a very dangerous rival."

“Ha!” replied the reverend gentleman. But what did this old fool mean by saying they were en tête-à-tête? He had not seen it yet.

“However, as I said, if you ain’t ghosty—and I must confess you don’t look as though you were—I’m your man, and one of us must die.”

Clearly, Trees thought he had got among lunatics.

“Are you spiritualistic, sir?” he asked.

“To a certain extent, I am. That is, I am always prone to sing ‘Sweet spirit hear my prayer,’ when I come to see Mrs. Blount; but as for the hocus-pocus of that old Corkscrew yonder, I’d like to burn her as a witch, and mean to try if I can’t some day, for I don’t believe the statute has ever been repealed.”

Then followed an experience which was painful to all parties. Dr. Mason and the Reverend Enoch Trees each tried to sit the other out. Trees drank cup after cup of tea, and refused thin bread and butter in expectation of that mysterious tête-à-tête which never

came ; but Dr. Mason inwardly vowed that if Trees sat until midnight, he would remain until the morrow morning. So at last Mr. Trees had to go, and said, as he was leaving, that he would take the liberty of inditing a letter to Mrs. Blount on the subject of their recent conversation, together with divers other matters which were exercising his mind. He then shook hands cordially with the widow, bowed very distantly to Mrs. Pugsby and the doctor, and waddled out.

“ May I exert the privilege of a very old friend, and ask what that clerical walrus can have to write to you about ? ”

“ He thinks of taking a West-end chapel, and coming near me. ”

“ The deuce he does ! Then, as I see Pugsby is either asleep or in a trance, let me say three words to you seriously and solemnly ; ” and he whispered, “ I love you. ”

“ My dear Dr. Mason, what do you mean ? ”

“ Exactly what I say. I have bottled-up my feelings all these months, and did not mean to draw the cork just now ; but your

clerical friend has brought matters to a crisis.

“May I hope?”

“No.”

“You will marry him.”

“Never—he has not asked me.”

“But he will.”

“I would as soon marry Blobbs.”

“Must I consider your answer as final?”

“Quite. I shall never marry. I devote myself to my children.”

“And prospective grandchildren. But you won’t let this make any difference in our friendship?”

“Not if you will promise never in the faintest way to approach the subject again.”

“I do promise. I am really very wretched, though I do not rave like a young Romeo; but I promise you never to allude to the matter again.”

Here Pugsby nodded and woke herself up, and the old doctor gladly accepted an invitation to dinner, if Mrs. Blount would only let him remain in his present costume.

The permission was given ; and they passed the evening pleasantly, discussing Maud's plans for the approaching summer.

" You will not think me cantankerous, will you," said Dr. Mason, " if I suggest that our dear girl should be carefully kept clear from our Corkscrew's little games ?"

" Not at all. Both Mrs. Pugsby and myself quite feel that it is dangerous for a person to sit much who is not in good health. They often lose much vital power by forming part of a miscellaneous circle."

By the early post next morning came a stout letter, addressed to Mrs. Blount, and marked " Private." It was from the Reverend Enoch Trees, and commencing with the words " Honoured madam," concluded with the same three which Dr. Mason had uttered *vivâ voce*. By the very next post Mrs. Blount despatched to that reverend gentleman a refusal even more curt than that she had bestowed on Dr. Mason, and without conceding to the

parson, as she had to the doctor, the right of enjoying her friendship for the future. A second letter from Mr. Trees, stipulating for this privilege, she desired Mrs. Pugsby, as her amanuensis, simply to acknowledge but not to answer.





CHAPTER XII.

MRS. PUGSBY'S REVELATIONS.

For as a Turk that is to act some crime
Against his Prophet's holy law,
Is wont to bid his soul withdraw
And leave his body for a time ;
So when some horrid action's to be done
Our Turkish proselyte puts on
Another spirit, and lays by his own :
And when his overheated brain
Turns giddy like his brother Mussulman,
He's judged inspired, and all his frenzies held
To be prophetic and revealed.—BUTLER.



WHEN they had fairly got over the two clear months of east wind which usher in the modern English summer, and that most perilous period of all, May Day, was left well behind, the rector of Briarwood and his wife, now happily convalescent, quitted the Surrey village for a short sojourn in town previous to a somewhat lengthened

holiday, the locality for which was not at first decided.

The Maida Hill establishment was *en fête* for the occasion, and everybody came to pay their respects to the young couple whose first wedding-day was celebrated beneath the maternal roof. Professor Buncombe was pioneered by Mr. Blathersby, and, contrary to his custom, volunteered to give a séance gratis. Mr. Blathersby was offensively familiar on the strength of the funds which Professor Buncombe brought to the Supernatural Lyceum, and asked Maud how it felt to be married—he! he! he! Didn't she wish she had accepted some good Spiritualist like himself—and so on. But Maud was feeling so well, and her husband was so rejoiced to see this the case, that they were in no humour to quarrel with anybody, and the dear credulous widow wrapped up the double fee on which Blathersby had calculated when he suggested the gratuitous séance.

"It pays to do the self-denying with some people, you know. Refuse the fee firmly. I

know she'll press it on you. Don't be afraid; and mind, my terms are 50 per cent."

"Fixed, my boy," replied the Yankee practitioner.

Professor Buncombe's *tour de force* was the answering questions which were submitted to him in a closed adhesive envelope; but with this suggestive proviso that the cover should not be sealed with wax. The spirits had an objection to wax, but would answer anything that was enclosed in a fastened cover in an incredibly short space of time. The performance was really a very curious one; and the Professor charged half a guinea for it—a guinea if he waited on you at home. Blathersby knew that the widow was good for two guineas under any circumstances.

Mrs. Pugsby declined to meet her American rival, and Blathersby proceeded to descant on the fact, until he was promptly shut up by Mrs. Blount, who said—

"Please to remember that Mrs. Pugsby is my particular friend and private medium." To which the sinewless one replied with his eternal,

“He! he! he!”

Professor Buncombe being a Yankee was, of course, before all else 'cute, and licked the Britisher, as he thought, by cleverly shaving the edges of the Vagrancy Act. Instead of giving it out definitely to the non-elect that he obtained his results by means of spirits, he called his performance “Psychological Prestidigitation.” He performed certain results after, he informed his circle, the most rigid course of preparation—physical, intellectual, and spiritual. In what this consisted was, of course, his secret; but he left people to infer, without actually asserting, that the arts involved were occult, and that he, by the adoption of them, placed himself *en rapport* with a class of agencies different from, if not superior to, those at work around us. The results were curious, and, but for the persistent objection to sealing-wax, would have been satisfactory. Take an example.

The circle assembled in Mrs. Blount's drawing-room gathered round the table, and everybody provided themselves with a closed

envelope, containing a piece of paper, on which a question had been written. The paper was privately marked by the writers for the purpose of identification, and never left their possession. As no assumption of spiritual agency was directly made, Dr. Mason salved his conscience and satisfied his curiosity by joining the circle. He produced his envelope carefully closed up, and held on to the corner like grim death, while Professor Buncombe just took the opposite corner between his thumb and first finger. They then placed it beneath the table, while all the rest of the circle watched narrowly. The answer was some time in coming; but presently a scratching was heard inside the cover, and the operator proceeded to read the question and answer.

"What was the question, doctor?" asked Professor Buncombe, as he fumbled at opening the letter. "You have fixed this cover pretty tight."

"Give me some test from my experience of the past week that you know my movements."

"Now read the answer."

"I'll be hanged if I do," said the doctor, laughing, but at the same time reddening to the roots of his white hair. "I'll hand it to Mrs. Blount, and she may make it public if she likes. If old Corkscrew wasn't shamming sleep, and isn't in the swim with these people, then I smell brimstone, Mrs. Blount."

The reply was—

"Popped to the widow last Tuesday and got refused."

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed Mrs. Blount. "You are satisfied now, doctor, I suppose?"

"Satisfied with the truth of the communication, but by no means satisfied with its subject."

"May I keep the paper?"

"By all means; but don't publish it in the *Anti-Christian*."

"Perhaps the spirits will give it to me without Mrs. Blount's intervention," simpered the editor.

"I'll give it to you if they do. Horse-whipping editors has sadly gone out of fashion, and I'm not at all sure that horse-

whipping pretended mediums mightn't be with advantage substituted."

The fierce old doctor looked not whips only, but scorpions, at the unmoved American practitioner.

The widow had asked for advice, and was counselled to "translate Enoch," a suggestion which she also carefully concealed.

"I say, you old folks," exclaimed the rector, "this isn't fair. You seem brimful of mystery. We can't appreciate the value of the evidence if you all keep your answers concealed."

"Really they are so private that I cannot divulge them," answered Mrs. Blount. "Wait till your turn comes, Willie; I daresay you will not wish your answer proclaimed upon the housetop."

"Very probably not. I shall want to keep it a profound secret, seeing that I have asked the Christian and surname of my parish clerk at Briarwood."

"Well, it *will* be satisfactory if we get that. Read the reply."

"Right to a letter," said the rector, "and more than I asked for: 'Jonathan Perkins, shoemaker.' This is very curious. Nobody here can know him except ourselves."

"Corkscrew's in the swim," said the doctor. "She knows him. She hasn't been down to Briarwood for nothing."

"Nonsense, doctor. Unbelief is sometimes more credulous than credulity itself. If Corkscrew did know it, how in nature could she get it here?"

"Nature has very little to do with it."

"Then how in the name of the supernatural? You seem to have swallowed the entire system wholesale."

"I said nothing about the supernatural. It's art—artfulness, nothing else."

"The Art, as I told you," said the Professor, quite unruffled, "of Psychological Prestidigitation."

"Confound your polysyllables!" said Dr. Mason, getting quite angry.

Then came Maud's turn.

She had written, "What spirit is always

near me?" and fully expected that the name of her child would be given. Not so, however; the reply was, "Your father. The little one has gone up higher."

Then the rector wanted to ask a further question; but this was altogether objected to. No more than one question could ever be answered; and Blathersby, who was packing up the shorthand notes he had been writing at the Professor's elbow, firmly declined all entreaties to repeat the exhibition even when an advance of terms was quietly suggested by Mrs. Blount. The power was exhausted, and the Professor had another engagement; so they pocketed their guineas, refreshed, and went their way.

But while everybody was puzzled at the *modus operandi* of Professor Buncombe, nobody, not even Mrs. Blount herself, was much impressed with the spiritualistic character of his exhibition.

"In what faculty is your Transatlantic friend a Professor, madam?" asked Dr. Mason, by way of opening up a criticism.

"Nothing higher than legerdemain, doctor, I should think."

"Then you don't believe him?"

"I did not quite say that, did I? It is very probable that he is a medium—indeed, I am disposed to think that most conjurors are; but I think he supplements nature with art. You see, although I am a weak woman and a benighted spiritualist as well, I can keep my eyes open when necessary."

"Beyond a doubt you can. Rector, what say you? Your eyes used to be wide open before you collided with that young woman. Has she blinded you too?"

"In a good many things, no doubt; but in this, I must give her credit for not having tried. I don't think anything has occurred to-night which might not be accomplished without calling in the aid of a *deus*—or demon—*ex machinâ*——"

"Which, being interpreted, means what?" asked Maud.

"Well, hobgoblins, or spirits of the departed."

"Could you do what Buncombe has done to-night, Willie," said Mrs. Blount, "that is the question? You know all the facts he communicated——"

"No, pardon me, that's just what I don't know. I have my suspicions as to those private matters between you and this sly old doctor, but I don't know them. Besides, supposing I did, that is not the question. I know that your cook gave us an uncommonly good curry to-day, and you told me what it was made of, and where you got your materials; but I could no more go down into your kitchen and produce a facsimile of that curry than I can fly."

"Corkscrew can fly, if we are to believe her," observed the doctor, by way of comment.

"Sydney Smith said," the rector continued, "that by sitting down to it for several hours a day, a man could eventually succeed in being funny; so, too, I have no sort of doubt that, when two men like Buncombe and Blathersby make up their minds to go in for an exhibition of this kind, they can do it without presump-

posing any extraordinary amount of talent on their parts, especially if, as the doctor thinks, Mrs. Pugsby is a sleeping partner."

"Apparently sleeping, but really very wide awake. Eh, Mrs. Blount?"

"You dreadful man, be quiet."

"These enigmas are more perplexing than Professor Buncombe; don't you find them so, Maud? Have you any idea what these two elderly people are sniggling at?"

"I guess."

"So do I guess how Buncombe does it."

"Would you mind giving me roughly your theory, Willie?" said Mrs. Blount. "I am not in the least favourably prejudiced as to Buncombe or Blathersby, though I own I do, at present, believe in Pugsby."

"Without denying that such a gift as thought-reading is possible," said the rector, "which might considerably modify my solution of the problem, I confess I have my suspicions that those envelopes are temporarily changed and passed from Buncombe to Blathersby. You noticed how closely the

editor sat, and how constantly he wrote his notes of the séance when there was nothing to write."

"Yes."

"It takes, I believe, a certain fraction of a second to see anything. Now if Buncombe is possessed of the accomplishment called prestidigitation, he may, in less than that fraction—in less time than it takes to see it—convey the envelope to Blathersby. He opens it, under cover of his shorthand notes, writes the reply, and Blathersby takes it back. There was constant change of position, you will recollect, and ample opportunity for such a transfer."

"But the facts," said Maud.

"What were they? Yours and mine were known, if not to Blathersby, certainly to Mrs. Pugsby, who is, by hypothesis, in the trick. Whether she knew Dr. Mason's secret and your mamma's, of course I cannot say——"

"But I can swear she does," affirmed the doctor; and even the widow did not contradict him.

“Then really I think the margin for the supernatural is very narrow,” said the rector. “I am not a scientific man like the doctor here, nor do I say such and such things cannot be, as though nature meant my knowledge of nature. As a theolog., you know, doctor, I think there are a few things in heaven and earth more than are dreamed of in your philosophy; but I really do not think that Buncombe’s exhibition requires us to draw much upon them. Ordinary shrewdness, a little co-operation, and some sleight-of-hand leave the work for the spirits next door to a sinecure.”

The next evening was devoted to an inspirational address from Mrs. Pugsbÿ. This was grandiloquent in the extreme, and so long-winded that it sent the doctor to sleep. It was extremely curious as being a sustained flow of words on a subject selected by those present, continuing for more than an hour, and being delivered by a woman who was, within the knowledge of those present, quite illiterate. The medium remained entranced

some time after she had closed her oration, which, by the way, was supposed to come from Mrs. Blount's late husband, and was thoroughly accepted by her as genuine. The doctor's comment was once more characteristic. They twitted him with having gone to sleep, and he owned the soft impeachment, adding—

“There are, I grant you, some wonderful things about this so-called Spiritualism, but I cannot include in the category of the marvellous the mere fact of a woman's tongue going nineteen to the dozen. You must confess that she talked arrant nonsense.”

“Now how can you know,” asked the widow, “when you were fast asleep?”

“It was the nonsense that sent me to sleep. I don't go to sleep when *you* talk to me, do I?”

“Hark at the old Lothario!” exclaimed the rector. “Oh yes, we know all about those mysterious messages, don't we, Maud?—my poor injured wife—we understand the deep-laid plot, don't we?”

“Let me show you a patient in delirium,” the doctor continued, “or adjourn with you

to what ought to be a familiar spot with all mediums—Bedlam—you shall hear just as illiterate people as Mrs. Pugsby talk as grandiloquently and much more to the purpose. I have no hesitation in pronouncing that woman's condition, while she talks her rodomontade, one of self-induced temporary insanity."

Mrs. Pugsby in the course of "coming to" looked at the doctor out of one eye in a way that gave her the appearance of winking at him. He pretended to think she was still in a state of coma, and said—

"You may wink, my dear old Corkscrew, but you'll find my science too deep for yours one of these days, or my name's not Mason."

"I am quite willing to confess," concluded the rector, "that none of these things touch the main point. Any number of Buncombes or Corkscrews—excuse me, Mrs. Pugsby, you woke up a little too soon—would not affect the possibility of an intercommunion between the two worlds, and would leave the question

still open as to the permissibility of such intercourse."

"Two worlds!" exclaimed the doctor in a tone of derision. "Where's your second?"

"Ah, there we are getting on a big question, and one where you and I should never be agreed, doctor. We will therefore, with your leave, adjourn this discussion and have a cup of tea. Your sleep-waking, as I think they term it, is contagious, Mrs. Pugsby."





CHAPTER XIII.

WIFE AND HUSBAND.

Let not thine eyes know
Any forbidden thing itself, although
It once should save as well as kill; but be
Its shadow upon life enough for thee.

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI.

ON one of those delicious *far niente* days, before they had entered on the serious work of their holidays, Mr. Campbell and his wife found themselves in for a long day together at Maida Hill. Mrs. Pugsby was not due, and the widow had gone to pay a series of calls.

"How we should have enjoyed this once, Maud, and not so long ago either," said the rector.

"Meaning to say that you do not care about it any longer. Oh, what creatures you

men are! It puts me in mind of that wretched Frenchman who worried his poor wife to death by spending all his evenings with another lady; and when his better half succumbed, everybody thought he would marry the lady who had entertained him. 'Not so,' said the creature, 'or else where should I spend my evenings?' You are all alike."

"Not so; or at least you ought not to think so. My theory of hymeneal existence is, that when a man and woman marry, he and she think each other exceptional people, and brought together by destiny from the average run of humanity who form the great ineligible rule."

"And that idea continues, I suppose, until one or the other is disillusionised, and discovers that the former exception is no exception at all, but one of the rule?"

"Precisely."

"And—has your disillusionising period come yet, Willie?"

"Ha! A very neat bit of angling indeed. No, darling Maud; it has not come, and I

don't think it is coming. In fact, I believe that it is only your long and weary illness, love, that has made me know how very dear you are to me. It is not only that our dead little one—that tiny seed sown in God's Acre—seems to bind us more closely together, but I realise your—well, your very exceptional character—realise how thoroughly you are all in all to me. You are even more physically beautiful now than before your illness, or back in your girlish life.”

“Do you think so?”

“In the long evenings when you had to keep your room at the rectory, and when your mamma was keeping guard over you, I used to sit in my lonely study and ask myself what life would be without you. I, who used to boast of my cynicism, and flatter myself that I could bear to live alone, felt that I should die—that I should not wish to live—if it pleased God to take you from me.”

“Dear old boy!”

“I used sometimes to think, What if Maud's strange creed be true——”

“My creed, Willie?” said the young wife, feeling with some penitential regret that her husband scarcely knew how erratic her creed was—how far it had carried her from the beaten track of ordinary faith.

“I mean your spiritualistic creed, you know. What, I thought, if the spirit which seems gradually loosening its hold upon the beautiful fragile body be here with me. You will think it fanciful, but I often used to imagine I heard your voice; and once or twice, when I was thus carried away, I found that you had just wakened up and were asking for me. Had we really been together in our dreams?”

“I have no sort of doubt about it. But now tell me, Willie, with regard to this strange creed of mine, as you call it; do you think it so utterly preposterous as most people do? Tell me frankly and outspokenly, for I feel that your opinion will influence me greatly, not because you are my husband—at least, not only for that reason—but because you take calm, broad views on the subject. You do not approach it with prejudice in its

favour, as I can see that mamma and even Mr. Ball do; nor, on the other hand, do you cry out 'devil' with Mr. Enoch Trees, or 'impossible' with Dr. Mason."

"Because I feel that there is a grain of truth in all your views, perhaps. I do try to put myself in other people's positions, and look at things from their standpoint as well as my own."

"I know you do; and it is such a blessing to find a person who can do that. I am so much ashamed of myself when I find, as I often do find, that I cannot accomplish this. What do you think, then?"

"Wifie mine," answered the rector, taking Maud on his knee, and fondling her head against his face as he spoke, "before I answer your question I will ask you another; or I don't know that I shall quite put it in the form of a question, because I can word it more definitely. Give me a kiss—no, not a matrimonial dab, but the long, long kiss of early engaged days—that's right; and I will tell you how I have been reading you

through and through like a book all these months."

"You must have found the contents very uninteresting."

"I have indexed them thus. You have never told me, Maud—girl-like, you feared to tell me, and so to risk losing my love; but you have wandered quite away from the old faith, the faith you had when you knelt at your mother's knee and lisped your prayers to Heaven."

"Who told you, Willie?"

"No one."

"Not Mr. Ball?"

"No."

"Nor mamma?"

"Nor mamma. I think it would have been better if they had done so; but it was a delicate thing for them to do when they did not know whether you had so far confided in me."

"You think I have deceived you, husband," said Maud, with the tears welling up in her black eyes.

"Not for a moment, darling. I am sure I

should have done the same had your case been mine. I should have feared to tell you lest I lost your love. I should have felt that when I was with you all would come right, and that it would be better you should never be pained by knowing my faith had swerved——”

“Oh, Willie, that was just what I *did* feel—do feel. You are painting my own case while apparently sketching your own.”

“I thought so. Now, Maud, I did not touch this topic to pain you.”

“I am so glad you *did* touch it, darling.”

“Certainly not to upbraid you, but simply to pave the way for my answer to your very natural question, what do I think of the spiritualistic creed which you have adopted in preference to the old creed you held in your childhood. That is so, is it not?”

“Yes.”

“Well, now you see I have read you pretty clearly so far; you will therefore be prepared to accept what I say in the way of analysis both of yourself and your creed with some

toleration, even if it does not quite square with your own preconceived ideas."

"I shall receive it with more than toleration—with reverence and respect."

"Then believe me when I tell you, that the reason why this spiritualistic creed so recommends itself to you is that you have lost your hold upon the other truer creed. Man—and woman more than man—must have something to believe in and to venerate. If, by ill fate, they lose their old reasonable religion, they will find another more or less grotesque. There, I believe, is the secret of all fanaticism, the previous vacuum that exists in faith."

"Mr. Ball preached all the orthodox faith out of me and mamma, I fear."

"There is the danger of a destructive system. Ball is one of the best fellows breathing, and my own good true friend, but he has assumed the work of a Voltaire. His mission is a negative one. He excels at pulling down, not at building up."

"I think you are right, Willie; nay, I am sure you are."

"In the very crisis and agony of this slipping away of the old faith—it is an agony, is it not——"

"Yes; oh yes!"

"There came this new fantastic faith, with its fascinating promise that belief should be made matter of demonstration. It is no new boast, darling; Gnosticism has existed in all ages—now under one guise, now under another."

"And has it always been a delusion?"

"I do not say so. I do not assert it even of this grotesque system, which came in with the Rochester knockings. Now I will tell you the ingredients of which it is, as I think, made up."

Maud listened attentively as her husband analysed her new creed.

"First, there is charlatanism pure and simple, represented by Mr. Blathersby, who for commercial reasons promotes what he knows to be false, and bolsters it up with trickery to any extent. In the same capacious category I must include Professor Buncombe and Mrs. Pugsby. I do not mean to say that all the

facts of the latter medium especially are conscious tricks, but I know—and you know, dear—that she is not above eking out possible fact with palpable trickery. That nocturnal flight, for instance, you do not believe that?”

“Not a word of it.”

“Of course not. So, then, we dispose of a large amount of the so-called manifestations, under the head charlatanism. Then, next, we have self-delusion. When you and your mamma are not being deceived you sometimes deceive yourselves—sometimes, not always.”

“Possibly.”

“You yourself cannot quite distinguish your automatic writing from the effect of imagination. You can stop your hand if you like. You sometimes know what you are writing——”

“Not always.”

“I guardedly avoid any sweeping general assertions. Some of your communications, just as some of the coincidences which your dear mother hails as ‘extra-ordinary,’ may be simply due to unconscious self-deception.”

“Yes.”

"Then we come to the Enoch Trees element. I do not cry 'devil' on all occasions, as you know; but I do think that a very large proportion of these phenomena are due to low spiritual agencies——"

"You do, Willie?"

"I do not see how I can think otherwise without tearing my New Testament to shreds."

"I am so rejoiced to hear that you do not think it *all* trickery and delusion."

"Those who say so greatly underrate the dangers of Spiritualism. Dr. Mason and his school do more harm than all the mediums in London, because they throw people upon an entirely wrong scent. They profess to be able to explain everything; and when folks find that the scientific theories are not big enough to cover the facts, then they rush into the opposite extreme, and become mad Spiritualists."

"Well then tell me, Willie, if you consider that some of this may be, nay is, the work of low spiritual agency, do you not think that some of it may be the work of a higher order of the same machinery?"

"It may be, no doubt; but I fail to see the evidence of it. Now here, remember, you must give me credit for that largeness of view which you have already conceded. I don't cry out, *Cui bono?* because Spiritualism does not tell me the winner of the Derby, or denounce the latest murderer; but I do adopt the criterion, 'By their fruits ye shall know them.' I look to see whether people are better in their morals for being Spiritualists, and I cannot see it."

"What is the matter with mamma and myself in point of morals."

"Don't be sophistical. Your morals didn't want mending, to begin with; but it has certainly unsettled your faith."

"Mine was unsettled before."

"But would have got back to the old moorings had not this substitute offered itself. No, I do not say that good angels may not be present even at séances—I think they must have been at *one* dark séance—but I do say that in the presence of Mrs. Pugsby or Professor Buncombe they must feel remarkably

like angels that had lost their way. You must have been shocked, Maud, when you heard that woman talking of our little angel."

"I was."

"Is it not equal desecration to have your dead father even mentioned in such connexion? Maud, you cannot think that those who have put on the higher nature can condescend to come back and bandy small talk with us at the beck and call of Mr. Blathersby, Mrs. Pugsby, or Professor Buncombe, and at the rate of ten and sixpence a visit, or a guinea at your own house, exclusive of cab-hire."

"Willie!"

"It is the utter grotesqueness and inconsistency of these phenomena that make me deem them a sacrilege. I do assure you, darling, that bitterly as I regret our dead darling's loss, I would not, even if I could prove his identity beyond shadow of doubt, debase him by calling him back under Mrs. Pugsby's auspices."

“But you do not think his death was a punishment to us—to me, do you?”

“No. I am no believer in a penal system. If we make mistakes, we suffer the consequence. Your sitting all alone, darling, was a mistake—not so much of yours as of mine—and the excitement attendant upon those communications was too much for you, and so hastened fatally that poor little premature existence.”

Now Maud's tears—a bereaved mother's tears—fell thick and fast as her husband pressed her lovingly to his heart.

“Then what do you wish me to do, Willie?”

“Do not put it so. I wish you to follow your own judgment. I have far too high an opinion of your strong common sense to deem it necessary to prescribe a course for you. We are going away, and shall be out of range of these matters. Let us speak freely about them. Tell me if you feel a vacuum, and if so, then I will say perhaps you are right and I am wrong; perhaps for some natures this supple-

mentary faith may be necessary ; it is not for me, but it may be for you. I shall still think you are engaged in a perilous quest, and shall ask you to let me follow it out with you—if follow it you feel you must. I would much rather have nothing to do with it, because I feel the dangers so far outweigh the possible advantages ; but if the danger is to be faced, you shall not face it alone through any cowardly shrinking back on my part.”

“Cowardly ! Whatever else you are, Willie, you can never be that.”

“Honestly I agree with you. I do not think that if it were possible for one of these low intelligences to manifest itself to me—or even the Reverend Enoch Trees’s grand solver of all difficulties, his Satanic Majesty himself—I do not think I should be alarmed any more than St. Dunstan under similar circumstances——”

“Oh, Willie!”

“I have no conception of the word supernatural. I should feel that whatever came was perfectly natural, and that to shirk it

would be unmanly. I should not choose to encounter a footpad on Clapham Common on a foggy night; but if I did, I should——”

“What?”

“Do my duty as a Muscular Christian,” said the rector, looking admiringly at a very presentable fist which he doubled up as if for the occasion.

“Yes,” he continued, “we may meet what Gerald Massey so beautifully calls angels unawares at the darkest of dark séances. I met one once, and here she is a rapidly materialising spirit in my arms. Now kiss me again, Maud. We shall have to end our matrimonial spooning, for there is your mother’s knock. Don’t think actively over what I have been saying. Let it gently simmer in your mind; we are going to forswear all active employment for awhile. We need neither of us forswear a sitting with Mrs. Pugsby or Buncombe, or even a turn at the Supernatural Lyceum with that most commercial of spirit-movers, Mr. Blathersby; but let us be on the *qui vive*. If we see anything wrong don’t let us be blind

to it; if Old Scratch is at the bottom of it all, let us not be afraid of him—though I don't see why we should seek his society. In short, let us exercise our common sense on this as well as all other subjects, always supposing we are blest with any."

"I shall look at the whole subject with different eyes," said Maud.

"Those bright ones were never made for being 'developed' into the cod-like expression of a Mrs. Pugsby. No, my own, if that be the superior state, I infinitely prefer the inferior."

"Well, indeed," said the cheery voice of Mrs. Blount, "gone back to engaged days, have we? On your husband's knee, forsooth! I used to feel I must cough on the stairs and fidget with the handle of the door before entering, but I did *not* think such precautions were necessary now."





CHAPTER XIV.

SCIENCE *VERSUS* GHOSTS.

The owl, he fareth well
In the shadows of the night,
And it puzzleth him to tell
Why the eagle loves the light.

Gallagher.

AGREEABLY to the plan of operations indicated in their recent interview, Mr. Campbell and his wife neither sought nor avoided séances. Maud's health was so greatly improved that the rector did not much fear any physical evils resulting from supernaturalism, and he trusted to her good sense to hold her back from excessive yielding to the undoubted fascinations of the subject.

"She has a good deal of the material which goes to make up the medium in her character,"

he soliloquised ; “ but she also has—what mediums as a rule do not possess—a strong vein of common sense. I shall trust to that.” And he did.

It would have been much safer to do so had Maud not been urged on by her mother to this dangerous topic. Mrs. Blount would not be convinced but that her illness was due to “suppressed mediumship.” Mrs. Pugsby would have developed it all out of her in a very short time. She was almost annoyed that Mr. Campbell did not issue some sort of ukase on the subject, and, indeed, regarded the circumstance of his not doing so as simply a consummate stroke of policy, which perhaps it was. Had the rector commanded, his wife might have rebelled, and mamma would certainly have protested. As it was, nobody had the smallest excuse for a grievance, and that is excessively irritating sometimes.

“Maud, dear,” the widow said, “you seem very lukewarm on the subject of Spiritualism, which was once near your heart. Can it be

that your husband's contemptuous attitude influences you too?"

"I have no doubt it influences me in some degree; but I do not imagine he feels contempt for the whole subject. He rather thinks it dangerous, especially for me. You and he hold diametrically opposite theories as to my late illness."

"I know."

There was to be a great event that night—a sort of spiritualistic *battue*. Professor Buncombe, Mrs. Pugsby, and Mr. Blathersby were all to be laid under contribution, for the sole and exclusive benefit of Dr. Mason. Mrs. Blount was seized with a scientific fit. She gave up the Church as hopeless. Even Mr. Ball did not go ahead fast enough to please her. A few timid utterances in the pulpit, as she termed them, were not enough. He should have a *séance* in church, or at all events in the vestry.

Mr. Ball did not quite see things in this light, and had the fear of the bishop before his eyes; so Mrs. Blount would leave the Estab-

lishment to flounder about amid the dry bones of dead faiths and ceremonies. It was no use trying to breathe life into them. As disciples of Lord Bacon, scientific men were bound to investigate. So were the clergy, for the matter of that; but they declined, so she turned to the Gentiles. She would convert her Doctor Mirabilis, and make him one in very deed. He should head a mission, then, to the London *savans*. She threw out the most delicate of hints that, if he would consent to do this, he need not labour alone.

Now the poor old doctor was dreadfully in love, and proved the truth of the adage that no fool is so bad as an old one. While the spell of the buxom widow's presence was upon him he did try—not to believe, that was too preposterous, but to behave civilly to the male mediums, and not to cut any very severe jokes on Mrs. Pugsby. The masculine portion, however, taxed his forbearance sadly; he did not find so much difficulty in the case of his old friend Corkscrew.

Proceedings commenced with what was

called a "thick tea," meaning a tea with substantial adjuncts, such as cold meat, &c. Mr. Blathersby and Mrs. Pugsby made it very dense indeed, and there certainly was no fear that either of these two would feel any sinking for want of due precautions in the victualling department. Professor Buncombe was more abstemious.

The manifestations began with the more simple phenomena, and advanced to the highest as a climax. Maud and her husband sat at the table, but took no prominent part in the proceedings; the young lady being especially noticeable for the absence of that excitement which generally marked her participation in a séance. The doctor was clearly the man of mark; and the whole spiritual battery was laid on to dismantle the fortress of his unbelief.

First and foremost, by means of raps, a brief *résumé* of his early biography was given, which he was bound to confess in the main true, though, with some discrepancies, quite as remarkable as those in the evidence of the

claimant to the Tichborne estates. The intelligences, for instance, could give the name of the place where he was born, his grandfather, grandmother, and mother, but as to the name of his father they broke down utterly. They would not confess ignorance, but tried name after name to no purpose, until they gave it up and fell back on the general assertion that the doctor had received tests enough, and ought not to expect more.

"I quite agree with the spirits, too," said Mrs. Blount.

"*Cela va sans dire*," replied the doctor.

During the whole of this time he kept plunging violently under the table, gazing at Mrs. Pugsby's legs, and trying to tread on Blathersby's toes. If the spirits were marshalling all their forces against him, he, in turn, was resolved to be specially wide awake, and not be taken in by any pseudo-manifestations. He fell into the mistake, however, of being too demonstrative in his suspicions, inasmuch that Mr. Campbell was fain to remonstrate with him.

"You'll never catch a weasel asleep that way, doctor. You show yourself so preternaturally on the *qui vive* that you never give him a chance of closing an eye. You certainly would not make a good detective. You display your hand."

Professor Buncombe simply observed, "Scientific, or *soi-disant* scientific, observers are always the least capable."

The doctor and he eyed one another with silent defiance. Our sceptical friend had a rod in pickle for the 'cute Yankee.

Then they rigged up the screens, and went in for materialisations. Strange to say, though several faces appeared at the peephole and blandly bowed to the assembled semicircle, nobody recognised them except Mr. Blathersby and Professor Buncombe. Even the fertile imagination of Mrs. Blount failed to discern the ghost—literally the ghost—of a likeness to anybody she had ever known in the flesh; but then again Dr. Mason kept running incontinently up to the Punch and Judy show, until at last the spirits got shy and would not

appear at all; so that plan was discarded, without the inquirer having discovered anything.

Then there was a brief interval of dark séance, at which the sceptic got placed between the rector and his wife, and kept breaking conditions by loosing hands, flitting about the room in Egyptian darkness, and breaking his shins over different articles of furniture. Mrs. Blount declared it was "Peter" moving the things; but the mediums suspected, and held their peace, save in so far that they declared there would be no manifestations, as the power had been used up.

"Now, Professor Buncombe," said the doctor, "we have had enough of this kind of thing, and I see Mrs. Pugsby feels it incumbent upon her to 'go off,' which is always a painful experience. Have you any objection to giving us some feats of Psychological Prestidigitation?"

"I'm your man, sir."

"That never fails, does it?"

"Never. It defies detection."

"Right you are."

"Now, first of all, doctor," continued the Professor, "you are going to test me, let me assume the right to test you. I am going to perform the simplest card trick. If you can detect me in it, I will give you some credit for observation; if you cannot, you will allow me to show the company how very simple the trick is, and thence let them infer what your powers of observation are."

The doctor did not quite like this turning of the tables, and was inclined to stand on his dignity, but found himself in a minority of one. Even the rector said—

"Come, doctor, that really is a fair proposal. You evidently think the majority of those present lunatics for being taken in with the Professor's performances——"

"Ye-e-s."

"Well, I think it is only fair to let them see whether you can find him out when he tells you he is tricking."

"What fun!" said Maud.

Professor Buncombe then took from his pocket a pack of cards and requested Dr.

Mason to shuffle them, and examine well that they were an ordinary pack only, that there were no marks on the back, &c. &c.

"Now kindly keep your eyes well on me, and observe all my movements. You are satisfied as to the cards?"

"Perfectly."

"Then, Mr. Blathersby, in order to obviate the idea that I have anything to do with this, will you kindly take the pack from me to Dr. Mason, request him to select a card, look at it, put it back in the pack, and *shuffle again*."

"He! he! he!"

"You have done as I desired you. Dr. Mason, you have chosen a card, keeping it carefully concealed from me and all the rest of the company; especially Mr. Blathersby, who might, of course, be my confederate?"

"I have."

"You have replaced that card in the pack, and shuffled it to your heart's content?"

"Yes."

"Now I will deal the cards out with their faces to the table, and—have the goodness to

watch me carefully—either at any number you like to name, or when you choose to call for it, your card shall be turned face upwards. In what order shall it come ?”

“ Let it be the thirty-seventh card in order.”

“ Watch me, pray, especially with the view of guarding against my having a card up my sleeve—recollect it takes a fraction of a second to see a movement—come quite away from Mr. Blathersby, so as to be sure he doesn’t help me. Now count the cards.”

The doctor counted the cards up to thirty-seven, and sure enough the thirty-seventh card, which was turned up, was the one he had chosen.

“ Replace the card ; shuffle again, and then tell me, as I deal them out, when the card shall appear.”

“ Now,” shouted the doctor at the very first card, thinking to take the Professor by surprise ; but no ! there was his card first in the pack.

Everybody agreed that this was one of the best tricks ever seen ; but the Professor addressed himself solely to Dr. Mason.

"Now, sir," he said, "how was that done? I do not ask the rest of the company, but I do ask you, as a strict scientific observer, to tell them how that trick was done."

"I own it beats me. I cannot explain it."

"Then I will; but, before I do so, let me advise you, sir, with all respect, not to attempt to explain Spiritualism. There may be a trick in it; but if it's a trick it's a much bigger one than that I have just done, and you must not expect to find it out."

"I'll try."

"You will try in vain. You used all the safeguards you could think of to baffle me in that trick?"

"Yes."

"You are ready to aver that I did not force you to take a card or to put it in any particular place?"

"I held the cards in my hands on each occasion."

"You saw it was an ordinary pack?"

"I did."

"And your card was the six of clubs?"

"Yes."

"Look here!" He scattered the pack of cards on the table, and there were nothing but sixes of clubs in it.

"I laid out two pound thirteen on that trick, doctor," he said, "simply for the sake of showing what your powers of observation were worth. At a wholesale manufactory I got fifty-three packs of cards with backs all alike, kept one for show purposes, which I easily changed for another composed of one sort of card only after you had made your examination. Of course, you shuffled the cards with their backs upwards. Had it occurred to you to renew your examination, you would have detected me in a moment. It was a great risk to repeat the experiment; but I did it twice, you see—nothing venture, nothing have—you might have named the first, the last, the fifteenth, or any card you liked. You might have stopped me dealing 'em out when you liked, you couldn't have had anything but the six of clubs, for the very good reason that there

was nothing else there. So much for scientific observation."

The doctor looked a little—but only a little—disconcerted. "Now for the sealed letter test," he said.

"At which you are going to turn the tables on me, eh?"

"I'll try, as I said."

"Do."

Each had prepared an envelope with a piece of paper inside, on which a question had been written as before, and the envelope then safely gummed down.

"Now, doctor, as you are going to find out this trick, will you be my assistant?"

"I was going to propose it."

"Agreed, then. Bring me the first letter please, the second, and so on. Thanks; now give me yours. This is the bombshell that is to explode us all, is it not?"

"That's my secret."

"There are no secrets to a psychological prestidigitator, sir."

"We shall see."

"We shall."

"Now, for the sake of tranquillising our minds, we must have that charming air, 'Shall we gather at the river?' and in one key, if possible. This trick takes more arrangement than the cards, doctor."

"So it appears."

The strain was concluded, and the envelopes still sealed up were returned to their respective owners, when every question was found to have written underneath it an apposite reply. The doctor's own came last, and, in a very deft manner, he slipped it into his pocket and replaced it with another which he had in readiness.

"Is your answer correct?"

"Very."

"Read question and reply, please."

"*Question.* Is Buncombe a humbug?"

"*Answer.* Arrant."

"Short, concise, and to the point, you must confess," replied the Professor; "but the spirits tell me you have got hold of the wrong one now. Please to read the one for which you

exchanged this. He took it from his pocket, where it was crumpled up, and read—

“*Question.* Is Mason a muff?”

“*Answer.* Arrant.”

“Now, ladies and gentlemen, I think it’s pretty plain the spirits have had both of these papers under consideration for the last five minutes, and one answer may be as appropriate as the other.”

The doctor *was* disconcerted this time, and confessed himself beaten amid the laughter of all the circle.

“Confess,” said Buncombe, with the utmost good-humour, “that psychological prestidigitation beats scientific observation.”

“I told you, doctor,” said the rector, “that the trick, if there was one, was probably too big for us to detect.”

“It’s a floorer,” said the old man.





CHAPTER XV.

TWO CHARLATANS.

Then turned I me forth,
And talked to myself
Of the falsehede of this folk,
How faithless they weren.

Pierce the Plowman's Crede.

PROFESSOR BUNCOMBE made stock out of the occurrence narrated in the last chapter, of course. Mr. Blathersby published it in the *Anti-Christian*, and industriously circulated copies to the daily and weekly papers, some of which reprinted it, and the Professor's fortune was made. The combination involved in the term psychological prestidigitation was clever. There was a judicious suppression of all spiritualistic claims, and apparently an open confession of conjuring. The thing took; and, during that season,

no party or fête which admitted such exhibitions at all was considered complete without Professor Buncombe. He raised his terms, dissolved partnership with Blathersby, and washed his hands of the Supernatural Lyceum; since he found it did not pay so well as private enterprise did.

Among the weekly journals which reproduced Mr. Blathersby's paragraph from the *Anti-Christian* was one called the *Filthy Rag*, which was the organ of Mr. Trees and his school at the East-end. Introducing the extract with an appropriate apology for drawing from such a source, this religious journal gave the occurrence as a proof of the diabolical nature of the system which could thus defy the scrutiny of the most scientific observer, and penetrate his very secret thoughts. It was a mistake, the writer of the article argued, to set down all this to legerdemain. It was clearly demoniacal agency. The author quite missed the point of Professor Buncombe's first experiment with the cards, which had so largely discounted Dr. Mason's powers of observation,

and spoke of the old physician as though he had been a Faraday at least.

Professor Buncombe took advantage of this article to come out in a new capacity, and aired his literary powers with fair success in several letters to the editor of that suggestively-named paper, the *Filthy Rag*. Waiving the diabolical question, upon which the editor and himself were not likely to agree, he submitted that the scientific observer, in general, was worth *nil*. A good, plain, common-sense inquirer, he urged, was worth all the *savans* in existence. He would prefer to perform his tricks, or exhibit his psychological phenomena, before a scientist rather than before an ordinary business man or educated artisan. He had been thrown into difficulties by the latter sometimes, but never by the former.

But while Mr. Blathersby and the Supernatural Lyceum chuckled over the idea of getting Spiritualism alluded to in the columns of a religious newspaper and the daily press, the Reverend Enoch Trees and his sympathisers were equally sanguine as to the triumphant

way in which they had demolished Spiritualism in their trenchant leaders. They did not see—and controversialists of their calibre do not see—that when they relegate Spiritualism to the domain of Satan, they are really conceding the whole spiritualistic position. They acknowledge the reality of the phenomena—that is, they do not suppose them due to trickery. They actually set down as an axiom that the manifestations are spiritual—that they are not due to anything in the shape of psychic force; and not only so, but they identify the communicating intelligence. When, therefore, the Reverend Enoch Trees, despite his rebuff as a suitor, presented himself to Mrs. Blount on a special mission of conversion, he was received by that lady in the most unexpected manner. She claimed him as the chief apostle of Spiritualism, and received his visit quite warmly in consequence.

“Do you know, Mr. Trees,” said the widow, who was sitting with her daughter and the rector, and particularly requested them not to leave her alone with Mr. Trees, “I wish you

would change the name of your paper, because when I send it to my friends, who do not know that the title is part of a text, they are suspicious as to the character of the journal——”

“What, you circulate my organ?”

“*Our* organ, you mean. Undoubtedly I do. You diabolical people—I mean you who say Spiritualism is due to the devil—are our most useful propagandists; because, you know, spiritualists don’t care whether the intelligence that communicates be called Satan or anything else, as long as they are sure there *is* a spirit working the telegraph.”

“A spirit by any other name would smell as sweet,” suggested Maud.

“Sweeter, if vulgar traditions as to the odour of his Satanic Majesty be true,” added the rector. “But seriously,” he continued, coming up and joining in the conversation, “I think Mrs. Blount is right. I watch this matter and all its ramifications with a good deal of interest; and I think my mother-in-law will tell you I am quite free from bias——”

“Gallio cared for none of these things,”

remarked Mr. Trees in his most unctuous manner.

"And *in re* Spiritualism I confess myself a Gallio. I don't care which way it turns out—I have an idea that way will be found the best way; and all I want to do is to get at the truth."

"So do we."

"Yes; but by exaggerating what may very possibly be one phase of the truth you warn people off from other phases. Do you follow me?"

"Not quite."

"Say that some manifestations may be due to trickery——"

"But I don't."

"I know you don't; but tolerate for an instant the improbable hypothesis that you may be wrong in this respect. There is some trickery, some diabolism, and possibly a little bit of one or two other things——"

"Good spirits," suggested the widow; Maud saying nothing, but looking as though she approved the suggestion.

"Good spirits, psychic force, psychological prestidigitation—anything you like. I say, to centre all your attention on one phase, even supposing it a true one, is to mistake the particular for the universal, to suppose we have ultimated truth when we have only got a little bit of truth."

"The source of half the errors abroad," was the comment of Mr. Trees.

"I quite agree with you. Then do you not think that by dwelling so unduly upon what I grant you may be one ingredient in this remarkably complicated subject, you are really giving a specious support to Spiritualism while you are apparently demolishing it?"

It had never struck Mr. Trees in that light.

"It is worth thinking over. I am not sure that *diablerie* is not a good deal in fashion now; I think it very likely always to be in times of high civilisation—a sort of make-weight for deficient faith—eh, Maud?"

"I understand," said Maud, smiling.

"So that really you do, as Mrs. Blount says, puff the system when you attribute it to Satan."

"But our editorial remarks tend to check such a feeling."

"Very likely; only remember that nine people out of ten read the *diablerie* and skip the comment. Life is so short, that we have to do a great deal of skipping nowadays. A properly regulated mind of course reads, marks, learns, and inwardly digests the whole of the *Filthy Rag* every week; but then properly regulated minds are, unless I am greatly mistaken, the exception rather than the rule."

Mr. Trees, however, could not be convinced. He was, in theological matters, a man of one idea, just as in scientific subjects old Dr. Mason was. It is among these pigheaded people that nine days' wonders of all kinds flourish and prevail. If zeal were tempered with discretion, theologians and scientists would be in a far better position to cope with this, which seems assuming the dimensions of a first-class heresy in the domains both of religion and science.

As no satisfactory result seemed probable in

this direction, the subject of Spiritualism was by tacit consent abandoned, and Mr. Trees, resolving to think out this new aspect of the matter when he got home, devoted himself to the more materialistic object of getting funds for the enlargement of his chapel—Bethabara-beyond-Jordan, as the Eastern conventicle was termed. He knew that the widow's purse was a long one, and her hand frequently in the habit of dipping into it for charitable purposes.

"I must here call in the aid of my son-in-law again, Mr. Trees—it is such a comfort to have a good, Muscular Christian on the establishment—the fact is, I am only a benighted woman, and I do not know to what denomination you belong. As the near relative to a rector in the Church of England, it would not be fair for me to contribute to any hostile sect."

"Paul, Apollos, Cephas——" commenced Mr. Trees, in the tone of a homily.

"Are all merged in one Name far greater than all, I am aware, Mr. Trees," said the

rector, "and if you know me at all, you will know that I am the last man to quarrel about—doxies. We are all trying to do good, some in one way, some in another, no doubt. Now I happen to be interested in the Sunday Question, and should like to get your poor folks down East the privilege of looking into the Bethnal Green Museum for two hours of an afternoon on the only day in the week when they have the opportunity. I don't want any subscription from you in the ordinary sense of the term; all I want you to do is to subscribe your *name* to an address to the Home Secretary, praying him to sanction the opening of the Museum, under such restrictions as I have named, on Sunday."

"Is it possible, sir," answered Mr. Trees, with solemn emphasis, "that you, a clergyman of the Church of England, can be so forgetful of your ordination vows as to shake hands with Jews, Turks, infidels, and heretics, to desecrate the Sabbath-day?"

"I was speaking of Sunday, Mr. Trees, not

the Sabbath—that's Saturday—but there, I did not for one moment expect you to subscribe your name to this document—it would ruin the *Filthy Rag* in a month if you did; it would stultify your utterances there; but so would it stultify my utterances in the pulpit of my village church if I subscribed to a chapel where, I doubt not, the disestablisment of the Church in which I am a minister is preached as a cardinal duty. Is it not so?"

Mr. Trees was fain to confess that it was.

"Then would it not be better for us to work in our own spheres, and take care to exercise all toleration one towards the other, but not to attempt the Utopian scheme of fusing all differences of faith and practice? Paul, Apollos, and Cephas would get on very well as long as they worked in the Name you were so appropriately going to pronounce, but directly they worked *quá* Paul, *quá* Apollos, *quá* Cephas, they collided, as our friend Professor Buncombe would observe."

The Reverend Enoch Trees regretted he had not found Mrs. Blount alone, as he thought he

might, in that case, have succeeded better in each of the special missions whereupon he had come ; while he was not without a hope that he might even have recurred to a tenderer one still, which had formed the subject of his recent letter. Fate seemed against him at Maida Hill.

He was lingering in a sort of forlorn hope that the rector and his wife would go, and accord him the desired interview with the widow, when Blobbs entered incontinently and announced—

“Mr. Blathersby.”

Had Blobbs fired off a gun at the adipose minister he could scarcely have produced a greater effect. He jumped up on his chair, and then buried his head beneath it, looking for his hat and umbrella, which he had deposited there in accordance with his custom. He rose red-faced and hot, just as Mr. Blathersby had saluted the rest of those present ; and as the widow introduced him to the Reverend Enoch Trees, he said—

“He! he! he! We’ve met before, Mr. Trees, have we not? But I didn’t know that

you had taken orders. Are you in the Church of England?"

"The Larger Church of England, young man, yes; the Establishment, no."

"By the way, I was going to ask you just now, when you displayed such intimate knowledge as to my ordination vows, what religious body you did belong to, Mr. Trees," said the rector; but Mr. Trees did not happen to hear him.

"People do change their avocations strangely, Mr. Blathersby—Blathersby, I think, was the name, was it not? You are, I believe, the editor of a paper, are you not?"

"Of the *Anti-Christian*, yes. You were good enough to reprint an article from our columns the other day."

"Yes; under protest as to the source. Why, sir, should you choose so terrible a title for a journal which I presume you wish to circulate?"

"I may retort, and ask why you adopt so questionable a name as the *Filthy Rag* for a publication which you expect to see lying on

respectable tables? But I don't think the arguments of rival editors would be very interesting to our friends here; so if Mrs. Blount will allow me the favour of five words with her in reference to the Supernatural Lyceum, I will retire and leave the coast clear for you, Mr. Trees—the Reverend Mr. Trees, was it not?”

The five words were accorded, and at their conclusion Mr. Trees heard the chink of gold as the widow's hand was extended to Mr. Blathersby. The Lyceum had succeeded where the chapel had failed. The ire of the reverend gentleman was roused, and he formed his plans as he rose to leave simultaneously with Mr. Blathersby.

On the doorstep he said, “In which direction does your road lie, Mr.—Mr. Blathersby?”

Blathersby pointed to the right.

“Mine lies this way,” rejoined Mr. Trees, indicating the left. “Good day, sir.”

“Good day, reverend sir.”

They set off briskly in opposite directions,

as men who were relieved of one another's society, and had no wish to foregather again. But by a very strange coincidence, five minutes afterwards; each had turned sharply upon his heel, and they met precisely where they had parted on the step of the hospitable widow's house.

"What, returning?" said Mr. Trees.

"Back so soon?" suggested Mr. Blathersby.

"I left my gloves behind."

"And I my pocket-handkerchief."

"Trees—my old friend Enoch—formerly of the Borough Road, you were going to split on me."

"Johnson, my slippery young friend, you thought to steal a march on *me*, didn't you?"

"Suppose I did."

"I don't suppose; I know it. Would it not be better for each of us to hold our tongues?"

"Perhaps."

"You are better off than I. You bled the old woman to-day. I couldn't get a screw. What are you going to stand?"

“Drinks, if you like.” And the reverend gentleman elevating his coat-collar to signify that he did like, adjourned arm-in-arm with his young friend and rival editor to a neighbouring Temple of Bacchus.

They passed a long, and it is to be inferred a pleasant, time in the snug parlour behind the open space where votaries most did congregate ; for their noses were red and their voices husky as they re-emerged ; while they quite failed to see Mr. Blobbs, who had been regaling himself after a very unwonted fashion in the bar, and hid his face behind a paper as the two men he had been watching issued forth.

“Honour, then ?” said Blathersby.

“Among thieves,” answered the Reverend Enoch Trees. “Good-by, Johnson.”





CHAPTER XVI.

BEYOND THE VOICES.

The seas are quiet when the winds give o'er,
So calm are we when passions are no more ;
For then we know how vain it was to boast
Of fleeting things so certain to be lost.—WALLER.

WHEN Blobbs went home and told his mistress the little discovery he had made in his capacity of amateur detective, that good lady was scarcely so much surprised as might have been expected. So Mr. Blathersby was not Blathersby, but Johnson. Johnson was a far from uncommon name ; but it struck her she had heard it before in connexion with somebody not altogether unlike Mr. Blathersby, in her dead husband's time, and at the little country town where the happy days of her married life were spent. She put it by to think over again

some day, and for the present contented herself with wondering why, if the name of Johnson were displeasing, the owner of that appellation did not exchange it for something a little more pleasant-sounding than Blathersby.

The summer had now set in, and the annual exodus of British tourists commenced. Among them were Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, who were going as nearly as possible no-whither. Both the rector and his wife had exhausted the ordinary watering-places, done Paris, and gone the Swiss round. They did not care much what their destination was, and would have been glad for anybody to settle the matter on their behalf.

They pressed Mrs. Blount to join them; but she said no. She had been doing more of the mother-in-law lately than she cared, and they would be glad of a respite. She believed that what would do Maud more good than anything else was a long spell of her husband's society. She had noticed of late that, at all events on the lady's side, this not very newly married couple were far from having outgrown their

silly age. She held with Swedenborg that there was a sex of mind, and that real marriage consisted of the fusion of those two minds. Willie and Maud's, never dissimilar, were now, she saw, becoming wholly assimilated. The stronger was simply asserting supremacy over the weaker. This might involve Maud's entire abandonment of Spiritualism; it certainly would cause her to shrink from being developed as a medium.

Was Mrs. Blount sorry for this? It scarcely seemed so. Perhaps she was feeling the contact of Mr. Campbell's strong-mindedness too. His was just the kind of influence which tells with sensible women. Mr. Trees might rave, or Dr. Mason might argue, and produce no effect. They were clearly prejudiced. Their conclusions were foregone ones. The rector was committed to no set of opinions. He did not think table-turning wrong. He had not laid down as an axiom that Spiritualism was wholly ridiculous. He kept his eyes open, and let nothing, as far as he could help, bias his judgment. How many manias would

come to grief if sensible people would only treat them thus, instead of turning maniacs into pseudo-martyrs, by persecuting or even laughing at them! In the history of most delusions there is a grain of wheat amongst a bushel of chaff; and discrimination is necessary lest we puff away that one grain with the strong breath of our disdain. The rector was not quite clear that such was the case with Modern Spiritualism; but, reasoning from analogy, he thought it very likely that it might be so, and he would not play into his opponents' hands by setting his face equally against what was, and what was not, worthy of denunciation.

"The wish is father to the thought in many cases, no doubt; and the wish is to prove immortality and certify unbroken association with the departed. Such a wish is in itself commendable, and keeps people clear of atheism and materialism; but our object should be to show that the response to this wish lies, not in any exceptional revelation, but in the ordinary course of religion. Faith, in

a word, is a little bit older than the Rochester rappings."

"But to many Spiritualists—to my dear mother, for instance—Spiritualism is, as she says, a religion."

"That may be, and still the thing may be wrong. Such an argument would bolster up fetishism, and sanction the worship of a cat or an onion. I know lots of people who make a religion out of evil-speaking, lying, and slandering; others again who, as Hood says, think they're pious when they're only bilious; but I retain my respect for kindly words and acts, nor do I for a moment let go my belief in blue-pill."

"Your prescription in mamma's case—and mine, perhaps—then——"

"Would be a kind of moral blue-pill. Get nine-tenths of this nonsense out of your system, and then I have no objection to your living contented with the other tenth."

"That tenth being, as you said, the longing after immortality."

“As Mr. Addison phrased it, yes. Lop off belief in Buncombe, Pugsby, Blathersby—the incarnations of humbug—let go spirit-voices, materialisations, raps and tilts; scatter to the winds Peter, John King, and Katie; suspect even your own automatic writing, as you term it—discard all these as excrescences, parasitic growths, mistletoes on the oak——”

“And would you not kill the oak?”

“Did the old Druids strip England of its oak-trees? No. I doubt whether the excision of such outgrowths doesn’t strengthen the parent tree; at all events it does not touch its own essential growth. In fact, I could pursue into curious closeness this resemblance of dark séances to the parasitic mistletoe,” he added, taking Maud’s hand in his.

“How so?”

“The mistletoe is useful as a kissing-bush, and dark séances are splendid for flirting at. Witness our own case, *ma chère*. But then, where two sensible people lose their hearts only, hundreds of fools, old and young, lose

their heads. Very likely they have no hearts to dispose of."

"Then surely the best thing would be to destroy this Spiritualism root and branch."

"Perhaps; but I would still do my iconoclasm gently. In the case of Blathersby, to wit, whom I identify with the £ s. d. type, I would deal certainly by means of apostolic blows and knocks; but in the case of your mother—yourself, darling Maud (for you still identify the two, I notice)—I should be more disposed to say—

I can scorn nothing which a nation's heart
Hath held for ages holy: for the heart
Is alike holy in its strength and weakness,
It ought not to be jested with nor scorned."

"That is what often strikes me, for example, with regard to old mythologies such as that of Greece."

"Yes; they were beautiful: but they were not spiritualistic. They were pretty bits of polytheism; and polytheism, like this so-called Spiritualism of yours, was the most barefaced

materialism. Pugsby's polytheism or materialism has the disadvantage of not being pretty, and being withal slightly ridiculous."

"It has."

They were sauntering along the beach in a little continental watering-place—the first stage in their holiday tour. Nothing is more delicious than this wandering without chart or compass, especially in the case of a wedded couple who have not quite outgrown their *premiers amours*. With lovers the case is different. Evening brings the inevitable separation, and the topic which is sure to be left unsettled at the final leave-taking, has to be shelved until the morrow. The rector and his young wife could pursue it without any adjournment at all; and each was exceedingly anxious that this, which had grown to be a more crucial question than it perhaps deserved, should be argued out and finally settled.

"Supposing this spiritualistic creed true, and all the Blathersby element quite eliminated from it, to me it would be infinitely depressing."

"Oh, Willie! surely no; surely quite the contrary."

"Not at all. It seems to reverse our idea of progress, and to deaden Christian effort. Instead of raising us, or making us try to raise ourselves, to a level with those who have put on the higher nature, it drags them down to us; forces upon them a wearisome, monotonous repetition of former existence, even if not of something lower. If I accepted Spiritualism at all, I verily believe it would be under the form of Re-incarnationism. I should believe, with Kardec, that some people had penally to undergo successive probations, and my own belief that these revenants were people who had not been quite bad enough to be re-incarnated, but whose penalty it was thus to re-visit the glimpses of the moon—shadows of a shade—squeaking, gibbering ghosts, and often light porters, or careful movers of mundane goods."

"What a dreadful thought!"

"Certainly not one that would give us much hope in shuffling off this mortal coil, if we believed that we were liable to be recalled into

the very thick of it at the caprice of a Professor Buncombe or Mrs. Pugsby."

When they entered the little town on the way to their hotel, they passed beneath the shadow of the fine old Gothic cathedral, which was described in the English guide-book as one of its "celebrities." The many-coloured lights which streamed from the Catherine-wheel window showed them that service was going on, and they could hear, when they stood still to listen, the sweet voices of children and the subdued sounds of the choir organ.

"Shall we go in, Maud?" asked her husband.

"Won't you be contaminated?"

"I am not afraid of that; and I suppose none of the old ladies belonging to my former congregation at St. Thomas Didymus' are here, or they would be considerably staggered. But then I always did like to exercise the mind of Mrs. Grundy."

"I wonder why they dignified Grundy with that matrimonial title. I always have an

idea that Grundy is a Miss—a hopeless old spinster.”

They pushed open the door, which always reminds one so forcibly of a sofa-squab, and an old man in a gown ran after them with an exceedingly dirty brush, returning only when he had sprinkled them well with holy water, into which he had dipped that implement. The service was only the simple evening Benediction Office; and our pair of heretics got just in time to hear the pretty Litany of Loretto, and to see the uplifting of the Host

“There,” moralised the rector, as the procession filed into the sacristy, “you have your Spiritualism, Maud, pushed to its legitimate lengths.”

“That Spiritualism! My dear Willie, what are you going to make spiritualistic next? You have first identified the classical mythology with it; now you fly off at a tangent, and include the Roman Catholic ritual.”

“There is no tangent at all in the matter. The Roman mythology of the past and the

Roman system of to-day are one and the same. Catholic worship is only a Christianised Paganism, if I may couple two such apparently antagonistic ideas. They are only slightly different varieties of polytheism."

"Yonder shaveling would scarcely like to hear you say so," whispered Maud, in reference to a priest who was regarding them curiously. "Is he anxious for our conversion, think you?"

"I fancy not," replied Mr. Campbell, "and I don't think he would care much about what we thought of his system."

"Pour les pauvres, m'sieur," said the priest, coming up to them and extending an offertory bag. "Merci."

"I thought I understood his hovering about," said the rector, smiling. "That collection was purely out of order; but no doubt the good creature thought, as we had escaped the *quête* during service, we should like to contribute now. Did you notice what a beetle-browed and evidently uneducated man he was?"

"Yes; how unlike our clergy."

"Thank you. Now that Litany, Maud; was it not but another mode of invoking the saints? You do it with 'Shall we gather at the river?' They do it much more tastefully with that graceful melody. Then, again, the elevation. Your people use a pellet of zinc and copper to produce fascination, magnetisation—what you will—these avail themselves of the consecrated wafer."

"That is Mr. Ball's view, is it not? The idea never seemed to impress me until I witnessed the process taking place before my eyes."

She did not add—though she might have done so—that Mr. Ball's voice had never been so persuasive as that which now addressed her.

"Why can we not have morality minus magic?" he continued.

"Why not indeed?"

"But if we are to have the magic, I should say the older the better. I should infinitely prefer the magic of the Vatican to that of the

Rochester knockings and the Supernatural Lyceum."

"Then you would hold that our opinions—I mean to say, rather the opinions of mamma and the Spiritualists—are not progressive."

"Only in the sense of advancing several steps *backwards*. No, Maud, they are worse than stagnant; they are retrogressive. They take us back to the Egyptian gloom of the Middle Ages."

"And yet we used to fancy that we were the only go-ahead people in the religious world."

"No doubt. But do you know, Maud, I have got another count in my indictment. You talk of the religious world. I don't call yours a religious world at all."

"Don't call it my world, Willie," she said, and clung to his arm; "my world is here."

"Shall I say the world you have left behind you?"

"Yes."

"It is not a religious world. It is more

than shaky in faith and considerably lax in morals."

"You don't mean that all Spiritualists are immoral?"

"Of course not; but I think that just as the doctrines of the school tend to a cold Theism, so the tendencies of its practice (I only say the tendencies) are towards laxity, at least in morals."

"And morals, after all, are the one thing needful."

Morality without magic! That phrase haunted Maud throughout the course of their somewhat extended wanderings. They went from Paris to St. Peter's, and saw the same everywhere—practical morality professedly, at all events, built up upon what she could not but confess, with her husband, to be a foundation as visionary as the old spirit-rapping, table-turning creed she seemed to have left so far behind her.

And yet why should she quarrel with either? Was not the ceremonial religion in which she was now undergoing her first experiences

eminently a beautiful and artistic one? Had not the spiritualistic faith, from which she felt herself slipping gradually farther and farther away, given her her husband? Was it not the faith of her whom, next to her husband, she loved best on earth? It seemed like libelling her childhood to throw rudely up the transcendental creed to which she had given her adhesion.

Besides, was she not herself a medium? Did she not know from her own experience that these things, which outsiders set down as impossibilities, were possible? She had proved them by doing them herself. How could they be false unless——

Unless? In the course of that summer's wanderings, Maud Blount approached, if she did not actually attain, the limit of the old philosopher's wisdom. If she did not know herself yet, she had got to suspect herself. She got to tolerate the unpalatable possibility that she might be wrong and other people right. What an immense step is gained when

we only compass the preliminary fact! What, if her husband was right—surely there was every probability that he was so—and the nine-tenths of Spiritualism were only fit to be discarded, while the tenth fraction was all contained in her old creed.

“You seem wonderfully thoughtful of late, Maud,” said that vigilant husband of hers. “Has our tour ceased to interest you?”

“Far from it, dear Willie. I am thinking over and over your words. I am fighting my doubts, and getting strength.”

“Which doubts?”

“The doubts about the old faith——”

“Which sent you hankering after these newfangled doctrines. Well, fight away. This is a kind of battle in which one cannot use mercenaries. One must fight individually, *pro aris et focis*. I will help you as a humble auxiliary.”

“Thanks, dear husband, I feel I have lots of help.”

“From whom besides?”

“Papa and our dead darling. They can help me, I think now, better where they are than as though I could drag them back again to this lower world. How beautiful those words of David were over his dead child, ‘I shall go to him. He shall not come back to me!’”





CHAPTER XVII.

AN IGNOBLE ARMY OF MARTYRS.

If I be not ashamed of my soldiers, I am a soused gurnet.

Sir John Falstaff.

WHEN the rector and his wife returned with the waning summer from their long Continental trip, what Maud would have liked better than anything else would have been to go straight on to Briarwood, and in their dear quiet home tell her husband by word of mouth, and her mamma by letter, what had been the result of that self-questioning she had been pursuing so diligently during the time of her exile. While living in London, with all the glamour of this strange pursuit upon her, it seemed as though she had never been able to *think*. It had shivered her old creed to pieces without putting, as it promised to do, a new and

more solid one in its place. The promise was exuberant, but the fulfilment never came. Her connexion with the new faith had been—and she realised it fully now—a disappointment. She had been led up to the climax of expectation, and there left with nothing to satisfy her. She had asked for demonstration, and received a Pugsby or a Blathersby.

But her confession was doomed to suffer long delay. Mrs. Blount urged that they should not 'pass through London without spending a night, at all events, in Maida Hill. Dear Maud would want a séance after her long abstinence from anything in the shape of Spiritualism. She was not sure that she would be able to arrange one, for poor Mrs. Pugsby's power had been fluctuating sadly, and that dreadful man Trees had been organising quite a crusade against mediums in general, and Mrs. Pugsby in particular. But Blathersby—dear Mr. Blathersby, she termed him—had the wretch under his thumb in some way or other, and was determined to use his power if Mr. Trees lifted finger against Spiritualism.

"Things seem to be in a lively condition in this transcendental sphere. Shall we go and have a good laugh, Maud?"

"As you like, Willie; but really it is no laughing matter when one hears a sensible woman like mamma speak of that odious fellow as 'dear Mr. Blathersby.'"

"You had a fit of that kind once, Maud. She may outgrow it."

"Mamma hardly has so much chance at her age, unless indeed-----"

"You could get her a good husband like me."

"Yes."

"Let's try to make her accept Dr. Mason. I believe he makes an offer, more or less serious, about every other day."

When they got to Maida Hill they found that the campaign had actively commenced. They had not been able exactly to announce the day and hour of their arrival, for the Channel was choppy, and they resolved to stop on the French coast until it was smooth as a millpond. So when they reached the widow's

house they were informed that Mr. Trees was upstairs. Professor Buncombe and Mrs. Pugsby had been dining; and, after dinner, Mr. Trees came to see Mrs. Blount on private business.

"I'm glad you are come, sir; for Mr. Trees seems to be using somewhat high words to missis," said Blobbs to the rector.

When the greetings were over, Mrs. Blount said—

"Now, Mr. Trees, you have been speaking to me a good deal more plainly than I like——"

"Honesty is always plainspoken, madam."

"But even honesty needn't shout loud enough to be heard in the servants' hall. In any case, address your remarks for the future to Mr. Campbell, not to me. I daresay, if shouting is required, he can bawl as loudly as you if he thinks proper."

"What is this all about, sir?" said the rector, in a firm voice.

Toning his remarks down to an unctuous whisper, the Reverend Enoch Trees said—

"I can find it in my conscience no longer,

sir, to tolerate these mediums. I called, sir, to inform Mrs. Blount, for whom I have the greatest respect——”

“Yes, yes.”

“That I meant to invoke the aid of the law against Professor Buncombe and Mrs. Pugsby. I was anxious to save Mrs. Blount all unnecessary surprise, so came to inform her that I should be obliged to subpoena her as a witness in case I really did take the matter into court. To my horror and surprise, I found the two very persons against whom I was about to proceed dining with Mrs. Blount.”

“Whereupon,” said the widow, “Mr. Trees forced himself into my house, abused my guests, and was abusing myself when you arrived.”

“Where are the guests?”

“They left abruptly. They have gone——” here Mrs. Blount whispered in the rector’s ear——“to fetch Mr. Blathersby, who seems to have some power over Mr. Trees.”

“But surely, my dear mother, there was a

policeman within hail," said the rector, rising and advancing towards the cowering Mr. Trees in a very Church Militant looking manner indeed. Even your manservant would have sufficed for this person's exclusion, had it been necessary to use force; and I can assure you the faithful domestic would have been only too glad to give you his services in that way. Now, sir," he continued, coming disagreeably close to Mr. Trees, "will you have the goodness to leave this house—instantly—instantly, I say, and without a word."

Hereupon the Reverend Enoch Trees raised his voice again, but it was not in tones of menace. He had now a man to deal with, not a woman, and his tones, though earnest, were deprecatory.

"Mr. Campbell—reverend sir—respect our holy callings. I am going, sir——" And he shambled towards the door.

"Go."

When the Reverend Enoch reached the portal, he was met by an unexpected obstacle.

Mr. Blathersby stood there, and, of course, received him with the accustomed—

“He! he! he!”

“You here! Curse you!” he said in a very different, and anything but a reverend tone.

“I told you,” said Blathersby, “if ever you stirred finger against Spiritualism or Spiritualists, I would split upon you. I find you have stirred. You have attempted to get summonses against two people who, whatever else they might be, were no enemies of yours. Now I’ll make a clean breast of it.”

“Do it, if you dare.”

“I do dare. My game is played out, and so shall yours be. I denounce this man as a sham parson. He is not in orders at all, but was clerk to a hop merchant in the Borough, dismissed on suspicion of embezzlement.”

“And Blathersby has no more right to that name than I have to the title of ‘Reverend,’” said Mr. Trees. “He is Johnson, your late husband’s clerk, Mrs. Blount, who, as you

know, was sent away, not on suspicion, but for proved embezzlement——”

“I am quite aware of it, sir,” answered Mrs. Blount.

“You are?”

“Perfectly.”

“And yet you admitted him to your house, let him use a feigned name, and pass himself off as an editor and a Spiritualist?”

“As you passed yourself off for a clergyman.”

“Hum!”

“I have here, sir, a letter from my dead husband, fully and freely pardoning that young man. He felt sure that his defalcation, which was a small one, was due to the influence of some older and more sagacious person upon him; and my poor husband was in London trying to find out who that was—trying to find *you* out, Mr. Trees—when he wrote to me. He was glad to learn that young Johnson had taken an assumed name, and was working honestly on the London press. I certainly did not know, when I first formed

Mr. Blathersby's acquaintance, that he was the young man in question ; but I have known it a good long time now, so that you might have saved your breath. The *tu quoque* fails. You are a man old enough to be his father. You encouraged him, under circumstances into which I do not care to go, to rob his master, and now you rake up his crime—for it was a crime—against him, through paltry revenge, when you know he was fully forgiven."

"Felony cannot be forgiven."

"Can the false assumption of Holy Orders?"

"Let me tell you, sir," said the rector, "if you have in the course of your clerical functions performed the ceremony of marriage between any ill-fated couples, you may find yourself in a far worse position than this young man. Now I will ask the favour of Mrs. Blount and Mrs. Campbell retiring for a few moments, and leaving me to settle this matter. Do not be afraid," he added kindly to his mother-in-law, as he rose to open the door for her and his wife. "There will be no disturbance. We shall settle all this very amicably."

"Be considerate to the poor young man," said Mrs. Blount.

"I shall be considerate to everybody," said the rector.

"Be seated, gentlemen," said Mr. Campbell, with the greatest urbanity, "and let us talk this matter over sensibly. Where are the Professor and Mrs. Pugsby, Mr. Blathersby?"

"They thought it better not to return, as their presence irritated Mr. Trees so. They feared it might lead to a disturbance."

"Perhaps they were right. Now, Mr. Trees, answer me truly—Have you really moved in this matter?"

"Not legally; no. I thought I would try what words would do first."

"You thought you would threaten before acting, and chivalrously commenced your attack upon a lady—a widow lady. Is that so?"

"Well, yes."

"I am not going to comment upon that, though I might. But seriously, after what has come out to-night, do you think it would

be quite wise in you to commence a crusade against Spiritualism?"

"Perhaps not."

"Certainly not, I think. Remember what Shakspeare says—

He who the sword of Heaven will bear
Should be as holy as severe.

I like Spiritualism as little as you can possibly do, and I feel that my dear wife has suffered severely from it; nay, I feel that my child's death was due to it, yet I shrink from casting the first stone. Let me advise you to do the same."

"And allow the thing to flourish?"

"Let me remind you of Gamaliel's argument. If it be of man it will come to nought, we need not fight against it; if it have a higher source, we must not fight against it. In either case our course—or, at all events, *your* course—is clear. Take my advice, and stir no farther in the matter. Will you do this?"

"Willingly."

"Then I am not bound to ask any questions as to your clerical experiences. It may really be very awkward for you if I did."

"Don't on any account. I will follow your instructions to the letter."

"Now, Mr. Blathersby——"

"He! he! he!"

"Don't do that, please. It is a meaningless interruption, and I feel sure you can omit it if you like. I must express to you, what I daresay Mrs. Campbell will endorse if you wish to have it from her, my extreme objection to her having anything to do with what you call Spiritualism for the future. Circumstances, which I do not choose to name, specifically render it most essential that she should not sit at this time; and I believe that the vow of abstention which she makes now she will continue for ever."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes. On this point, you see, Mr. Trees and myself are agreed, and you have not with me the same mode of repression which you had with him. My letters of orders are open

for your inspection, if you have any doubt about them. I make it my special request that you refrain from all mention of the subject of Spiritualism to my wife. You understand me?"

"Quite."

"And have I your promise to observe my request?"

"You have, sir. But what of Mrs. Blount?"

"With her I have nothing whatever to do. She will exercise her own discretion, and I rely greatly upon that. You can see her, if you like, though I shall be glad if you will call upon her at some other time and not remain to-night. We have been absent from England, as you know, for some time, and I shall be glad to have some conversation with my mother-in-law. Perhaps you would like to call to-morrow morning."

"Thank you. I should."

"Do so. And now good-night."

He rose with an unmistakable air of meaning his visitors to go, which they did forthwith; and, without any preliminary parting

this time, adjourned as if by instinct to the very same Temple of Bacchus they visited on a previous occasion. By a remarkable coincidence, too, just as on that previous occasion, Mr. Blobbs stepped in to moisten his clay, and was very much inclined to agree with Mr. Trees when he remarked to his younger friend, "What two blooming fools we have been." Only Mr. Blobbs thought the observation might have been more appropriate still if the word "rogues" had been substituted for "fools."

The next morning Mr. Blathersby called on Mrs. Blount, and told her, with something like dismay, that Professor Buncombe and Mrs. Pugsby had never turned up at their respective abodes since they left her house to call on him last night, and apprise him of Mr. Trees's visit.

"How very dreadful!" said the widow, with a sly twist about the corners of her mouth, which Mr. Blathersby was not nearly quick-sighted enough to observe.

"Can you tell me whether there is a Mr. Pugsby?"

"There has been, I believe. Why do you ask?"

"Of course I know there must have been at some time or another; but I want to know whether he is in the body or out of the body."

"I cannot tell," answered Mr. Blathersby.

"Why don't you stop quoting texts, mamma, and show Mr. Blathersby the letter?" said Maud, who had entered the room.

"Perhaps it would be as well," replied Mrs. Blount, and handed a letter to Mr. Blathersby. It was in the familiar hand of Mrs. Pugsby, and ran thus:—

"DEAR MADAM,—In the hour of danger, me (*sic*) and Professor Buncombe have forgotten our animosity, and joined in partnership, matrimonial as well as mediumistic. Business has been slack lately, and there is scarcely market for two. I hope Pugsby is better off. It is so long since I saw him that the case must come within the Statute of Limitations. So before you get this Buncombe and

I shall be married before the Registrar, and start for America at once. He says the Britishers are too 'cute for him, and he doesn't believe they'll ever take kindly to ghosts. He will devote himself for the future to prestidigitation, and wishes me to give up mediumship. With many thanks for past favours,

"Yours—for the last time—

"MARY PUGSBY."

Mr. Blathersby retired after sniggling some little time over the letter; and the rector, who read it, said—

"Are you very proud of the results of Spiritualism, mother?"

"Well!"

"Well, what? How do you think your folks 'show up?'"

"Don't judge the use of a thing from its abuse, Willie."

"No, of course; only it was a high authority that said, 'By their fruits ye shall know them.'"

"There *are* respectable Spiritualists."

“Meaning?”

“Mr. Ball, to wit.”

“Ah, I had forgotten him. I wonder how he will bear these revelations. With him morals are before everything. What will he think of your friends’ escapades, I wonder? Would you mind asking him to dinner to-day?”

“I should like it above all things. You have all so turned against me, that he is really the only friend to whom I can address myself.”

So he was invited, and would be most happy to come.





CHAPTER XVIII.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE SUPERNATURAL.

So quick bright things come to confusion.

SHAKESPEARE.

THE Supernatural Lyceum was a somewhat ambitious undertaking, scarcely proportioned to the not very Atlantean shoulders of Mr. Blathersby, who was its presiding genius. It was intended to be a kind of Universal Provider for Spiritualists from the cradle to the grave, catching them at the former extremity of life in the hope of making Infant Phenomenons of them, and retaining their hold upon them until the last, on the chance of converting them into Rapping Spirits when *in articulo mortis*. It was a kind of school, clubhouse, and chapel rolled into one, and all comprised in the not very spacious

accommodation of a first-floor over a barber's shop, in a back street of the W.C. district. In these two rooms some of the most remarkable of the inhabitants of London gathered day by day for ghostly conversation, séances, or other transcendental purposes; and here they entertained those distinguished guests from the other side of the Atlantic who were, as has been said, always welcomed with a soirée and dismissed with a blessing of a more or less substantial kind.

In conjunction with Miss Flight, the energetic female secretary of the Lyceum, Mr. Blathersby had devised a form for "receiving" infants of believing parents, which ceremony was to stand them in lieu of baptism, and insure their being developed at an early period, if they had anything at all in them to be developed.

They had also arranged a form for disposing of the mortal remains of deceased Spiritualists, without the intervention of the parson, for whose calling they entertained a special dislike. In fact, Mr. Blathersby and Miss Flight

had themselves taken upon them quasi-clerical duties—not in name, like Mr. Trees, but in reality. They prefaced the inspirational addresses of the mediums on Sunday with a short form of service performed by themselves. It was most desirable, Mr. Blathersby said, to recognise the dual principle in all such ministrations—the female being quite as essential an element as the male.

Miss Flight thought this very nice of Mr. Blathersby, and her little twittering voice was very useful in tuning up the hymns from the *Spiritual Barbiton*. Mr. Blathersby read a portion from some work; and it must be said that his selection was most varied. The Bible took its turn with the New Koran, and John Keble alternated with Walt Whitman; nor did the Sunday lessons disdain to be supplemented from the field of journalism; the columns of the *Banner of Light*, or even the *Anti-Christian* itself, occasionally supplying that most eclectic of all readers with material for his ministrations.

Then there was a Register for Mediums,

where the spiritualistic force of the metropolis was concentrated as in a focus. Of course it was only the "professional" element that was represented here, and they were accustomed to speak with withering scorn of amateur mediumship. Their prices ranged from a shilling to several guineas per sitting; and their accomplishments were certainly of the most varied character. Let us take an extract or two, and illustrate with photographs from life.

There was Mr. Frank Squirm—the mediums always seemed to have such funny names that one fancied they must be pseudonyms—a muscular young man, who was once described by a popular journal as "bull-necked." You would never have fancied he had a spiritual element in him, at least until you examined his eyes. They seemed trying to look at one another; and that was held by the initiated to be a sign of mediumship. Mr. Squirm's capacities were very varied. He was a physical medium, produced voices and materialisations, and (for an extra charge) gave cabinet séances.

Signor Guglielmo, who had perhaps the largest "practice" in London, and had formerly been in partnership with Mr. Squirm, was a dreamy-visaged young man, who apparently had sat most of his senses away, and generally looked like an owl suddenly brought into the daylight. He was considered one of the most reliable mediums in London; and since the dissolution of partnership between himself and Mr. Squirm must have netted a very good income indeed, for he commanded a high figure per séance; and it was really true, as stated on the Register, and not the mere puff it might have appeared; that he had few hours at liberty. He could rarely have seen the light at all, for he was nearly always sitting in darkened chambers, or bound like a malefactor in a cabinet which bore a close resemblance to a clothes-press. Poor fellow! Perhaps he dreamed of some time when he should have made a modest fortune by his mediumship, and retire from the region of the spirits for the term of his natural

life. He must have been utterly wearied of their squeaking and roaring, and perpetual dislocation of furniture. The floating musical-box and spirit-lights were among Signor Guglielmo's specialities; and John King, that most ubiquitous of spirits, was supposed to accord him especial patronage.

Besides these, there were young men whose terms were much lower, and their *carte* no less attractive.

There were ladies whose name was legion, from ethereal Miss Auceps, and the elegant American Mrs. Mangles, whose familiar was the spirit of Queen Mary yclept the Sanguinary, down to poor Mrs. Pugsby herself, who included in her spiritual operations one which seemed so *infra dig.* as that of medical rubber. Let us hope that she has rubbed and rapped her last; that her liege lord may realise a fortune from his unspiritual prestidigitation, and that no ungrateful Mr. Pugsby may ever turn up to mar her married bliss.

But the worst of all these varied operations

was that they did not pay. Mediums were, as a rule, impecunious or devoted to making a rapid fortune like Signor Guglielmo—

Ut in otia tuta recedant ;

and the proprietor of the hairdressing establishment on the ground-floor began to show symptoms of anxiety as to his rent, which was in arrear.

“ I don’t like these spiritual folk,” he was heard to say. “ They knocks the place about, and brings a lot of queer visitors ”—it is not quite certain whether he alluded to ghosts or mortals—“ if they’d square up, I’d give ’em notice and wash my hands of the concern.”

But squaring up was just the difficulty ; and as for washing hands of the concern, if Mr. Blathersby could only have done that in reference both to the *Anti-Christian* and the Supernatural Lyceum, how glad he would have been to live for the future on the modest income he derived from his penny-a-lining !

“ I’m tired of this kind of life,” he said, one day, to Miss Flight. “ Wouldn’t you like a change?”

Little Miss Flight thought the critical moment had come at last. She always thought Mr. Blathersby nice, as we have seen. Now his niceness was surely about to culminate in a proposal of marriage. What else can a single gentleman mean when he tells a spinster lady he is tired of his present kind of life, and asks her whether she, too, would not like a change?

But a glance at the inexpressive eye of Blathersby told the little spinster that she was mistaken. He was not in a marrying mood, nor were his fortunes at that moment in a marrying condition. She saw her mistake, and, in a moment, realised his meaning. It was no news, alas! to Miss Flight that the Supernatural Lyceum did not exactly flourish. Straightway the pair resolved themselves into a Committee of Ways and Means.

"I'm uncommonly hard-up to day, Miss Flight," said the proprietor, as though that condition were a very exceptional one for him; "let me have a few shillings out of the petty cash."

But Miss Flight was fain to confess that the petty cash was petty in nature as well as in name; in fact, that its pettiness was so remarkable as to render her incapable of accommodating the proprietor.

"Confoundedly annoying!" he said; "and the same is the case at the office of the *Anti-Christian*. Miss Flight, we must shut up shop."

"I fear so."

The little hairdresser was summoned from downstairs; and, after expressing a decided preference for their squaring it, he fell in with the notion of shutting up the Lyceum. He agreed with them it would be better to let him have the rooms and make what he could out of them, than to hold them on when there was no chance of paying the rent.

"I don't want to sell you up," said the honest little fellow; "in fact, I don't know as there is much to sell up here except tables."

"And chairs," suggested Miss Flight.

"But you see," replied the hairdresser, "your spirits, or your visitors, is such a rough lot

that they seem to me to have ruined the constitution of every chair. It isn't safe for an average man to sit down in 'em, and the tables have a rickety feeling about 'em too."

"There's one chance left," said Mr. Blathersby, sadly enough.

"What's that?" asked Miss Flight.

"Guess. Can you?"

"I think so. Mrs. Blount."

"Yes. I've worked that oracle to the utmost extent myself; but you might write officially. Say that for the sake of 'the Cause'—and mind you write Cause with a capital C—you don't want the Lyceum to be shut up. You may add——"

"What?"

"Something about me being in a low desponding way, and you don't know what mightn't happen if I was likely to be taken up."

"If the lady is at all tender 'arted," observed the barber, "that ought to bring her to book."

"I don't believe much in writing or plead.

ing for the cause. I think if I were to put on my bonnet and go at once to Mrs. Blount, telling her the simple truth, that would be more likely to interest her."

"Do it then."

The active little secretary did it. She was off like a shot.

"If I was you," moralised the hairdresser, "I should marry that 'ere little woman. She'd be the one to help one out of a 'obble."

The poor man had been in so many "'obbles," as he termed them, himself, that he could not help sympathising with Blathersby, and invited him, nothing loth, to share his humble dinner of pork and greens in Miss Flight's absence.

"The lady 'ave condescended once or twice lately to jine our frugal meal, and I shall put by some dinner for her to-day. I hope she won't walk all the way to Maider 'Ill."

Mr. Blathersby thought it was very likely she would ; and as a matter of fact she did, so that it was late in the afternoon when she

returned. To Mr. Blathersby's astonishment, she was accompanied by Mr. Campbell.

"Now I daresay you wonder what has brought me here, Mr. Blathersby, and possibly you are somewhat jealous of my escorting Miss Flight. I remember when you laid me open to the attacks of the green-eyed monster by sitting next to my wife—before she was my wife—at a certain dark séance."

Mr. Blathersby and Miss Flight both blushed in the most promising way; but the little editor's spirits had not so far revived, even under the genial influence of the pork and greens, as to enable him to indulge in his favourite cachinnation.

How strange it was that everybody seemed to see a natural fitness of things in a marriage between himself and Miss Flight!

"I find the Supernatural Lyceum is in straits."

"Considerably," said Mr. Blathersby.

"Rent in arrear?"

"Slightly."

"Landlord pressing?"

"On the contrary," answered Mr. Blathersby, "he is most considerate, which makes me all the more sorry that he should be a loser."

"He shall not."

Those words brought new courage to the despondent spirits of Mr. Blathersby. He was glad, at all events, to feel that his host would be compensated for the pork and greens.

"Don't think me indelicate, Mr. Blathersby, if I make proposals to you which you can of course accept or reject at your discretion——"

Mr. Blathersby murmured something to the effect that beggars must not be choosers.

"But I don't want to put the matter upon such an ungenerous footing as that. I want to help you—my mother-in-law wants to help you for her dead husband's sake; and, of course, I should like to do it in my own particular way; but, as I said, if you don't like my way, name your own——"

"Thanks."

"You said your game was played out here. Is it so?"

"Utterly."

"And in the case of the *Anti-Christian*?"

"Worse still."

"I'll pay off the calls upon that paper, take it at a reasonable valuation, and continue you as editor at a fair salary, on one condition."

"What is that?"

"That you drop the first two syllables of the name. Make it the *Christian*, and let it be a good healthy organ of Muscular Religion. There is room for such a journal. Will you do this?"

"Willingly."

"Could you conscientiously edit such a paper?"

"Quite. I have learnt my lesson from my brief connexion with unbelief as—pardon me if I am wrong—I think your wife has."

"You are not wrong, but quite right. I am glad to see the process repeated in your case. These seem nice rooms."

"Very nice."

"And the man is a good fellow, you say?"

"Thoroughly."

“Would it be a bad spec to continue them as a penny reading-room? I don’t mind joining you in such a speculation, Miss Flight, on equitable terms. I am a regular man of business, you know, and looking carefully after Number One in all these matters. There must be a sort of connexion here, too. What say you? Will you drop the Spiritualistic element—which doesn’t seem to answer—and go in for general literature?”

“I shall only be too happy.”

“Your energy impressed me so favourably,” continued Mr. Campbell, “that I could not help feeling, if I were a young man—say, like Mr. Blathersby—with my way to make in the world, you are just the helpmeet I should choose to pioneer me along.”

Still the same idea! Everybody was for marrying them out of hand. Blathersby determined to yield to destiny, and propose that very evening. His star was in the ascendant, and he thought Miss Flight quite as nice as she thought him. Why delay?

The little hairdresser was had up and

squared. He quite went in for the conversion of his first-floor to the purpose contemplated by the rector.

"It'll keep things quieter, and pay better in the long run, depend upon it," he said. "My opinion is, that if spirits has anything to do with these matters, they're a low lot."

"I quite agree with you, my good friend," said the rector. "Then I'll reckon on you to have the sign painted out here, Miss Flight; and you, Mr. Blathersby, to get the first four letters sawn off from the *Anti-Christian* board. One word, Miss Flight," and he whispered, "Don't put your name as proprietress just yet. You may change it, you know, and that would lead to fresh expense. Oh yes, I'm the very incarnation of business!"

Miss Flight blushed and deprecated the idea. But that very night, nevertheless, she promised to be Mrs. Blathersby.



CHAPTER XIX.

COMFORTING THE WIDOW.

So have I seen the sun kiss the frozen earth, which was bound up with the images of death, and the colder breath of the north ; and then the waters break from their enclosures, and melt with joy and run in useful channels.

JEREMY TAYLOR.

I told her of the knight that wore
Upon his shield a burning brand ;
And that for ten long years he wooed
The Lady of the Land.

I told her how he pined ; and ah !
The deep, the low, the pleading tone,
With which I sang another's love,
Interpreted my own.—COLERIDGE.



WHILE others were marrying and giving in marriage, the Rev. William Ball was pursuing the even tenor of his way at St. Thomas Didymus'. Perhaps he felt his bachelor residence a shade more dull when his *confrère* left him alone once more,

and carried his beautiful bride off to his sequestered country parsonage. It was tantalising, too, to see everybody else pairing off around, and still to find himself standing alone in the midst. But when he felt a fit of the blues coming on, he set to work a little more resolutely than ever; took a fresh spurt at parochial visiting, or started some stiff subject to read at the British Museum, and soon, as he said, got himself straight again.

"It's astonishing," he remarked to Dr. Mason, "what an antidote Muscular Christianity is to any love-sick ideas or sentimentality of any kind."

"Ah, my dear sir," sighed the poor old bachelor *malyré lui*, "it's all very well for you, who are unwounded by Cupid's dart, to preach equanimity to the stricken deer. Wait till you're hit, sir—wait till you're hit."

"How do you know I've not been hit, doctor? How can you tell I was not deeply in love with Maud Blount, and ready to smite Campbell under the fifth rib when he carried her off from me?"

"Maud, indeed! A nice little doll, of course; but what is Maud compared with her mamma? If ever two beings were cut out for one another by destiny, I do believe it is myself and that beautiful widow. Yet she flies in the face of fate, sir—flies in the face of fate, and persistently refuses me."

"Well, supposing I had been hit in that quarter, then, since you don't hold Maud capable of committing much havoc in a middle-aged bachelor's breast."

"In that case, Mr. Ball, there could be nothing for it, but you and I should be found somewhere at the bottom of a frightful precipice locked in each other's arms in a death struggle. Don't joke about it, sir; I can't bear to hear another's name associated with her to whom I have so often offered my hand and heart."

"Often! What, have you 'proposed more than once?"

"I am always proposing, sir. I live in an atmosphere of offers and rejections. She refuses me daily. I have never actually, and in

set terms, done so on more than one memorable occasion; but I look—I languish—and she, sir, she understands it all——”

“Yet remains obdurate. Well, I tell you what I should do. I should look elsewhere. There are buxom widows in the world besides Mrs. Blount.”

“Mr. Ball,” said this aged Adonis, “don’t act the traitor. There mayn’t be any precipices in your parish, but there are in the Alps, in the Andes, in the Rocky Mountains, and down one of these inevitably we go, if you display a symptom of double-dealing.”

Mr. Ball really began to doubt whether the old man was not getting a little off his head on the subject, but he assured the doctor his advice was disinterested. He was going to dine with Mrs. Blount that very day, he said, and would prove his sincerity by pleading Dr. Mason’s cause if he liked.

“No, now will you?” exclaimed the poor lover, with new ardour. “I should never have dreamed of asking you; in fact, I am not sure now that I am not being hoodwinked

—in which case, precipices for two at once— but I know how much power the clergy have in these cases, and I'm blamed if I don't trust you."

That was the strongest oath the doctor ever indulged in, and the use of it as an expletive showed he was very much in earnest indeed.

The incumbent of St. Thomas Didymus' was duly sensible of the delicate charge committed to him ; but there was another reflection which weighed even yet more powerfully with him, and that was a haunting doubt as to whether he had done right in coquetting with the Modern Mystery to the extent he had done, and inoculating the minds of his parishioners with his ideas. As far as he and such a man as Mr. Campbell were concerned, he saw that there was no great harm to be done. They could look at the subject quite dispassionately ; but he was astonished to find how few men, how far fewer women, could do this. They took sides, *pro* or *con.*, and directly they did so they seemed to bid farewell to their sober senses, and turn into mad partisans. He had been especially shocked to hear from Maud's

own lips what havoc the new opinions had made with her faith. He had hoped the reverse. He knew she went in (as she would phrase it) for that amount of scepticism which many young ladies affect as though it were an evidence of strong-mindedness; and he thought, as he told her, that the demonstrative evidence claimed by Spiritualism would exactly meet her case. Had it fulfilled its pretensions it might have done so, but there had been such an amount of chicanery—whether it were exceptional or not he could not tell—mixed up with their experiences, that he knew the result must be bad. The prop he had chosen gave way and pierced his hand. However, Maud was married; and he knew he could trust Campbell to do the work he had failed in. With regard to the widow, he had noticed to his sorrow how all her time—and he suspected a good deal of her money—had been wasted on professional mediums. He had tried to reason with her as delicately as he could; but she was almost rude to him whenever he crossed her inclinations in this respect.

She bade him not forget that he had brought the subject of Spiritualism before her. She embraced it as part of his teaching from the pulpit. Now, she said, he was giving up his own tenets, blowing hot and cold in the same breath. It was no use for him to assure her that he had not changed in the slightest degree. It was a very different thing, he urged, to believe in Spiritualism, and to believe in every spiritualist and credit every medium beforehand with sincerity. It was a matter in which peculiar circumspection was necessary; and he saw to his chagrin that he had unwittingly put a two-edged sword in the hands of many of his friends, with which they wounded both themselves and him.

There was no difficulty, then, in bringing the subject round to the desired channel in the course of the dinner, at which he was present on such short invitation. All were anxious to unbosom on the subject; and even Blobbs was so interested in the conversation that he was perpetually forgetting his duties, and bringing the symposium to a standstill.

"I am going to call our church St. Thomas Cranmer's, instead of St. Thomas Didymus', for the future," said the widow, in a tone of good-humoured *badinage*. "You know, I suppose, Willie," she added, "that your good friend here has recanted on the subject of Spiritualism?"

"I would drink my friend's health in a bumper on the spot, though I think that a custom more honoured in the breach than the observance, if I could believe that he had suddenly returned into the ways of common sense in that matter," said the rector.

"Then I think you had better ask Blobbs to fill our glasses, bumpers round, as you wine-bibbers say," replied the hostess.

The mention of his name recalled the domestic to a sense of duty; but he had no notion what was expected of him, and handed somebody the bread at a venture.

"No," continued Mr. Ball, "I have not altogether changed, perhaps not at all changed, my own opinion as to the possible value of Spiritualism. I think it may be useful to some classes of minds, as supplying that

demonstrative evidence without which they cannot believe. I used it in one such case"—and he looked earnestly at Mrs. Campbell.

"With what success?" asked the widow.

"Utter failure. No success at all."

"Do I know the case?"

"You do."

"Why make a mystery about it?" asked Mrs. Campbell. "Everybody knows the case was mine. I believed, firmly as Mr. Ball did, that this exceptional revelation, as I deemed it, was specially designed to meet the case of pert young misses like myself, and that I was made a medium in order to bring about my conversion by a special miracle. Blobbs, will you give me some fish, please? I am waiting patiently."

"I beg your pardon, miss."

If Maud had been a grandmamma, Blobbs would have still given her that maidenly title. He was utterly absorbed in her moral diagnosis, and had quite forgotten to serve her in consequence.

"I now find, thanks to this big boy here,"

said Maud, looking proudly at her husband, "that, like M. Jourdain, I have been a Spiritualist all my life without knowing it. As things have turned out, it has done me no harm—rather good, perhaps; but I dread to think what would have happened if this lord and master of mine had been a religious Bluebeard, and sternly forbade me to sit—an Enoch Trees, breathing fire and brimstone at every sentence, or a pseudo-scientific Dr. Mason——"

"By the way, don't let me forget, please, that I have a private message to you, Mrs. Blount, from Dr. Mason, before I leave," said Mr. Ball.

"Another offer, mother," laughed the rector. "How many times to-day has that trusty cavalier plied his suit? Well, Maud, had I been such a moral tyrant, what would you have done?"

"Defied you, of course; fancied myself a martyr; been developed to any extent, and one of the best mediums in London by this time."

"If you had not sought the congenial

retreat of Bedlam or Hanwell in the interim," said her husband.

"As I confess I very probably should have done."

Mrs. Blount took advantage of Blobbs's temporary absence from the room to request that the discussion might be adjourned until dessert. He was so interested in it that he had not only forgotten his duties, but done incalculable damage among the crockery and glass during his fits of aberration.

It seemed to be agreed on all hands, except perhaps Mrs. Blount's, who made a feint of dying very hard, that, while Spiritualism might be useful in a few exceptional cases, it was like alcoholic stimulants or opiates, very well if used discreetly, but sadly calculated to do more harm than good when used in excess. as, by its very nature, it was certain to *be* used.

"So you must preach your recantation, my boy," said Mr. Campbell, "as publicly as you preached your new doctrines."

"I shall do so frankly and outspokenly, Willie."

"That I am sure you will, if you are convinced it's right."

"Thanks. Now will you and your wife go upstairs and play a connubial game of cribbage, or bill and coo in a way I hear you have not yet given up? I will ask Mrs. Blount to sit with me over the wine a few minutes while I deliver Mason's message."

"Don't you believe him, mother," said Mr. Campbell, rising and preparing to follow his wife. "He looks dangerous to-night. I don't believe he's come to plead that poor old baffer's case a bit. Don't you believe him, after the mean way in which he has turned round about your last mania."

"This is quite an unusual capacity for me to appear in, dear Mrs. Blount," said Mr. Ball, breaking the ice determinedly, "but it is exactly as the young people surmised. I am commissioned by Dr. Mason to renew his offer to you."

The widow smiled.

"Really you must not laugh at him, poor old man. He is terribly in earnest. We are

to lie at the bottom of a precipice, locked in a death struggle, if I do not perform my mission faithfully."

"So bad as that? But I hope that dreadful fate is not contingent on your success; because, even to obviate that, I could not possibly say 'Yes.' I esteem Dr. Mason very much, as you know, and should be very sorry that even this persistent following-up of his really ridiculous proposal should make the slightest difference in our friendship and association."

"Do you really think it ridiculous?"

"Do *you* know I feel a little aggrieved at that question? I am not a young woman. I am not so silly as to be unaware that I have fallen into the sere and yellow leaf; but—I can speak boldly to you—look at me, and say whether you think I am quite old enough for Dr. Mason?"

Mr. Ball did look. He indulged himself with a long, steady, admiring gaze, and was fain to confess that Dr. Mason's offer was preposterous.

"At least let me tell him that no other

occupies the place in your affections that he covets for himself. You do not wish to change your state—do not mean to marry, in fact.”

“What right has Dr. Mason to require any such assurance from me?” Mrs. Blount said.

“My negative answer puts him out of court.”

“But it does not put me out of court.”

“You are simply Dr. Mason’s advocate.”

Mr. Ball was not quite so sure of that, as things had turned out.

“Supposing I throw up my brief, then ; or rather, since that case is over, supposing that I address the court on my own account. Will you tell *me* whether you would care to change your state?”

“That depends.”

“Of course it depends on the right man being in the right place. If I pleaded on my own account, might I hope to do so with success?”

“Think of the precipice !”

“I do, and defy it. Dear Mrs. Blount, let me offer you my hand.”

"And your heart?"

"Do you think I would insult you by offering one without the other?"

"No; I do not. But before you press me for my answer, will you reply to one question?"

"To any you like to ask me."

"Did you love Maud?"

"I did. How did you guess that?"

"Women see these things more quickly than men fancy. And you suppressed your feelings——"

"Because I felt I was old enough to be her father."

"And gave her to Willie."

"Whom I knew was in every way calculated to make her happy. Was I not right?"

"Dear, noble man," said the widow, as her eyes filled with happy tears, and she placed her hand tenderly in his.

"And will the mother grant me a love which may be a truer reflection of my own than any I could have dared to expect from the daughter?"

“You have my hand. Take with it my heart.”

Thus did that audacious ecclesiastic brave the horrors of the threatened precipice. The announcement was scarcely unexpected when they entered the drawing-room, hand in hand, and told the young folks of the turn events had taken.

“Rash woman!” said the rector. “I told you not to believe him. Rasher man! Was it in vain that Mr. Weller put on record that historic warning, ‘Samivel, my boy, beware of the vidders?’ What are you going to do with that fiery old doctor? I suppose I shall have to manage him, shan’t I? All these little jobs fall upon me, from shutting up a Supernatural Lyceum down—or up—to performing the same office on an erotic old bachelor. I begin to wish I was back in Briarwood again.”

The poor old doctor bore his disappointment bravely. If she was not to come to himself, he would rather she went to some

good fellow like Ball, than moped and pined away all by herself.

"I know how lonesome it is from bitter experience," he added, with quite a dash of pathos, to Mr. Campbell; "but it's a settler for me this time. I ought to have known I was much too aged a Methuselah for such a resplendent creature as that to throw herself away upon. Tell her I said so, and that I only stipulate I shall act *in loco parentis* at her wedding and give her away, which I begin to think at my time of life is a more becoming capacity for me to act in than trying to keep her myself."

"I can promise you that, I am sure."





CHAPTER XX.

EXORCISING THE SPIRITS.

Man the twofold creature apprehends
The twofold manner in and outwardly,
And nothing in the world comes single to him,
A mere itself. . . .
All patterns of what shall be in the Mount!
. . . . Earth's crammed with Heaven,
And every common bush afire with God.

AURORA LEIGH.



ONCE more the year has waned, and the Christmas festivities are over at Briarwood Rectory. Mr. and Mrs. Ball have been there, of course, and the incumbent of St. Thomas Didymus' exchanged duties with the assistant curate at Briarwood on the afternoon of Christmas Day, for the express purpose of preaching over again to the congregation in the little Surrey village the sermon he had given his own people in the morning.

Describing the halo of sign and wonder which surrounded that Great Birthday, he told them how once upon a time, and not so long ago, he had thought that these events were not so exceptional as we had once believed. He thought it would corroborate the Golden Legend, if it could be proved that it was being perpetually acted over again—that each nativity was thus angel-tended—every existence thus an incarnation in the same high sense as the one they were commemorating. He found he had been in error, and he hastened to confess it. True, indeed, it was that the Biography they commenced that day was the Biography of the Model-Man; but it was the Biography of more than a Model-Man. Once he thought that these same signs and wonders, which starred the Good Tidings in every page, were being literally repeated in our midst, and that we had only to exercise care and discrimination in separating the wheat from the chaff. There had always been, he used to say, Moses and the magicians, Paul and the sons of Sceva. That, he

found, was but a cold, dead literalism. Here, in the Golden Legend, was the true; there, in the Modern Mystery, was the false. He did not say that no good could come of it, because he felt that, in his own case, the slender element of supernaturalism which he still believed to exist in this new creed quickened his hold on the truths of revelation. But he was bound to say that he feared such an experience was rather the exception than the rule.

"A very creditable recantation," said the rector. "Cranmer burnt off that offending right hand of his with inimitable pluck at last; but how in the world you ever could have accepted that farrago of charlatanism and *diablerie* as a new or supplementary revelation beats me hollow, Ball."

"And will probably do so still. I can see it all plainly as though it were written down for me in a book; and thoroughly believe the experience I have gone through has been a most wholesome discipline for me. Just as you wonder how I could ever accept the

revelation, so do I wonder how it failed to strike you in the same light as it did—shall I say it does?—me.”

“What, Cranmer going to pull that scorched hand back?”

“No. I see my mistake. I gave out my crude theories prematurely to those who, I ought to have known, would be sure to convert them into hobby-horses and ride them to death. I ought to have shown them—as I meant to show them—that this possible element of good in the farrago, which you unfairly limited to charlatanism and *diablerie*, was all existent in their own creed and ritual.”

“Instead of which, you showed it to them embodied in a Buncombe, a Pugsby, a Blathersby——”

“Poor folks! Don’t run through my hagiology. It was my fault, not theirs. Given the data I laid down, it was inevitable that such a superstructure should be raised on the foundation.”

“Well. The spirits you have raised have abandoned you. All the better for you, and

them too perhaps. You, their Prospero, their archimage, are the last to come back to common sense. However, better late than never."

"It's a dreadful thing to have to say, Campbell," observed Mr. Ball at dinner on Christmas Day, "but there seems some kind of occult connexion between Hymen and sanity on these subjects. We all, male and female, went in more or less for mania in reference to Spiritualism while we were single, and became clothed and in our right mind soon after we were married. Evidently Providence meant people to be married. Eh, wife?"

Mrs. Ball, however, only looked an assent more eloquent than words.

"You were a long time finding out that very self-evident truth, wasn't he, mother? I like to call you mother now, if only to raise a suspicion of Ball being my venerable father. But I demur to your assertion, Ball. I have never wavered, married or single, have I?"

"No rule without an exception. You are, of course, the pattern of consistency."

"And our dear old friend, Dr. Mason. You

have never wavered, have you, doctor?" Of course the doctor was present at that Christmas dinner.

"Never; and if matrimony is necessary to bring about my conversion, I never shall now, since that perverse lady refused me and accepted yonder clerical weathercock."

"One for you, Ball. Bravo, doctor!"

"Hush, dear," said Mrs. Campbell. "Do I not hear the voice of a more potent spirit than even Hymen? Was not that baby?"

For there was another baby. Little Effie had come just in time to be rather an uncomfortable adjunct to the Yuletide festivities. Mamma just got down in time to be present; but the baby kept her on the *qui vive* continually. Her principal mission seemed to be crying. The nurse was optimistic, and said it was a dispensation of Providence "to open the lungs." Effie's lungs must have been very open indeed. At all events, this new mortal showed no symptoms of developing into a new immortal, as her brother had done.

Another Yuletide comes; and little Effie is

promoted to the dignity of a high chair at the Christmas feast. The company is the same as of old. Mrs. Ball looks, if anything, a shade younger than before. Dr. Mason drops asleep at rather an earlier stage in dessert. All our friends are progressing. The Penny News-room has flourished, and begins to pay a dividend. The *Christian*, supported by our Muscular parson, is developing into a Broad Church organ, though it eschews the name, which average people are apt to confound with latitudinarianism. Mr. Blathersby begins to get fat and develop sinew. He is strongly of opinion that his wife is the very best in the world, and that Mr. Campbell was a veritable *deus ex machinâ* when he supervened upon the pork and greens on that day of anxiety and distress. He would never have done so if that wonderfully energetic little wife of his had not gone to fetch him.

Blathersby is by no means a bad fellow in his way, though foredoomed to be uxorious. If he had met with a bad wife instead of a good one he would inevitably have been henpecked.

He never commits himself in public ; but in the privacy of the domestic circle, when he has had half a glass of something warm (which is all his wife allows him, for his head is not strong), he gives it as his opinion that paid mediums are, on the whole, a shaky set ; but the chief fault he says lies with the British public, which is so extremely gullible as to offer " a premium on dishonesty."

"Poor old Pugsby, to wit," he would say, when mellowing with his modicum of gin and water—" 'ot," as he would persist in terming it—" was a real medium. But 'tis not in mortals to command success. She did more—she manufactured it. If sperrits did not come, she had a nimble toe and a flexible voice. Trance was sometimes real ; but it was fatally susceptible of simulation, and occasionally had to be laid on to order."

"Then really you come round to my opinion after all," said the rector of Briarwood, " that there is a possible fraction of truth in these manifestations, with a large preponderance of falsehood."

"Somewhat like the proverbial needle in the traditional bundle of hay," said Mr. Blathersby, who, by the way, dubbed himself by his incognito no longer, but went in for simple Saxon Johnson.

"Is the needle worth hunting for?" asked the rector.

"It's open to question," replied his editor. "Great cry and little wool in any case, even if there is any wool at all."

"Fancy Blathersby, the ex-proprietor of the Supernatural Lyceum, enunciating such a dogma."

"Say rather, please," said the sprightly little wife, "Johnson, the present editor of the *Christian*, and proprietor of the most flourishing Penny Newsroom in London."

"Where all the young bloods come to see his pretty wife take in the 'browns,' as they term them," observed her husband enthusiastically.

"Never mind, dear, as long as they come."

"I'm not proud," he replied.

"But you ought to be proud, sir," she said; "and you are proud, you know it."

Johnson, the many-named, was fain to confess that he did feel an honest pride in the circumstance.

"I'll tell you what is the most painful experience I have had for some time—since the *Anti-Christian*, Supernatural Lyceum, and eleemosynary pork-and-green days, at all events," he added.

"What is that?"

"The appearance of poor Enoch Trees at the office of the *Christian*. He wanted to do a little penny-a-lining, and I said I would take anything I could."

"Is there anything particularly painful in that?" asked the proprietor of the *Christian*.

"Not at all; or my existence would have been one prolonged agony," replied his editor. "But I went on to the Newsroom."

"To see that your young wife was collecting 'browns,' and not flirting with young bloods," suggested Maud.

"Perhaps."

"What happened there?"

"Who should come in but the same Enoch

Trees, asking to be registered as a 'face-medium.' He was a little disconcerted when he saw me; but proceeded to say that the hop season was an uncommonly bad one, and he was on his beam-ends. I did what was necessary, of course; declined his invitation to 'wet' the meeting at a Temple of Bacchus, and advised him to give up spirits altogether. He mistook my meaning, and thought I was alluding to alcoholic stimulants. 'Too late,' he said; 'I live on 'em now.' 'On spirits?' I said. 'Yes; mostly gin. It comes cheapest.' My mind was relieved, for I thought he meant spirits of a different kind."

"Then do you really think Spiritualism worse than dram-drinking?" asked the rector.

"In the privacy of the domestic circle, and without any harsh critics to point the finger at my former pursuits, I do," said the editor of the *Christian*.

"Valuable testimony that, Maud," said Mr. Campbell.

"I did not need it, dear Willie. Mamma does not need it now. We thought differently

once—most of us—all of us but Willie; but we know better now.”

“Poor old Dr. Mason,” said Mrs. Ball, “would have claimed exemption too. He was with us last Christmas Day.”

“I wonder whether he would give us a rap, if we went in for an extempore séance now,” suggested Mrs. Campbell.

“Maud, my dear, I am sure that was Effie,” said her husband.

It *was* Effie. She knew the potency of that far from spiritual voice of hers; and she felt neglected. On her baby face lived the lineaments of the departed one, whom, in no superstitious spirit, the parents thought the spirits had taken from them years ago.

Yuletides come and go; and Effie is the good fairy in that quiet home. They need no invocation to summon the angels around them. There is always an angel in the house, the double, it sometimes appears to them, of their dead darling.

Mr. Ball has risen in popular estimation since he gave up preaching bogey, as some of

his congregation irreverently termed it. St. Thomas Didymus' was not a rich living; and, although his wife's income raised him above need, Mr. Ball would have liked something better. He would certainly have got the parish in which St. Thomas' was situate; but the Bishop's son-in-law, a pale-faced priest of twenty-four, was promoted over his head. What are parochial experiences when weighed in the balance against the supreme merit of having married one of a numerous family of episcopal daughters?

He solved the problem at last by purchasing of a clerical agent a "valuable piece of preferment," advertised in the *Ecclesiastical Gazette*, with an incumbent aged eighty-seven and afflicted with rheumatism. He died opportunely, and Mr. Ball was promoted by merit after all. Merit in his case, as in very many others, meant a good round sum of money.

Effie is still mistress of the situation at Briarwood Rectory. Her right there is none to dispute. She is just a wee bit *spirituelle* and delicate. The one haunting fear her

mother has is lest by any chance she should turn out "mediumistic."

The latest news from the Western World is that Pugsby has turned up, but abstains from declaring himself. Like an unromantic Enoch Arden, he remains in the background, and levies black-mail from time to time on his former wife, who is flourishing with her reputed husband.

The last news of Mr. Enoch Trees is that he is a determined Good Templar, stumping the country in the interests of that rising body of social reformers.

Thus do the spirits, technically so called, die out in all respects from our story; but the good spirits are there, as they always are, where innocent children, good wives, brave, strong husbands do their allotted work in this world. Little Effie, it would seem, exorcised all the rest. She literally "put their noses out," and has finally taught her mother the great lesson that one need not sit at tables, or sing "Shall we gather," see faces, or hear voices, to assure us that the good angels

are about our path and bed. The truest, deepest love is often the most silent, the best friends are the most undemonstrative. The dear spirits are none the less around us because no voice breaks the stillness, no touch reveals them to us. Far better such eloquent silence, such noiseless access, than the squeaking of Peter, the howling of John King, or the hired services of mediums at a guinea a séance.

THE END.



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