

GILBERT WRIGHT

THE GOSPELLER

A TALE OF THE LOLLARDS.



MERRYWEATHER

GILBERT WRIGHT

The Gospeller.



APPREHENSION OF GILBERT. (p. 48).

CHURCHMAN'S REPLY

THE

OF

R. SOMMERSET HALES

1841

PRINTED BY W. CLAY AND CO. BUNGAY, SUFFOLK.

LONDON:

S. W. PATERSON AND CO.
15, PATERNOSTER ROW.



THE MAN AND THE WOMAN. (1891.)

GILBERT WRIGHT

THE GOSPELLER :

A Tale of the Lollards.

BY

F. SOMNER MERRYWEATHER.

Author of

"LIGHTS AND SHADOWS OF THE OLDEN TIME," "OUR ENGLISH HOME,"

"BIBLIOMANIA IN THE MIDDLE AGES," ETC. ETC.



LONDON :

S. W. PARTRIDGE AND CO.

9 PATERNOSTER ROW.

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**DUBLIN STEAM PRINTING COMPANY,
DUBLIN AND LONDON.**

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PREFACE.

PREFACES are not popular: to be read they must be brief. But I crave a moment, to explain one or two things, in a very few words.

First, then, as to the passages of Scripture. To have given quotations from Wycliffe's New Testament—interesting as they might prove in a philological sense—would have been pedantic, and might puzzle some of my younger readers. I have therefore purposely used our modern version.

Then, as regards the expressions used by the representatives of the Church of Rome, in their treatment and examination of the Gospellers; I may say, that strong, and coarse, and even blasphemous, as they sometimes sound, yet, they are strictly in accordance with fact; and no argument or expression in the examination scenes, has been used,

authority for which cannot be produced from actual records. I have endeavoured, in all those passages touching upon the manners and customs of the time, to be historically accurate; and have, I trust, avoided any serious anachronisms.

My earnest desire is, that this little tale may lead our young people to value, still more than they may have hitherto done, the inestimable privilege of a free Gospel; and warn them against that system of priestcraft, which would rob them of this precious gift of the Reformation.

F. S. M.

NEW MALDEN,
November, 1877.



GILBERT WRIGHT,

The Gospeller.

CHAPTER I.

THE VILLAGE OF STUDMORE AND THE MONKS OF GREYLEYE.

ENGLAND, four hundred years ago, was a very different country from the England of to-day; yet four centuries have wrought but little change in the scene associated with our tale. The quiet Hampshire village of Studmore, has not, even to this day, been invaded with the iron tramp of modern civilization. Across the moor, almost hidden among trees of mighty girth, it seems to have escaped the keen eyes of speculators. It is but five miles from the railway station, yet, the white stone cottages with their thatched roofs, retain all their picturesque beauty, and primitive inconveni-

ence. If great, great grandfathers of past generations could rise from their resting-places in the churchyard, they would find but little change. The old farmsteads in which they had lived and kept hospitality are there; the very oaks under which they made sport, and danced with the village maidens, are yet spreading out their branches over the same spots, and look fresh in their verdant spring leafage, as if they had no thought of old age or death. The narrow and twisted lanes, and grassy avenues, skirting the stiff corn-lands of Studmore, are as cool now in summer, and as muddy and impassable in winter, as they were in the days of the second Edward: those high hedge-rows, not so common then as now, but much valued by the swains of Studmore as love screens, are still the nestling homes of early primroses, and violets, golden celandines, and nodding daffodils: and the sweet spring perfume of those lovely old-fashioned lanes, would call back to those great, great grandfathers, pleasant and tender memories of plighted faith and gentle wooings, in the merry May days of their youth.

Yes! it is a pretty English scene, and not without its historical interest. Rising amidst that

THE VILLAGE OF STUDMORE, ETC.

cluster of trees, over the clear trout stream that glistens like a streak of molten silver, and runs so smoothly along the southern boundary of the village, you see staring out from the dark foliage, the ruins of an old tower, of grey, bare, withered stone. It is a lonely, weird-looking place, forsaken by all save bats and owls; even the confiding ivy has refused to hide with her generous tendrils, the grim decrepitude of this gaunt and forbidding ruin. In the village some say that the place is haunted, and strange legends are told in whispers over the winter firesides of Studmore peasantry; about the dark doings at Greyleye Priory, in the latter days of monastic rule.

And at the time when our story begins—that is, in the spring of the year of grace, one thousand four hundred and thirteen, when Henry the Fifth was king—this monastic power was in full sway. Prior John and his twelve monks of Greyleye were the rulers of all the social life of Studmore. The influence of centuries of unopposed priestcraft, had brought wealth and power to the monks. Yeomen, who had tilled their lands with honest labour, and had scraped together a little store of worldly goods as dowers for daughters and widows, and portions

for sons, had often been led, amidst the closing scene of life, to change their wills, and had left still larger portions to the monks out of gratitude for liberal absolution, and for the remitted penalties of sins that had weighed heavily on their souls in the hour of death. Squires and yeomen, and even peasants ; scarcely emancipated from the serfdom of ancient custom—hardworking and poor, were nevertheless taught according to their varied means, the sacred duty of pleasing God by ministering to the temporal necessities of the saints at Greyleye. By sacerdotal cunning acting on the ignorance and superstition of the people ; and by all the machinery of priestism, including the pretended blessings of confession, absolution, extreme unction ; and, after death, masses to shorten the period of their purifying punishment in purgatory ; the monks had managed to delude their credulous and unreasoning dupes, and, little by little, or bit by bit, to add the best lands of Studmore to the acreage of the Priory domain ; while the robbed surviving relations of those they had imposed on, suffered a proportionate loss of property. In this and several other ways, all equally dishonest, the “holy men” of Greyleye had increased their rent roll with some fee farm, or quit rent, at the expense

of almost every person, high or low, in their neighbourhood; had filled their coffers with coin, and loaded not only their "altars" in the chapel, but even the great buffet in the common dining-hall of the Priory, with gold and silver plate in such gorgeous profusion, as to strike all beholders with reverent regard for the power and greatness of the monks of Greyleye.

And these wealth-grasping monks were the representatives of Christianity at Studmore; and not only at Studmore, but very much of all England in the year 1413. Light, indeed, was beginning to break through the clouds, and Wycliffe, that glorious harbinger and early star of the Reformation, had shone with a brightness that had warmed some hearts with hope, and caused other hearts to wither out of very fear, because of those better and happier days that were prophesied to come.

The village of Studmore was built chiefly of stone, and was inhabited by a very simple class of people. The accommodation of even the best houses seldom exceeded a living-room and a dormer above, but at either end of the village there was a house of more pretentious features. The one at the east end was

the "great house" of Studmore; and, besides a capacious dining-hall, had several rooms on the ground floor, with many dormers and a guests' chamber above. Its frontage abutted upon the main street, but behind, there were gardens and apple-orchards, and a charming look-out over pleasant meads, now glowing with buttercups and daisies. The interior of the house was furnished in a style that bespoke hospitality, and with many comforts which in those days were regarded as innovations upon ancient custom. The arrangements of the dining-hall, however, were truly English in their plain severity—the floor was covered with green rushes, and the tables were mere boards and trestles of rough "carpentrie." The windows were unglazed, and only slightly protected with lattice work. But leading out of the hall, and raised above its level by two or three steps, was an apartment, which, in the early part of the fifteenth century, was rarely found except in the homes of wealth. This was the speaking-room or parlour, and—luxury of luxuries! it had a chimney, up which ascended the smoke from a cheerful sea-coal fire on the hearth. A sunny, cozy, bay window, with its laden casement glazed with small lozenge-

shaped panes, half hidden with a curtain of needle-work, made the room bright and cheerful. There must surely be some one else living here than old Anthony Barton, or why those Flemish chairs, that steel mirror, that carpet before the fire, and those other nic-nacs and "new-fangled notions" from over seas?

Yes; although at the time when our tale begins, there lived in this comfortable home, Master Anthony Barton, sometime miller, and fell-monger, but now gentleman and churchwarden of Studmore, there also lived there Alice Chatfield, his niece.

To be acquainted with Alice was at once to understand all the many indications of refinement, that appeared in the more private recesses of Anthony's abode. Her sweet and gentle spirit found its greatest joy at home. Her pleasures and her musings, her tastes and hopes, were of that quiet order that finds its sphere of happiness in domestic life. An unendowed orphan, she had lived with her bachelor uncle from early childhood. He loved her with a father's tenderness, and she returned his affection with all the devotedness of a daughter. Irritable in temper, of strong will and indomitable obstinacy of spirit towards others, Anthony was

ever kind and indulgent to his niece. Her open, guileless nature, her sweet smile and cheerful voice, had a marvellous influence over her uncle, and soothed his rugged and wayward temper into gentleness and peace. Nor was the person of Alice less attractive than her manner. She was not tall, neither was she handsome, critically speaking, and, according to the canons of beauty, there was scarcely a feature in her face that could be pronounced correct. Yet she was inexpressibly lovely, winning her way into the heart by a sweet, genial smile of purity and good nature, that ever lit up, with the radiance of real beauty, that fair young face, making her blue eyes beam with tenderness, and her lips laugh with bewitching sweetness.

Anthony Barton, now somewhat advanced in years, had been a prosperous man. Keen-witted, he had worked his way from the humble position of a miller's boy to that of an influential and important person in the little world of Studmore. He was reputed to be a stern man, not given to much tenderness of feeling; he seldom, indeed, was known to change his mind, and he had but little charity for those who did. He loved the old ways and old things, and had deep contempt for new ways and

notions, and it was only by a sort of compromise between principle and feeling, that, out of his love for Alice, he had permitted many of those little domestic luxuries to which we have alluded, to invade the time-honoured customs of home. He was withal, a religious man, having the most obsequious reverence for the priest and the Church. His knowledge, however, was far below the level of his zeal. He was most devout at public worship, yet he did not understand a sentence of the Latin prayers chanted at matins and even-song. But Anthony lived in a dark age, when religion was a religion of formalism, and when the ministry was a ministry of priests.

Not that religious matters had, as yet, much disturbed the mind of Anthony Barton. He would have regarded it almost as sacrilege on his part, to question for one moment the teaching of Prior John, or the doctrines contained in the homilies with which Master Roger de Whyttenham, the easy-conscienced Vicar of Studmore, sometimes treated his parishioners. His reverence for the Church was so deep, and his confidence in her teaching so implicit, that he placed his soul entirely in her keeping, and if her authorized priests couldn't save

it, things, he would have thought, must have come to a pretty pass indeed!

Old Anthony could do that which very few in Studmore could do—he could read; yes, and write his own name, and even indite a short letter, if needs be, without resort to the monks of Greyleye. Besides, on a little shelf in his cozy parlour, were two or three volumes of Romance, and a learned “Boke on the Crafte of Medycyne;” these were rare treasures, and at once stamped Anthony as a scholar, in the eyes of the Studmore folk.

But, although he could read and write, Anthony knew nothing of the Bible. He had heard that in the library at Greyleye, there was a great book written on vellum, in old Saxon tongue, which was said to be a nearly complete copy of the Old Testament, from Genesis to Job; and he had heard the Vicar sometimes read out of the “Gospel” in church, but he had never seen or handled a Bible in his life, nor did he wish to do so. He was quite content to hear it read in Latin by Roger de Whyttenham, and what business had *he* to pry into matters that, as Prior John was wont to say, had been entrusted solely to the keeping of the Church?

But the religious notions of Master Anthony

were, at the opening of our tale, to receive a rude shock. As he went early to church on that bright May morning, in the year 1413, with sweet Mistress Alice at his side, he little thought what a sad spirit of naughtiness and heresy, had entered the peaceful village of Studmore.

The little church of St. Editha adjoined the Priory. It was then a comparatively modern building, somewhat plain in its exterior, and surmounted with a turret containing a single bell. Upon the interior, much grotesque decorative art had been lavished: carved cupids, or angels, or infant demons, or whatever they might be, were all over the church, smiling or grinning, or making ugly faces, to the astonishment and distraction of the village children, while the carving and gilding of the chancel and rood-screen, the paintings, the crucifix, the glittering plate on the altar, and the gaudy dresses of the priests, made St. Editha on holidays as good as a show, and set the simple village folks gazing during service-time with wonder and admiration.

As old Anthony and his niece approached the wicket gate of the church-yard, they were met by one with whom they appeared to be on very friendly terms. He was a man of thirty, or perhaps thirty-

five, years of age. He was tall, and although dressed as a simple yeoman, there was something in his manner and bearing that stamped him as one of Nature's gentlemen. The hearty greeting from Anthony, and the quick, changing blush on the face of Alice were unmistakeable indications of a feeling, far beyond that of common regard. These signs of friendship were fully reflected in the open, manly face of Gilbert Wright; who, having raised his cap, greeted Master Barton with a hearty "good morrow," and then, taking the proffered hand of Alice, pressed it and held it as if loth to abate the bliss inspired by its answering pressure; while, tenderly gazing in the face of the fair young girl, he lovingly and playfully said :

"Sweet Alice, I see thou hast been in the garden this morning, and hast brought away the bloom of the early roses."

"Nay, nay, Gilbert," said Alice, blushing still more deeply, as if to prove her lover's statement, "thou art always a flatterer."

"Flattery! then truly the strictest truth must be the greatest flattery, for thou art sweeter than all the roses in the world! But, Master Anthony"—and over the countenance of Gilbert there passed a

cloud of sadness as he spoke the words,—“ I hear there is sad news abroad.”

“ News! whence? what about?” inquired Master Barton.

“ A mandate from the Council came by special messenger to Master Whyttenham yesternight. Search, I hear, is to be made for any Lollards lurking in the village, and for any writings of Master Wycliffe.”

“ Ah! I have heard nought of that,” exclaimed Anthony, as he hurried on before.

The rose tints suddenly left the fair cheek of Alice; and now with a trembling, timid voice, she inquired if any of their friends were suspected.

“ No, Alice,” said Gilbert, “ I believe not. Simon, the smith, and John of Brenton were seen with the Lollards at Andover last Eastertide, and the monks have had an eye upon them ever since; but there is nothing more against them. No, Alice, I think we are safe.”

“ *We*, Gilbert! Why, to hear you talk any one would think you classed yourself among the heretics.”

Gilbert was silent, but an expression of sadness, strangely mingled with joy, passed over his face.

They had arrived at the porch, and there was no opportunity for further conversation.

The greater part of the service in the church, passed off without any unusual occurrence. Yet, it was evident that something was to be said or done, for the monks were in full attendance, and Prior John sat at the altar, looking out upon the excitement. When the time came for reading the homily, instead of Roger de Whyttenham ascending the pulpit, Prior John advanced to the chancel steps. He commenced by reading the mandate from the Council, directing diligent search to be made for heretical persons called "Lollards," or "Gospellers," and for any of the accursed tractates and writings of Wycliffe; and then, raising his voice, he launched forth in angry denunciations against what he called the "damnable doctrines of the Lollards."

"These pernicious fellows," said he, "are foxes with firebrands tied to their tails. What right had they to disturb the peace of holy Church, by teaching their devilish doctrines, and selling the Gospels among the people? Had not the Church warned the faithful against the Bible? Woe unto ye, I say," exclaimed the Prior, "who dare to read it! If there be any here who have harboured these

writings in their homes, let them bring them before sunset to the Priory, or prepare for anathemas of holy Church, and the penalties of the law. Ye think I know not! Beware! I have an eye upon some of ye! beware, I say, and purge yourselves in the matter, or take the consequences of to-morrow's quest!"

Had a barrel of gunpowder exploded in the church there could scarcely have been greater consternation among the astonished folks of Studmore. As the people left they congregated in little knots, and talked with many signs of fear and trembling, of the threatening words and warnings of Prior John—for Prior John was a holy man, but hard and stern, and knew no pity for heretics.



CHAPTER II.

MISTRESS ALICE AND GILBERT THE GOSPELLER.



ALICE was up betimes next morning, and down to the usual five o'clock breakfast of bread and meat and cheese, in the hall. This may seem startling to some of our fair readers, who not only need to be "called," but sometimes need a rousing, too, to stir them from their downy beds. Ah! but then in those old days, before composites and gas, people were "early to bed," and so, as a matter of sequence, were, "early to rise." Custom and fashion have so changed the habits of people, that we must not always judge of the seemingly Spartan virtues of our ancestors, by the degeneracy of modern times. Alice could claim no exceptional virtue, because of her presence at a five o'clock breakfast. The housekeeper, Dame Jane Mostyn, and the maids and serving-men, were already seated at the board; and, as there was

seldom much restraint to conversation at these times, Master Anthony Barton soon began to speak of the event of yesterday.

“Sad work this, Dame,” said Anthony. “Things are coming to a pretty pass. I thought we were free from such evil-doers in Studmore.”

“Oh! sanctify us,” exclaimed Dame Mostyn; “I wot not Prior John had been so wroth without good reason.”

“Tush!” replied Anthony, “think ye such malpractices could be amongst us unbeknown to me.”

“Well, but good master, thou knowest foxes are sly.”

“Sly? nonsense!” said Anthony, with official importance. “I tell thee, had such things been harboured in Studmore, the churchwardens hold too keen a quest, not to have had them down in their presentment.”

“True, true, master,” said Dame Mostyn, dutifully.

“But, uncle,” said Alice, “why was the Prior so angry?”

“Ah! ‘why,’ indeed?” said Dame Mostyn, shaking her head ominously.

“Fear, lass, mere fear. No, no, the Prior need

not have been so wroth," said Anthony; adding, indignantly—"as if the churchwardens had been asleep!"

"True, true," replied the obsequious Dame.

"Be not so sure of that, master," said Geoffry, the serving man, with a knowing look.

"What meanest thou?" demanded Anthony.

"Only that there are others," answered Geoffry, "besides Simon the smith, and John of Brenton, in Studmore, that know something about the Lollards; else gossip is astray."

"Idle gossip; idle gossip! As for John, and Simon the smith, they are half crazed. The churchwardens know of none other, I tell thee."

"None of our friends, I trust!" exclaimed Alice, turning to Geoffry.

"Nay, mistress Alice, inquire not too closely, lest thou shouldst be grieved," replied Geoffry, in a low voice.

Alice started with alarm, and the quick current of her troubled thought was shown, in the rapidity with which the flush of beauty was blanched to pallid fear. A half-uttered exclamation escaped her lips; but, with a happy presence of mind, she checked herself.

“‘Friends?’” exclaimed Anthony, with a dark frown, in reply to the inquiry of Alice. “‘Friends’—what mean ye? Nay, thank God and Saint Dunstan, we call no heretic by the name of friend. Come, let us hasten our meal, and let us see if we can lend a hand in hunting out these Lollard traitors against the Church, if any such be lurking in Studmore.”

“Stay! uncle, dear; be not so eager,” said Alice, gently; “for after all they say, both Simon and John are good men and peaceable.”

“Tush, Alice!” replied her uncle, hastily; “in this matter hold thy peace. We want no Lollards in Studmore.”

The meal was soon finished, but finished in gloomy silence, and Master Barton, calling his two serving men, departed for the Priory. The maids sought their several duties, but Alice experienced a strange oppression, and that undefined presentiment of coming evil, so often prompted by the tender fears of love. Gilbert Wright, her betrothed, to whom her young heart was wedded with a deep and loyal affection, and in whom she placed implicit and trusting faith, had never openly professed his sympathy with the Lollards; and yet she could not but

remember many little circumstances, unthought of as being fraught with danger at the time, but upon which the words of the Prior, and recent events, now seemed to throw a new and dangerous meaning. Moreover, had Gilbert not often spoken well of, and in a tone of apology for, Simon the smith; and, when he had told how the new King, Henry V., had commenced his reign with such severity against the Lollards, had he not always had a gentle word for the sufferers, as if he pitied them? Ah! just like Gilbert, she had thought, for he was always kind; and then she remembered, too, how when her uncle was one day talking of the burning of John Badby, the tailor, in the late King's reign, he had repeated some strange but sweet words about a forgotten precept, that we were to do unto others, as we would that others should do unto us; and she remembered, too, how angry her uncle was about it.

Alice was absorbed with these thoughts as she sat at the bay window;—her fingers were idle, and the spinning wheel was untouched before her. She must, indeed, have been more absorbed still, for she even failed to detect that, which the quick ears of expectant love is so eager to note—the approach of

the one in whom the heart's affection is centred. Gilbert stood for a moment at the door-way, watching, with eyes beaming with tenderness and pride, the sweet form of Alice. She was sitting at the open casement, her head slightly resting on one hand, with her face turned to the window in an attitude of abstracted thought. She was dressed in a morning kirtle of simple stuff, with a tight bodice of black velvet, and a white lace collar, pinned with a plain gold brooch. Her hair flowed down her shoulders in rich and natural profusion. Hers was, indeed, a graceful form, and one in which love might well delight. Gilbert watched her as if spell-bound, in one of those happy moments of a lover's sure complacency, broken at last by an involuntary deep-drawn sigh, not of pain but of tender and thankful admiration. Alice quickly turned, and, with an exclamation of joy, arose, with that impulsive eagerness to greet him, which ever betokens the sincerity of love. She held out her hand, which he took, with a grace that seemed like reverence, and, gently drawing her to himself, imprinted a fond, lingering kiss upon her lips.

“Oh, Gilbert!” she exclaimed ingenuously, “I am so glad you are come.”

“Thanks, dearest, my heart is lighter for seeing thee ; but why so deep in thought ?”

“Because I am sorely anxious, Gilbert, about this quest for the Lollards.”

The face of Gilbert, that seemed before beaming with all the brightness of happy love, became suddenly overcast with an expression of touching gravity, as he slowly and gently replied :

“Sweet Alice ! ‘Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.’”

“But, Gilbert, I have a strange misgiving that makes the threat of Prior John terrible to me. It seems——”

“What, darling ?”

“As if some great calamity were about to happen.”

“Nay, nay, Alice ; thou hast been brooding over thy fears too much,” replied Gilbert, lightly.

“I trust it may be so ; but Geoffry spoke words this morning, that trouble me.”

“Ah ! What did Geoffry say ?”

And Alice repeated the words that had given her so much alarm ; and then she waited, with a look of yearning anxiety, for some re-assurance from her lover.

But Gilbert did not immediately reply. Still holding Alice by the hand, the grave expression of his face returned ; but there was no trace of fear. His form, indeed, became somewhat more erect, his mouth firmer, his eye more fixed, as if looking far beyond the surroundings of the moment.

Alice looked up beseechingly at him, and, in a trembling voice, as if fearful to disturb his thoughts, whispered :

“Speak, Gilbert ; speak.”

As if aroused from a reverie, he started, then looked, almost pityingly, into those sweet and trustful eyes, and lifting the small and delicate hand that rested so confidingly in his, he raised it to his lips, as he said :

“Be brave, my darling ! I have nothing on my conscience, neither have I wrought or thought evil against King Henry, or the Church of Christ.”

“Nay, Gilbert, believe me,” quickly exclaimed Alice, with a look of almost injured pride, “I doubted not thine honour, but I am sorely puzzled.”

“Why, dearest ?”

“Because it seemeth to me, that so many true men are mixed up with this Lollard sedition.”

“Hard things are sometimes said, Alice, because of lack of charity.”

“But heard you not what Prior John said? Did he not affirm that they who recanted not their wicked, heretical opinions, and failed to give up any secreted writings, would be reported to the Council?”

“But what does *Christ* say, Alice? ‘Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake.’”

“But, Gilbert, I do not understand. Prior John says that it is wicked to read the Bible, and that these Gospel writings are dangerous and heretical.”

“Dear Alice, how can it be wrong to read Christ’s own words?”

“‘Christ’s own words!’ Surely the Prior cannot mean that.”

“I fear he doth. I know nothing of the doings of the Lollards, or of Lord Cobham’s men; but Master Wycliffe did a good thing, I trow, when he gave us Christ’s words in vulgar tongue, let the monks say what they will.”

“Hush! Gilbert,” exclaimed Alice, looking round nervously to the parlour door.

“Dear Alice, fear not: there are no eavesdroppers here; and, after all, would it not be an honour to profess, in the face of danger, Him who died for our sins out of His great love for us?”

“But, Gilbert dear, have a care. Think what they did to Master Badby.”

“Well, well, Alice, I am no seeker of danger. I will be silent for peace’ sake.”

“And for mine, Gilbert.”

“Yea, and for thine, sweet Alice!” said Gilbert, fondly; and then, as if fearing that he had been somewhat weak, he added, “Nevertheless, I will not deny my Lord.”

“But these writings, Gilbert; thou hast none of them, I trust?”

“Quiet thy fears, love, quiet thy fears,” said Gilbert. “If Wycliffe wrote aught that was treasonable, I know it not. The words of Christ cannot be treason; His Gospel cannot be wrong; and one little book writ on parchment, is all I have.”

“A little book of Wycliffe’s! Oh, Gilbert!” exclaimed Alice, with an affrighted look. “Where is it? Hide it, Gilbert; hide it!”

Gilbert did not reply; but, unclasping his doublet,

he drew from his bosom a small book or tractate, written on parchment, and fastened around his neck by a silken cord. It was the Gospel of St. John in English. Opening the leaves, and looking at the words, with eyes filled with radiant joy, he slowly read :

“He that hath My commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me.”

“If a man love Me, he will keep My words.”

“He that loveth me not, keepeth not My sayings.”

Then, clasping the book, and raising it in his hand, and lifting his eyes, bright with the enthusiasm of faith, to heaven, he exclaimed: “And, O Christ! with God’s help, never will I part with this precious record of Thy Will!”

There is nothing so potent and catching, as the influence of a strong and enthusiastic faith, especially when manifested by those we love. Alice looked upon the face, and listened to the words of Gilbert, with feelings in which the tenderest love was sweetly blended with the loftiest admiration, and with almost reverential awe. All timidity, all fear of consequences were banished, and there was a thrilling pathos in her voice, as she exclaimed :

“God bless and strengthen thee, Gilbert; thou art right!”

At this moment a sudden noise was heard in the hall, and Gilbert had only time to thrust the precious book of Gospel Truth into his bosom, when the door was flung open, and Monk Stephen, with a dozen men, appeared at the entrance.



CHAPTER III.

THE "QUEST" FOR LOLLARDS.



REYLEYE PRIORY in the fifteenth century was an imposing structure. Its style of architecture was solid and massive, and gave little sign of that ruin and decay which, in the intervening ages, were to sweep away all traces, save a lonely tower, of its ancient glory from modern eyes. The tower itself formed part of the Prior's apartments, which were constructed upon the plan of a castellated mansion, and were united with the monastic buildings by the cloisters, and by a covered passage leading from the Prior's dining hall to the great Refectory, in which the monks always took their meals. On this Monday morning, the Refectory was the scene of an unusual gathering. The four o'clock matins had been hurried through, and the monks, instead of again seeking their dormitories for an after slumber as usual, had immediately sat

down to an early meal, and, by "prime," or six o'clock, had formed themselves into a Chapter, for the transaction of the solemn business of the day. Prior John sat on the dais in a high oaken chair of state, whilst Master Roger de Whyttenham was seated on his left. Rough benches, on each side, accommodated the cowled monks of Greyleye, who sat there grim and mute, and ominously vigilant. Standing uncovered at the end of the hall, was Anthony Barton, with his churchwarden's badge and wand; the constable of Studmore, dressed in a serge gown, and carrying his painted staff of office; and two assistant constables. On a table at the right hand of the Prior, were some parchments and writing materials. Two lay brothers, dressed in the habit of the order, were stationed at the hall door. The business commenced by the Prior reading the mandate; he then ordered one of the lay brothers to call Nicholas Wyffen and Geoffry Tryon, which he did with a loud voice, at the outer door. When they appeared, they were formally commanded by the Prior, "to well and truly serve as questmen, and to give all diligence in assisting the churchwardens and officers in searching for Lollards and their pernicious writings."

Both of these men were of low moral stamp, and of forbidding aspect, but the restless eye, and the dogged, sullen look of Geoffry—whom we have seen before at the breakfast-table of Anthony Barton, for he was no other than the serving man—especially marked him out as the more dangerous of the two, and as a most likely and suitable tool, to be employed in any purpose of villany. Geoffry had, indeed, voluntarily proffered his services, and had even shown a strange eagerness in the matter; while, at the same time, he had strengthened his application by hinting that he might be able to put them on a scent, they had little thought of following. This was said on the Sunday night, after evensong, to one of the lay brothers; and the Prior, at daybreak the next morning, had sent for Geoffry, and held a long and secret conversation with him in his private closet. It will be remembered that Geoffry had made no allusion to this interview, at Master Anthony's early meal.

The quest having now assembled, and having received the command of the Prior; Anthony Barton, as churchwarden, and the constable led the way, followed by Nicholas Wyffen, and Geoffry, and the two assistant constables. A monk, Brother Stephen,

accompanied them, and carried a warrant authorizing any search that the questmen might think fit to make.

"Where," inquired Master Anthony, "are we to make a beginning in this matter?"

The monk, taking a paper from his satchel, read the first name on the list, that of "Simon Ralffe." The whole company now walked on in silence, until they entered the main thoroughfare of the village, where they attracted general attention. The people came to their doors, and, with alarmed looks, watched them as they passed. Some followed them, impelled by curiosity; and by the time the quest had reached the smithy, quite a crowd had gathered round them. The loud and vigorous beat of the hammer on the clanking anvil, indicated to the officials, as they approached, that Simon was at work; and, as he worked, he sang, in a full bass voice, snatches of verses from "Piers Plowman's Complainte" against the abuses of the times;—verses which were very popular among the working-classes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and which were used, with many variations, by the Lollards. Few, however, were so bold as Simon, who, fearless as he was strong, was wont to lighten his labour, by singing

these "sedytyous ballads," as they were deemed. On such occasions, he would sometimes even modify the words of the old poet, in order to express his contempt for the evil living of the monks, and would now and then give tremendous emphasis to what he sang, by the harmonious accompaniment of well-timed, and increasingly vigorous, blows.

Monk Stephen looked aghast, as he heard—

"And then shall come a King,
Who will do the rightful thing,
And beat you as a fool,
For breaking of your rule;
Beat you, as the Bible telleth,
For breaking of your rule."

Beat you, beat you! Oh, how the hammer came down to enforce the prophecy! How the iron bent on the anvil under the sturdy blows of the Lollard, as he sang, "To *beat*—to *beat* you, for breaking of your rule!"

"Oh! oh!" cried the monk, "I smell a Loller now."

But on went the smith, amidst the blows of the hammer and the clank of the iron :

["Then the Abbot of Andover,
And all his monks for ever,

Shall smart with the knock of a King,
As he does the rightful thing!"*

"And *beat* you"—down came the hammer with a crash. "And *beat* you"—away flew the sparks in a gleeful shower;—and so engrossed was Simon with his occupation, that it was only when one of the constable's men went so close to him, that the sparks from the anvil caused the man to quickly exclaim: "Oh! stay! good morrow, Simon!" that the blacksmith ceased from his labour.

Resting on his hammer, Simon watched the officials enter his shop, with a quiet and undisturbed countenance, and waited, as if to be informed of their business.

He was a man about fifty years of age, of dark, swarthy countenance, and stalwart frame. He was not a man to be easily frightened, nor did he seem so in the least degree; although he had heard the news, and had fully expected a visit from the quest;—for he had taken no pains to cloak his favourable opinions of the Lollards, and had often been heard to say, that he wished he could read

* This remarkable prediction of the Reformation was written almost in these words by Robert Longlande, in the 14th Century, in his "Vision of Piers Plowman." The poem was popular among the Lollards.

Master Wycliffe's writings. Nay, it was even mooted among some of his neighbours, that Simon had, by some mysterious necromancy, learnt to read; and that he had been seen with something in his hand very much like a parchment copy of Wycliffe's book. Information of this had been duly conveyed to the monks of Greyleye, by Nicholas Wyffen, that lazy lout of a fellow, to whom we have already introduced our readers, as the very congruous companion of Geoffry Tryon, and who, more than once, had been taken before the Justices as a "common loiterer and eaves-dropper," and had been soundly whipped at the post of reformation, for his pains. This ruffianly member of the quest band was the first to make known the object of this official visit to the worthy smith, and he did so with an insolent air of authority, as he said to Simon :

"Ho! ho! Master Simon, we be the quest; so hasten thee, and bring out of hiding those evil writings of thine."

"'Evil writings!' what meanest thee?" cried Simon.

"It is known to our reverend father that thou hast some heretical book in thy possession," said monk Stephen, "and I advise thee at once to deliver it."

"The good father has been misinformed; I have no such book."

"Lie not, lossel!" angrily exclaimed the monk. "We have no time to parley; if thou art not inclined to obey, we must put our warrant in force."

"If thou thinkest I lie," gruffly muttered Simon, "thou hadst better search."

"Nicholas!" exclaimed the monk, "proceed with thy duty."

Nicholas obeyed with alacrity, and with that swaggering importance which power, however brief, generally excites in the servile and the mean. He had been a spy upon the blacksmith for some time, and in his frequent loiterings about the smithy, had cunningly watched the actions of Simon. No sooner, therefore, was the order given, than, without any disguise or pretence, he went to a recess in the living-room behind, and, seizing a book, held it up in triumph, exclaiming:

"Ah! did I not tell thee so?"

Brother Stephen eagerly seized the volume, but when he opened it found that it only consisted of two covers, inside of which was pasted a skin of parchment, inscribed with the alphabet, and little words of two letters. It was simply a "horn-book"

or primer, the common school book of those ancient days. Over this, Simon, in his desire to learn to read, had spent much time, and had often been seen bending, with puzzled look, by the spy Nicholas; who, in his crass ignorance, had jumped to the conclusion that the horn-book was one of the heretical writings of Wycliffe. The monk glanced darkly at Nicholas, as he warmly exclaimed:

“What meaneth this foolery?”

Nicholas, however, was mute, and stood gaping with open mouth, disappointed and crest-fallen.

“And pray, reverend Sir,” said Simon, “what hast thou discovered in this book of mine, presentable? Has the King’s Grace’s Council declared it treason for me to learn my A, B, C?”

“Prate not!” replied brother Stephen, “thou hast been learning letters for some evil purpose, I’ll warrant.”

“Only that I might read—only that I might read.”

“Read indeed!” contemptuously replied the monk. “What next? I wonder. Every jack-a-nape artisan, I suppose, will be claiming benefit of clergy, and every vagabond thief, reading his neck verse! Tend to thy horse-shoes and anvil, Master Simon,

lest the devil lead thee into heresy with thy reading."

With these words, the monk turned in anger from the smith, followed by the officials. With a self-satisfied smile, Master Barton exclaimed :

"I thought as much. Little heresy you 'll find in Studmore, I 'll warrant. As if such things could be, and the churchwardens not know it!"

On leaving the smithy, the quest visited several domiciles, mostly of the poorer class. In each case there was some little circumstance known to the monk, communicated, no doubt, by the tattling eaves-dropper, Nicholas. Many of the charges were innocent, and unimportant in themselves; but the jealous fears of the monks had construed them into positive proof of heresy. Some indication of a thirst for knowledge, as in the case of Simon; some scrap of home conversation, perhaps, listened to at the cottage doors, of other, and equally innocent objects of malicious espionage, and repeated to the monks, with those exaggerations that always varnish the stories of the mischievous gossip; or some well-learned text of Gospel, spoken in public as Christ's words, was brought against others, as evidence of Lollardism; for any pretence to even the slenderest

knowledge of the Scriptures, was looked upon as almost certain proof of heresy. And, indeed, these things *had* a significance little thought of then ; they were indications of that coming change in the religious and social life of England ; the gentle stirrings of the atmosphere, before the coming tempest, that was to clear away the black clouds of superstition and priestcraft which, during ages of darkness, had hung in the heavens, and obscured the Sun of Righteousness and Life. An instinctive premonition of the rising storm, invested with an undefined terror, in the heart of priestcraft, the feeblest sign of this new phase in the religious world.

Several hours were spent in their house to house search ; but as yet, nothing was discovered of sufficient importance to be "presentable" as heresy, although many trivial items were jotted down as "suspicious." At this failure Master Churchwarden Barton looked more important than ever, and showed many signs of impatience at what he now openly ventured to call a "bootless errand."

"Come, my men," said he, "it is eleven by the dial, and our dinners will be spoiled ; let us to our homes and report all's well."

"Not so fast, Master Barton, not so fast," said

brother Stephen, again opening his paper of instructions.

"Whither now, then?" inquired the constable.

"Well, let me see," said the monk slowly, as he conned the paper. "John Brenton—no, we can go there by-and-by." And then, after a moment's hesitation, he exclaimed, "To Gilbert Wright's!"

"What!" exclaimed Anthony Barton, turning quickly round.

"To Gilbert Wright's," said the monk.

"To Gilbert Wright's!" incredulously repeated Master Barton.

"Ah! even so, Master Anthony," said the monk, with a sneer. "To Gilbert Wright's; we shall find some game there, I'll warrant, in spite of all thy watchfulness, Master Churchwarden Barton."



CHAPTER IV.

GODLINGSTONE GRANGE.

HERE stood at the western end of the village of Studmore, a large, irregularly built stone house, of ancient date—an erection of feudal days, when homes had little of that sweet security we now enjoy; but when, to guard against the lawless hand, domestic architecture partook of the military character. Godlingstone had been somewhat modernized; and, as the times were thought to have become more peaceful, the eyelets, or narrow windows, had been enlarged, so as to admit more of the light of day into the interior; but the general features of the building were unaltered. There were turrets bulging out at each angle, with strong vaulted chambers beneath, and bartizans on the front turrets, to defend the outer approach, in case of an attack. There were also traces of a moat, although this was now filled in,

and the drawbridge had long disappeared. The old entrance remained, and was more like the gateway of a castle than the door of a plain yeoman's house. But these indications of military times were now pleasingly contrasted with abundant signs of a more peaceful nature. A great barn, and smaller farm buildings at the side, together with the well-filled rick-yard and richly-blooming apple-garth, denoted not only active, prosperous industry, but smiling plenty and rural comfort.

Godlingstone was the home of Gilbert Wright. Gilbert's position was one which in these days, we should describe as that of a gentleman farmer, or country squire. He was descended from an old family, which although decayed by misfortune, still retained sufficient to enable its living representative to occupy the home of his ancestors, and, by farming, to maintain an honourable position in the village.

By a series of strange providences, Gilbert was now the only descendant of the family, which in past times had been numerous and strong. "He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow," and the love existing between them was of a nature that was most truly touching in its tender-

ness. Mistress Wright's devotion to her son was unbounded, and Gilbert loved his mother with the clinging affection of one who felt, that in her were centred all the natural ties that God had left him.

Mother and son lived in this old house, in quiet happiness. There was unbounded confidence between them. Gilbert had no thought or hope in secret. As the shades of evening drew on, they would sit and chat. Of late, indeed, much of the conversation had been about the new opinions that were spreading among the people, and stirring sleepy minds into activity and thought; and much, too, upon a subject of which Gilbert never tired, for Mistress Wright ever listened, with fond complacency, to her son's fervid description of the marvellous virtues and graces of Alice Chatfield.

Indeed, these two subjects had of late introduced new joy and hope into the somewhat monotonous life of Godlingstone Grange. The earthly love had become sanctified by the holier love of Jesus. The soul of Alice was dear to Gilbert, and his brightest and tenderest thoughts were those which were consecrated with this new joy. The dearest and most eager desire of Gilbert, was to lead his beloved to the foot of that Saviour whom he had so recently

found. But, although he had somewhat prepared the way for the reception of the Truth, he had not openly declared to any other than his mother—not even to Alice, how he had found Jesus, and what he had read and heard about Him and His blessed Words. But with the mother and son it was of late the frequent subject of conversation; and when the doors were closed at night, and the shutters of the casement were barred, Mistress Wright would sit and listen with thankfulness as her son read the sweet story of the Gospel.

And in this pursuit of spiritual knowledge, there was ever present a feeling of which, in the present day, we know nothing. To read the Gospel with the dread of an eaves-dropper at the door; to read it as a sacred duty and great privilege, yet with a consciousness that the act was a breach of earthly law; to read it, knowing that the discovery of the act would lead to imprisonment, and perhaps even to death, was a fiery trial to the Bible readers, or Gospellers, of those days which in Protestant England has long been unknown. Many were unequal to the strain, but those who by God's grace were enabled to grasp, in their mighty faith, the preciousness of the truth, found themselves, day by

day, living more in Christ, caring less for self, and being prepared by the power of the Holy Spirit for the glories of martyrdom.

To Gilbert, unconsciously almost, but surely, the Gospel had become precious. It had revealed to him a Christ who, without priestly intercession by a fellow sinner, had given him eternal life. With the simplicity of faithful trust, he had read the Word and believed; and with this he had felt in every sense a new creature. New hopes, new thoughts, and new aspirations seemed to ennoble and sanctify all the aims and purposes of life. He understood little or nothing about the dogmas of the monks; but he saw, now that the scales had fallen from his eyes, many things in a new light; but he was too full of spiritual joy and peace, to stop to analyse the contradictions between the teachings of the priests and the words and commands of the Gospel. It was enough for him, in his new-born happiness, to have discovered the way of Truth and Life.

To communicate joy is the delight of love. Gilbert was eager to make known his newly-found treasure to Alice. Mistress Wright, with maternal timidity, had restrained Gilbert from doing so. His mother knew how strong were the prejudices of

Master Barton, and his horror of anything like heresy; and she dreaded the effect of a too hasty communication. But the unexpected events of the last Sunday had brought matters to a crisis; and, after Church, before seeking their rest, mother and son had talked over the matter—she, with maternal fear and trembling; he, with glowing enthusiasm.

“To-morrow, dear mother, I must tell all to Alice.”

“God help thee, my son; I fear it may breed trouble. Wait yet awhile.”

“I cannot, dear mother. With this coming search, who knows what may happen? My opportunity may be gone; and oh, mother! I have prayed so earnestly, that I might be allowed to be the means of leading my beloved to Jesus.”

“Well, Gilbert, be it so; and may the Lord preserve thee!” said the mother, with a sigh.

The next morning, Gilbert hastened at an early hour, on his mission to Alice; and it was during his absence, that the quest came to search Godlingstone Grange.

Monk Stephen, with more politeness than he had yet displayed, inquired of Mistress Wright for her son; and, on learning that he was not at home, endeavoured, with subtle tact, to gather from her

some account of his pursuits. The mother, however, was on the alert; and, after much skilful fencing, the monk found himself completely foiled, in his attempt to convict the son by the mouth of the mother. Her manner was quiet and dignified; but when the now irritated monk demanded to know where Gilbert was, she answered, without the slightest hesitation, that her son had gone to Master Barton's. Thither the monk immediately ordered the quest to proceed, to the amazement and indignation, and the no small discomfiture, of Master Barton himself.

The attachment between his niece and Gilbert Wright, was no secret to the churchwarden. He recognised it, and gave it his cordial approval; but this was the first time he had ever heard a word spoken against the character of Gilbert.

"Some gossip's mischief!" he exclaimed, "or the tattling of that scoundrel Nicholas. I'll have the knaves' feet in the stocks for this! Ah! marry, indeed, will I!"

But Master Constable, to whom he addressed himself, looked gloomy and suspicious, and only replied with a shrug of the shoulders; and Master Barton followed the quest in silence.

No sooner did the party reach the home of Anthony, than, without the least ceremony, the monk abruptly entered the hall; and flinging open the parlour door, he suddenly confronted as briefly stated in a former chapter—with fiendish triumph in every feature of his face—the gentle lovers, the brave-hearted Gilbert Wright, and the sweet-souled Alice Chatfield.



CHAPTER V.

APPREHENSION OF GILBERT.

THE scene in the quaint, old-fashioned parlour of Anthony Barton, would have made a fine subject for a painter. The brave, manly bearing of Gilbert, as the monk with a dark and suspicious scowl approached him; the alarmed and excited look of poor Alice, who, with heightened and glowing beauty, stood beside her lover, and had involuntarily, amidst this seeming danger, grasped him by the arm; the perplexed and astonished Anthony, whose official importance had lamentably given way, before this unexpected turn of events; the exulting, malicious smile on the low-browed face of Geoffry; and the eager curiosity depicted in the attitude and looks of the inferior questmen—gave, altogether, a strong dramatic character to the group.

Brother Stephen, the monk, was the first to speak. Advancing to Gilbert he said :—

“Gilbert Wright—my lord the Prior has been grieved to hear a charge against thee of heresy.”

“In what respect, I pray?” inquired Gilbert.
“My conscience charges me not.”

“Thou shalt hear and answer the charge before my lord the Prior, who will first inquire of thee concerning this matter?”

“What matter?”

“Nay, pretend not to innocency, Master Wright. There is one here,” exclaimed the monk, pointing to Geoffrey, “who vouches that thou hast Wycliffe’s writings, even now, about thy person!”

“What! Geoffrey!” almost screamed Master Barton; “Oh, thou lying villain! Thou sneaking, pitiful scoundrel! thou——”

“Silence!” shouted the monk, with a frown.
“Would’st thou dare intimidate the knave in his duty? Let Gilbert Wright deny the charge, if he can.”

During this commotion, Gilbert remained silent; but when thus appealed to, he quietly replied:

“If I am charged with heresy, I deny it. They alone are heretics, who pervert the truth.”

“But the book, the book! hast thou the book?”

“If I am charged with reading the Gospel, I care not to deny it.”

“Where is it?” exclaimed the monk.

“Look within his doublet, reverend Sir; look within his doublet,” said Geoffry, in a low voice—but loud enough to be overheard.

“The sneaking dastard of a cur,” exclaimed the now excited churchwarden.

“Silence,” thundered the monk.

But Gilbert quietly drew forth the little parchment volume, and unclasping it read aloud: “‘These things I command you, that ye love one another. If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you.’”

“Hold, heretic! hold!” shouted the monk.

“Nay, quiet thine anger,” replied Gilbert. “Dost thou not recognise it as the Gospel? Can this be an heretical book?”

“Thou knowest that book,” exclaimed the monk, “is unauthorized by holy Church. It is one of the accursed and heretical paraphrases of Wycliffe.”

“Accursed!” said Gilbert with a shocked and troubled look.

“Yea, accursed,” replied brother Stephen, with excited anger. “Deliver it immediately, that it

may be burned in accordance with the injunction of the King's Grace's Council."

"Nay," firmly replied Gilbert; "never!"

The monk was enraged at this bold defiance; anger flushed his brow, and, with a hasty spring, he reached forth, and snatched at the silken cord to which the volume was attached; the cord broke, and, in the unseemly scuffle, the book fell on the floor. With a quick motion, Alice caught it up, and, in the confusion, the action was unseen by all, save by the vigilant eyes of her lover. The silken cord, alone, remained in the hands of the disappointed monk; and, under the impression that Gilbert had again thrust the book within his breast, he passionately exclaimed:

"The book, heretic; the book!"

Gilbert was silent. He rejoiced to know that the precious volume was in the unseen possession of Alice. Amidst all the excitement, his thought was for her; and with that peaceful, joyous smile again on his face, he breathed a silent prayer to Heaven, that the Word might prove to her a message of salvation and peace, as by God's blessing, it had proved to himself.

Still more incensed at this imperturbable silence,

the monk ordered the constable to seize Gilbert in the King's name. Gilbert made no resistance, but turning to Alice, whispered a few words of loving and tender farewell, and bade her, for his sake, to have courage.

“Read, my darling,” said he, “the precious book of Christ's Gospel. Take it as my parting gift, and may it comfort and bless thee!”

“Yes, Gilbert; but oh! how can I part with thee?”

The words were uttered in a low moan of tender agony. It was indeed a bitter trial to those loving hearts to be so cruelly severed: there was a very martyrdom of anguish in that parting. To the strongest and bravest, to those who can face undaunted, the peril of the deep, or the danger and din of battle—there is a cruel pang in a hopeless separation, that makes the strongest weak. As Gilbert, trembling with emotion, was dragged away by the questmen, he looked back with a yearning tenderness and pity upon Alice, and saw her fall fainting into the arms of her uncle.

CHAPTER VI.

GILBERT BEFORE PRIOR JOHN.

THE Church of Rome had been so long the one great power in the world; had, even in brave old England, so long subdued princes and bowed the necks of kings; and had held, indeed, the mind of the nation so completely under her sway, by the power of her false teaching, that she strove to suppress the feeblest indications of freedom in religious thought. So long as men were blind and ignorant, they could be led into any error which Rome's designing ecclesiastics deemed needful to their interests; and in the absence of better light, and safer guides, the people were of necessity compelled to feel a dependence upon her guiding hand. But when the Gospel was written in the language of common folk; when its glorious power and mighty truth touched, as with healing rays, the darkened eyes, and shed a new light on

the religious life of England, the monks, and all the priestly orders of the Papacy, saw that their power was in danger. Fear bred cruelty and hate; and one could hardly have believed it, had it not been stamped on the national mind in deeds of fire and blood—with what bitter malice and fiendish cruelty, the priests endeavoured to maintain their sway over the consciences of Englishmen.

History, it is said, repeats itself. Strange, how the history of Evangelical truth in the first century, repeated itself in the fifteenth. It was not before worldly power and might that Paganism trembled in the days of Cæsar. It was the poor fishermen of Galilee, and the tent-maker of Tarsus who shook the whole fabric of mythological priestcraft. Contemptible in the eyes of Cæsars and Herods—driven into the catacombs and cast to the lions—nevertheless, the poor Christians, even in their martyrdom, preached the doom of their oppressors. And so with this Paganism of Priestly Rome. In the fifteenth century, a poor Rector in a church; a few vulgar folk who had learned to read, and who, in their zeal and love for this new-found truth, were eager to teach others to do the same;—these were the poverty-stricken and vulgar “Gospellers,” who at first only

raised the contempt, then excited the fears of the Papacy.

Yes, these were the pioneers and evangelists of the English Reformation. What a great, but silent, work was done in quiet homes, in those early days! How the good news was spread; how the word was treasured; what sacrifices were made to get it; and what sufferings were endured to keep it, no tongue has ever told—no heart has ever known. Many, indeed, suffered and died for the Gospel, and the right to read it; and those "Gospellers" swell the list of our English martyrs. But the wretched system of priestly persecution; the dogging, and tracking, and watching of men in their homes; the petty cruelties, and insults, and tyrannies, which were borne for the Gospel's sake, no historian has related; and it is only incidentally in the records of social and domestic life that we see how bitter was the hate, and how merciless the persecution of the monks, towards the poor "Gospellers" of the fifteenth century.

No wonder, then, that, when Gilbert Wright was led as an arrested heretic through the village of Studmore, the popular feeling was against him. Studmore was in the hands of the monks; all con-

nected with Studmore was directly, or indirectly, under their sway. Self-interest helped the false teaching and kept up the tyranny of priestcraft. Some few, secretly touched with the new doctrines, held their tongues, and looked on with fear and pity; but most of them, as they turned out from shop or house, joined in the cry:

“A Lollard! a Lollard! down with the Lollards!”

This was a bitter experience to Gilbert. He had always stood well with his neighbours. Indeed, he had been until now most popular in the village; and young and old regarded him with favour. But popular friendship was no proof against religious fear and bigotry. This sudden desertion and revulsion, as it were, of good feeling, struck like a chill to the heart of Gilbert. He felt alone.

The quest soon reached the Priory, and Gilbert was ushered into the great Refectory, where already assembled, were the Prior, the rector, and some of the monks.

“Well,” inquired Prior John, looking towards the monk, “hast thou proof?”

“Ample; not only has he now the book of Wycliffe’s about his person, but he has dared to read it before us.”

“What say you, son?” sternly demanded the Prior, turning to Gilbert.

“The book I had, reverend father, was no evil writing, but a fair copy of the Gospel by the holy evangel John.”

“In Latin or English?”

“In English,” replied Gilbert. “I wit not Latin; it was plainly written in common tongue.”

“And therefore accursed, as the work of that evil-minded heretic Wycliffe.”

“Accursed! reverend father.”

“Yes, accursed! Holy Church alone hath keeping of God’s Word. That thou knowest, Gilbert; that thou knowest.”

“I pray you be not angry, reverend father; the Book is simple truth. The clerk at Andover tested it by the Latin, and vouched for the verity of the translate.”

“It’s false,” exclaimed the Prior. “The book, doubtless, is that heretical version of Wycliffe’s, condemned by the King’s Grace’s Council.”

“I ween not, reverend father,” boldly replied Gilbert; “the little book is but Christ’s gospel, unglossed with any comments of Master Wycliffe.”

“Tush! Christ’s gospel, indeed! Treasonable

lies against holy Church, in whose keeping is the true Gospel. It seemeth me," added the Prior, with a frown, "to have led thee into grievous error."

"It hath been a comfort," said Gilbert, "to me and to many."

"Ah! then thou hast been infecting others with thy Lollard heresy."

"Heresy!" exclaimed Gilbert; "Christ's Gospel, heresy!"

"Yea, heresy, when writ in that swinish tongue," angrily replied the Prior. "If thou wantest Christ's word, ask thou of the priest."

"*He saith, reverend father,*" answered Gilbert, "*Let whosoever will, come.*"

"Ah! I see thou hast gone far in thy Lollardy, and darest with argument to show thy disaffection. Where is the book?"

Gilbert was silent.

"Where is the book?" demanded the Prior, in a loud and angry voice. "Deliver the book, I say, that we may cast it into the fire, lest it lead thee there, thyself."

"I have it not," said Gilbert.

"What! dost thou lie? Heretic, beware!"

The face of Gilbert flushed, his eyes brightened

with indignation, and angry words rose to his lips, until he remembered his Lord's example under provocation; and he meekly replied:

"I speak the truth; I have not the book."

"Not the book!" exclaimed brother Stephen, with unfeigned astonishment. "Why, I saw it in thine hand, thou lying heretic!"

"Thou didst," said Gilbert, still unruffled at this monkish brutality, "but when thou snatchedst at the cord, it fell to the ground."

"Believe him not, my lord Prior, believe him not; he hath the book for a surety, under his doublet," said brother Stephen.

"I demand thee, in the King's name, to deliver it," said the Prior; adding, as he saw that Gilbert made no sign, "or I will order thee to be searched."

"I object not, reverend father," said Gilbert, opening his doublet.

Every pocket and fold was felt again and again, but in vain. Stephen the monk looked mortified and suspicious, whilst the Prior could with difficulty suppress his rage. At last, finding the search fruitless, he exclaimed:

"What knavish trick is this?"

"Some necromancy of the devil," muttered Stephen

the monk, with a darkened brow, and crossing himself as he spoke. "I saw him with the book, I swear."

"Heretic!" exclaimed the Prior, "where is the book?"

"I have it not," was the reply.

"Where is it, I ask, knave?"

But Gilbert was again silent; and, although the question was put again and again, he did not reply. So eager was the Prior to secure the Gospel book that it might be burned,—so fearful indeed of the effect of the simple Word of Truth, that he offered Gilbert liberty, and even absolution, if he would give information that would secure possession of the dreaded Word of God. But neither persuasion nor threats availed. As a last resource, the Prior adopted a more gentle tone, saying:

"Gilbert, my son, tell me what thou knowest, lest this evil book lead some others astray."

"I fear not, reverend father," replied Gilbert, "Christ leadeth not His sheep astray: 'He is a good Shepherd,' and not a 'hireling.' Nay, father, let us rather hope that that Gospel book may comfort and bless its possessor, even as it hath blessed and comforted me."

“Thou obstinate heretic!” shouted the now enraged Prior. “Away with thy vile Lollardy. Ho! ho! there! Take him away to the cell of the gate tower; we’ll find a way to make the fellow speak!”

As Gilbert was hurried away from the Refectory, the Prior advanced to the table, and rang a small hand-bell. A lay brother answered the summons, and stood bare-headed awaiting the directions of his superior.

“Go to the Scriptorium,” said the Prior, “and bid Walter de Wytham attend me with pen and parchment: Haste! I await his coming.”


The lay brother turned, and was about to retire, when the Prior impatiently called him back.

“Stay!” said he. “See that a messenger be ready to carry a letter, post-haste to my lord of Winchester.”



CHAPTER VII.

HIDING THE BOOK.

OME time elapsed before Alice Chatfield regained her consciousness. Her uncle, alarmed beyond measure, shouted lustily, and soon brought Dame Mostyn and the maids to her assistance. They carried her to the upper chamber, and sent off hastily for the village leech; but before he arrived, the cordials and distilled waters, of which Dame Mostyn always kept a goodly store, had so helped her recovery that she refused to see Master Poddlestone, who came fully prepared to give her a copious bleeding, which kill or cure—was his remedy for almost every ailment. No sooner did Alice thus partially recover, than, finding herself alone with Dame Mostyn, she anxiously inquired about Gilbert.

“Oh, good dame!” she eagerly asked, “whether have they taken him?”

“Alack! alack!” replied the good woman, “they’ve taken him to Greyleye, to my lord Prior, and all about some wicked book. Oh dear! oh dear! alack! alack! what a foolsome youth.”

“Nay, dame, nay! thou knowest naught about the matter,” gently remonstrated Alice.

“Wot not about it!” exclaimed Dame Mostyn. “Didn’t I hear that it was seen in his hand? and didn’t Master Stephen promise that it should be all well if he gave it up? and that if he didn’t——”

“Well, well, dame, speak no more now, I am weak,” said Alice, in a sad, desponding tone.

“Keep thee quiet, sweet mistress. Oh dear, a dear, I fear my prating old tongue hath frightened thee.”

So, indeed, it appeared, for Alice looked deadly pale, and as if about to swoon again; but by-and-by she became more composed, and asked to be left alone. Dame Mostyn, after attending to her comfort in a kind and motherly way, quietly withdrew.

The first thought of Alice was for the book, and it was joy to her to find that it was safe in her

pocket. She pondered for some time within her mind how to guard it from all accident of discovery ; at last she remembered that at the bottom of the bedstead head there was a sliding panel—a very common contrivance in those days, as depositaries for money and valuables ; and she took the opportunity, during the absence of Dame Mostyn, to place her treasured volume in this place of security.

But the shock that Alice had sustained, proved more serious than at first supposed. Her grief and anxiety for Gilbert preyed upon her mind, and, after a long and sleepless night of anguish, at early morn she fell into a disturbed and fitful slumber, to awake a few hours later in a high state of fever.

Master Poddlestone, leech and barber of Studmore, was again sent for, and a great fuss he made in the house, brewing his potions over the kitchen fire, and talking ominously of signs and prognostications ; but strange to say, in spite of all his leechcraft, his awful messes and copious bleedings, poor Alice, on the third day, was so far recovered as to be able to sit up in bed. But it was a sad and gloomy time, for she could learn nothing as to the fate of Gilbert, except that he was lodged in the

gate-tower of Greyleye Priory, awaiting, it was supposed, his examination on the charge of heresy.

But, in the midst of this dull despondency, Alice found an unexpected comforter. Happily, she had been taught to read and write, and was, for the dark age in which she lived, educated, even beyond the average of her class. Her natural intelligence, and quiet, reflective habit of mind, enabled her to profit by all she learned. The little book, so dearly precious to her as the parting gift of Gilbert, and not esteemed the less because of the danger involved in its possession, was read whenever she was alone, although at first, from mere curiosity. But the power of the Truth was soon felt. The seed of the Word fell upon good ground, and her heart warmed and glowed with new-born gladness, as she read the sweet words of solace and tenderness recorded by the "disciple whom Jesus loved." She not only read it in secret, but occupied herself in committing verse after verse to memory, thinking that, should events rob her of her treasure, some portion of the precious Truth might thus be stamped for ever upon her heart. What a comfort that little book was to her, none can tell. What a revelation of mercy and love divine, and what a new and better life it

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opened to her soul! Oh! how she longed for some friend with whom she could talk about Christ, and how she yearned for the society of Gilbert now, that they might together rejoice in the happiness of their mutual faith, and together seek their Saviour's aid to sustain them in their bitter trials.

One day, before she had become sufficiently convalescent to leave her sick bed, in which she had been sitting up and reading, Alice, feeling tired and weak, reclined upon her pillow, and so fell into a reverie; and this soon merged into a gentle dream of those happy days which seemed, alas! now gone for ever. All was quiet, and as usual in the afternoon, she was alone, and not likely to be disturbed. As she slept, the Gospel book slid from her hand, and lay open on the bed, and the title-page, with the words,

“*The Gospelle as by Saynt Ihon put into
Playne Englysshe by Measter Wycliffe,*”

was fully exposed to view.

Whilst Alice thus slept, unconscious of danger, Dame Mostyn, who had gone to prepare the supper, it being four by the dial, returned, bearing on a wooden platter a marchpane cake and a small bowl

of wheaten gruel, for the invalid. Seeing that Alice was asleep, she placed the platter on the table, and turning to the bed, saw the open book. The good dame was no scholar, and had never got beyond the horn-book, but she had heard so much about the evils of books of late, and the danger and sin of reading them, that her curiosity was excited, and she softly crept to the bedside to examine what seemed to her a very dangerous possession. Imperfect as her learning was, she spelled out, clearly enough, the words, "JOHN WYCLIFFE," on the parchment page, and she could scarcely forbear a scream as she made the alarming discovery. "Alack! alack! what did it all mean? How could Alice have obtained the book?" Then she thought that, perhaps, after all, she was mistaken, and that it was not one of the dreadful books about which she had heard so much. Well! she would wait until Alice awoke, and then ask her all about it.

The good dame sat on the window settle for some time, thus thinking; but as Alice still slept, and, not caring to awake her, she thought she would take the gruel into the kitchen again, that it might be kept warm. Giving directions to one of the kitchenmaids to tend it, she was about to return,

when Geoffrey, the serving man, came in, bringing some fagots for the fire. Geoffrey was still retained: indeed, it would have been difficult, with the then legal regulations between master and man, to have got rid of him, even if such an act would not have excited, as it would have done, the anger and suspicion of the monks. To discover heresy was a virtue, and a virtue, it was said, which every good Churchman should encourage, even if it affected the members of his own household. As for Dame Mostyn, she did not know, not having been present at the apprehension of Gilbert, that Geoffrey had taken any part in the proceedings, so that, when Geoffrey greeted her with a "Good day, Dame Mostyn," she gave him a gracious answer, and inquired as to the gossip of the day.

"Ah! gossip, Mistress Mostyn! Evil things are said about us here, I can tell thee."

"'Evil things,' Geoffrey! alack-a-day, what dost thou mean?"

"Why, forsooth, they do say," said Geoffrey, "that the quest will have to pay another visit to the Grete house."

"'Another visit' here! Oh, dear! oh, dear! a mercy me; what next? I wonder."

"How's fair Mistress Alice?" abruptly asked Geoffrey.

"Poor lass, she's sadly, Geoffrey, sadly, and frets sore at heart about Gilbert."

"Ugh! more's the pity," said Geoffrey, sullenly.

"Why?"

"Why, because he's doomed for the stake," replied Geoffrey; "unless, indeed," he added, "they can't find the book, for it be said that on his way to Greyleye he gave the book to the devil."

"What book?"

"Why, dame, the book of Master Wycliffe's, of course! You see, if they don't find the book, he may perchance escape the burning."

"Ah! I see, I see!" said Dame Mostyn; "good luck then, it is, surely. Yes, yes, I see. Ah! ah! good luck, good luck!"

"What's 'good luck,' dame?"

"Well, well, well, well!"

"'Well, well, well, well!'" exclaimed Geoffrey. "What hast thou found, good dame, that thou'rt so joyesome?"

But dame Mostyn only shook her head, smoothed her kerchief, pursed up her lips, and looked very knowing.

Geoffry, crafty knave that he was, saw that there was something to be known about the lost book, and with adroit cunning set to work to discover it.

"I fear me, dame, he has it though, for I saw the book in his hand," said Geoffry.

The dame still remained prudently silent: would that she had kept so.

"Better it were burnt, unbeknown to any."

"Ah! good, Geoffry, a good thought, Geoffry," said Dame Mostyn.

"Save a heap of trouble," said Geoffry, "The quest 'll be here to morrow," he added, as a bold venture.

"Here!" exclaimed Dame Mostyn, "a-lack-a-day, a-lack-a-day, poor Alice!"

"What about Mistress Alice, dame? Does she know anything about it?"

Dame Mostyn, now fully alarmed, looked straight at Geoffry, and going close to him, whispered:

"Wilt thou keep safe counsel, Geoffry?"

"Ah! truly, dame, by Holy St. Dunstan, I will!"

Dame Mostyn, thinking no harm, and only anxious for the safety of Alice, on whom she doted, told Geoffry what she had seen. The cunning


caitiff listened with malignant joy, but it did not suit his purpose that the book should be burnt. He advised Dame Mostyn to go back to Alice, secure the book, and hide it away in safety, for the present.

Dame Mostyn bustled away on her errand, whilst Geoffry hastened to Greyleye Priory, and, knocking loudly at the gate, asked to be taken, without loss of time, into the presence of Prior John.



CHAPTER VIII.

THE CITATION.

HEN Dame Mostyn returned to Alice, she found her awake and much refreshed. The book had disappeared, for Alice had restored it to its hiding-place, not suspecting that it had been seen. Dame Mostyn could not long contain her anxiety, prompted as it was by a real desire for the welfare of Gilbert.

“Ah!” she said, “I have news, my dear.”

“‘News!’ of whom?” eagerly inquired Alice.

“Of Master Wright. I hear they cannot find the book, and they are likely to search for it here.”

“And if they find it not, dame, what then? Will they let Gilbert alone in peace?”

“I wot not,” replied the dame. “Geoffry says——”

“‘Geoffry!’” exclaimed Alice.

“Yes, Geoffry; he says if the book could be hid away, it ’ud be much better for Master Wright.”

“He’s a false hind!” exclaimed Alice. “Hold no converse with him, I pray thee, about Gilbert.”

“Nay, nay, lass dear; I ween he meaneth well.”

“He’s false, dame, I know it. He it was who brought the quest here. He’s in league with Prior John—trust him not!” warmly spoke Alice.

“Oh dear, adear! alack, alack!” moaned Dame Mostyn, as she always did when in trouble.

“What’s the matter, good dame?” inquired Alice.

“Oh! what have I done, with my foolish old tongue?—alack, alack!”

“Tell me, good dame, tell me what hurts thy mind,” said Alice, tenderly, seeing how distressed she was.

And then she told Alice how she had seen the book open on the bed, and what she had said to Geoffry about it. When she had finished, Alice quietly asked :

“And where is Geoffry now?”

“I wot not; he left the kitchen awhile ago.”

“For Greyleye Priory, dame, I doubt not.”

Alice at once saw the danger, but she bore this shock with happy quietness of mind. The precious words of the Gospel came even now like

whisperings from the mouth of Jesus, to comfort her. She felt strong already in the energizing power of the Divine presence, and in the might of that indwelling faith which had enabled the glorious army of martyrs to brave the fires of persecution, and march triumphantly to death. She had no hesitation about her duty, as a new disciple of her Lord. She refused to listen for one moment to the suggestion of Dame Mostyn, as to the destruction of the Gospel book. She loved it too dearly to show it such despite, and she resolved to keep it as long as she had power to do so. She did not divulge its hiding-place, but took every opportunity of reading it, and of adding some precious text to the riches of her memory.

The next day Alice was so much better, as to be able to sit in the parlour. She was disappointed to find that her uncle knew nothing more about Gilbert. He had several times inquired at the Priory, but the lay brother at the gate was disinclined to answer his questions, and all he could learn was, that Gilbert was awaiting his examination.

Alice, amidst this anxious uncertainty, again found solace in her hidden treasure. She soon,

however, ventured, in the boldness of her love, to take it from its hiding-place, and read it as she sat alone in the quiet, curtained bay-window of the old parlour. Already she began to feel the workings of that living zeal, which a loving recognition of the good news ever stirs in the unselfish heart. She longed to tell others of her Saviour and His free offers of mercy; and she began to question to herself whether she ought to hide so hastily, as if ashamed of it, the little book, whenever her uncle or Dame Mostyn approached. She was thus thinking, when Dame Mostyn herself came in, and sat down to her work. Alice soon introduced the subject now so dear to her heart, by quickly taking the Gospel from her pocket, and commencing to read the 14th chapter of John.

Poor Dame Mostyn was terribly frightened; indeed, as soon as she saw the book, she shuffled her stool farther away, as if she feared some terrible contagion.

“A mercy me!” she cried, “put that book away!”

“Fear thee not,” said Alice, “it is a good-news message, and one that will delight thee to hear.”

“Prithee not now, sweet Mistress Alice! prithee

not now!" she exclaimed, holding up both hands in an imploring gesture, and looking nervously around, as if almost expecting to see the constable peeping in at the door.

"Alay thy fears," said Alice, gently, "whilst I tell thee somewhat about these sweet words of Jesus Christ."

And so, by degrees, the good dame was led to listen; and as she listened, marvelled that words so gentle and full of love, could be heresy. "Why, they were sweeter than the homilies of Roger de Whyttenham! Well, well, she couldn't understand it at all."

Whilst thus engaged, her uncle entered in great excitement. He held a slip of parchment in his hand, to which was attached a pendent seal of yellow wax. He looked pale and alarmed, and in such a state of frightened eagerness, that he could scarcely speak.

"Alice! Alice!" he at last exclaimed, pointing to the document which fluttered in his trembling hand.

"What is it, dear uncle?" cried Alice, starting from her seat.

The old man almost gasped for breath, in his

speechless fear. He shook as if he had the ague, and could only mutter—"Read, read!"

Alice took the parchment from his hand, but, like all the legal documents of that time, it was written in Latin, and so was a dead language to her; yet attached to it were a few words in English, written by way of explanation, which ran thus: "This is a Citation to Mistress Alice Chatfield, to appear on the eve of the Feast of St. Editha, before the Lord Bishop of Winchester and the Abbot of Andover, at Greyleye Priory; then and there to answer the charge of heresy, on the deposition of Geoffry Tryon."

"The lossel caitiff!" exclaimed Anthony Barton, in a rage.

"Oh, a-lack-a-day, a-lack-a-day!" sobbed Dame Mostyn, who now saw the mischief her gossip had done.

"But—but, Alice, what meaneth it all?" inquired Anthony, still in great agitation.

"Dear uncle, be calm," said Alice.

"'Calm,' niece!" exclaimed Anthony, with sudden energy, "and this vile charge against thee, my sweet one!—Alice, dear," he continued, now with trembling voice again, "thou shalt not go—no, no ;

they shall never take thee from me ; no—no—no ! ” and the old man sobbed bitterly.

“ Nay, uncle, fear not, they cannot harm me.”

“ Harm thee ! why, with the lying speech of that false caitiff, they will burn thee, my darling ! Alice—Alice, dear, let us flee,” said the old man, “ let us flee ! ”

It was long, indeed, before Alice could calm her uncle’s fears ; but her own sweet heroism won upon him at last. Her fair young face expressed no terror ; and although her girlish mirth was gone, and the sunny smiles that had been wont to dance in every feature had fled, there was in her whole countenance a sweet and holy serenity, radiant with the quiet joy of inward peace.



CHAPTER IX.

THE EXAMINATION.

DURING the few days that had elapsed since the opening of our tale, the monks had been busy enough. The search for the Lollards, it is true, had not been altogether so successful as they had expected, and very few books had been unearthed. But, after all, there was a goodly "presentment" to read to "my Lord Bishop," who was coming over from Winchester. Gilbert Wright was safe in the cell beneath the tower; Mistress Alice had been cited to appear; Simon the smith, had been put under watchful eyes, and John of Brenton, the tailor, had only last night been caught reading a New Testament, as he sat mending an old doublet, little thinking as he read a verse between his stitchings, that prying eyes were looking through the crack in the shutter! Poor John was a timid man, meaning to do good,

and wishing to act as a Christian should act, but sadly weak in the flesh; and when the constable hurried him off to Greyleye, and he stood before Prior John, and felt his stern look upon him, his courage failed, and he made a full confession of his heresy—gave up the New Testament on bended knees, and received promise of absolution, on condition of doing penance on the morrow.

Gilbert was kept in close prison, and although the prior had visited him, and had used persuasion and threats to induce him to confess heresy, and to give information about the Gospel book, he had remained firm. Some questions, too, had been answered by Gilbert in a manner that had exasperated the prior. It was evident that ignorant as he might be about the theology of the schools, he was wise in the simple truths of the Gospel, and this was enough for Prior John to set him down as a dangerous and incorrigible heretic.

The great desire of the monks was for a recantation. It was a real triumph to priestcraft when a Gospeller recanted—declared himself convinced of his error, and threw, with his own hand, the Bible into the flames; but the cruel triumph gained over her victims, in even an *auto-da-fé*, was a very doubtful gain to the

Church, when the faith of the Gospellers stood even the test of the fire. All, therefore, that persuasion, and threatening, and worrying, and arguing could do, was done, to humble and wear out the spirit, and bring the heretic on his knees. Too frequently, this badgering succeeded—especially when backed up with threats of the tar barrel and the flames. Hundreds recanted—did miserable penance, received absolution, and went back into society with the torturing sting of apostacy, and recanting their recantation, bitterly, in their hearts.

Ah! and let us think gently of their unfaithfulness, for many of them were forgiven by Him who knew their frailty, and mercifully remembered that their “spirit was willing,” though their “flesh was weak;” and so once more accepted, they became His true followers, after all. There have ever been more Peters than Pauls in the world, and some of our bravest martyrs were sorely tried, and their courage and faith often wavered amidst the cruel terrors of priestly persecution.

Nature will prevail sometimes. It was so with Gilbert Wright. In that lonely cell, with its dim light and bare walls, the mind was thrown back to feed upon itself in a mood of dulness and depression.

He thought of the life and joy he had to sacrifice. He thought of Alice, and her bright smile haunted him in his solitude, and made him yearn for her sweet presence. Life seemed so dreary and so sad, that even the thought of her, now that hope had well nigh fled, brought not the joy that before it had never failed to do. Indeed, it was his deep love for Alice that made his cross almost too heavy for his faith to bear: and the fiercest battle that his heroism had to fight, was the strong temptation of his heart's affection, to forsake his Saviour for the idol of his love.

And yet he conquered. Not in the power of his own might, but rather because he trusted not to it, but to the all-sustaining power of the Divine presence.

And so, when at day-break on the morning before the feast of St. Editha, the lay brother who attended upon Gilbert in his cell told him that he would have at "tertia," or nine o'clock, to appear before the Bishop, Gilbert felt no fear, but with his uplifted prayer for help, received all the strength that he needed for the coming trial of his faith.

Greyleye Priory, that morning, was in a state of solemn excitement, for my Lord Bishop of Win-

chester had come to examine charges of heresy, and to suppress by his admonitions any further disaffection to Holy Church. The great refectory had been arranged for the occasion, and the whole house put into severe order, as became the strict rule of the monks.

The bishop, who was received with obsequious reverence by Prior John and the monks, was a fine, aristocratic-looking man, with a face which neither care nor asceticism had robbed of its natural advantages. His eyes, keen and penetrating, could yet twinkle with humour, and a courteous smile would sometimes play around his mouth. His voice was gentle and persuasive, and his manner kind and paternal. Henry Bolinbroke, Bishop of Winchester, was nevertheless a hot-headed papist, and worked with Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Clifford, Bishop of London, in a zealous persecution of the Lollards. His natural suavity of manner was his strength; and if Arundel gloried in having burned more heretics than any ecclesiastic of his day, Bolinbroke could boast of having led still more to recant by his crafty good-nature.

As soon as seated, the bishop called for the depositions.

“Let us lose no time,” said he, “but inform me what disaffection thou hast found in Studmore.”

“May it please my Lord’s grace to listen to the presentment of the quest?” inquired Prior John, bowing lowly.

“Read it, and then to business,” said the bishop.

Prior John handed a paper to brother Stephen, who acted as clerk, and standing up, read the following:—

Presentment of the Quest.

“Item. We do find, that one Simon Ralffe uses opprobrious words, sings seditious ballads, and learneth to read.

“Item. We find that on the Saturday after Ash Wednesday, was seen in the house of Richard Kempe, a brass pot over the fire, with a piece of bacon and oatmeal seething in it; and that he doth not observe holy days, and holdeth conference with Lollards.

“Item. We find that Gilbert Wright hath a book of Master Wycliffe’s, and refuseth to give up the same, and is suspect of heresy.

“Item. We find that Mistress Alice Chatfield, niece to Master Barton, is of Lollard sect, and hideth a New Testament, and can read English.

“Item. We find that John of Brenton, the tailor, is one of the Lollards, and hath a New Testament, which he bought for four marks and forty pence, and hath taught from the same naughty book.”

"A heavy bill, Sir Prior," said the Bishop; "and betokening lax vigilance, methinks."

"Heresy groweth apace, my lord," replied the prior, apologetically.

"We must use strong measures, then, and burn some of these Loller knaves by way of warning."

"Wisely said, my lord," replied the gloomy monk; "mercy is out of place with these troublers of our peace. We have, I fear, an obdurate and seditious fellow in this Gilbert Wright."

"Yet I hear," said the bishop, "that he is held in worshipful respect in Studmore. Bring him forth that I may question him."

The lay brother, having received his orders, proceeded to the cell, and unlocking the heavy door, beckoned Gilbert to follow him. When in the corridor, he touched Gilbert on the shoulder, and whispered:

"Now, Master Wright, be not wilful, but confess thy fault, and give up the book."

Gilbert shook his head.

"'Tis thine only chance," urged the brother, adding with a jeer: "Why shouldest thou be burned, when thou canst marry and live?"

"Away," cried Gilbert, "and tempt me not."

With a shrug of the shoulder, the lay brother led the way to the refectory. The room had now been cleared of all except the Bishop, the Abbot of Andover—a quiet, dull-looking ascetic,—Prior John, and Stephen the Monk. Directly Gilbert entered, the bishop smiled upon him blandly, and said, in a tone almost tender and compassionate :

“Son, I trust thou art in a better frame of mind.”

“Yea, thanks be to Christ’s grace,” answered Gilbert.

“Good,” said the bishop, with another sweet smile, “we should have sorrowed if thou, of all others, hadst remained obstinate in thine error.”

“Mine errors have been grievous,” replied Gilbert ; “but by God’s mercy I am pardoned.”

“Not so fast, good son—not so fast!” said the bishop. “Thou must first show thy fault by due penance, and receive absolution from Holy Church.”

“Reverend Father, Christ hath assured me of that.”

“What meanest thou, Gilbert?” exclaimed the bishop. “This babble soundeth like Lollardy.”

“Not Lollardy, my lord, but Gospel Truth ; for the words of Christ, as writ by blessed John, are : ‘He that believeth My Word hath everlasting life.’”

“ Ah ! I perceive where thou art now ! ” exclaimed the bishop. “ Have a care lest the devil blind thee ! ”

“ Told I not your lordship, ” said Prior John, leaning across the table, “ how his heart is indurate. Question him closely upon his Lollardism. ”

“ I find it in the deposition, ” said the bishop, turning to Gilbert, “ that thou hast a vile book of Wycliffe’s in hiding. Where is it ? ”

“ I have it not, ” said Gilbert.

“ It was seen in thine hand. Thou knowest full well that the King’s grace hath prohibited these baneful writings. ”

“ “ I have given them Thy Word, ” ” slowly repeated the Gospeller, in a quiet and absent tone, “ “ and the world hath hated them. ” ”

“ Cease thy babblings of Scripture, ” exclaimed the bishop, impatiently.

“ Lo, Sir, ” said the prior, turning to the bishop, “ this is ever the manner of these lossels ; they pick out sharp sentences of Scripture to warrant their free use of the Gospel. ”

“ Gilbert ! Gilbert ! ” exclaimed the bishop, in an angry tone. “ I see thou hast been travelling with the devil, and art fast in his bonds. ”

“Not so, my lord,” replied Gilbert; “but rather in the joysome liberty of Christ, for He died to make me free.”

“But not free to read the Bible, though. Thou hast no right to read the Book, save by the aid of Holy Church,” said the bishop.

“Yet I read,” said Gilbert, “that Christ said, ‘Ye shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free.’”

“Proud presumptuousness,” exclaimed the bishop.

“Test him, my lord, test him,” whispered Prior John. “Inquire of him as to his Lollardy.”

The great fundamental truth, which was the pivot, as it were, upon which turned the whole course of the English Reformation, even from its earliest day, was not so much the right to read the Bible; as that the Sacramental Elements in the Lord’s Supper continued, after consecration, to be but bread and wine. This great Evangelical truth struck at the very root of sacerdotal power. This was *the* subject of the controversial battle of the Reformation. Sacerdotalism had built up the fable that the bread and wine, after the priestly consecration, became the very body and blood that was crucified on Calvary. The monks bolstered up the fable by stories of bleeding wafers,

and coupled it with the miracle of Bolsena, which was commemorated by the great festival of Corpus Christi, and immortalized in the fresco of Raphael. It was against this stupendous imposition of priest-craft that the earliest Reformers contended. It was for this that Sautre, the first martyr, died; it was for this that Chatres, and Thorpe, and Badby, and Lord Cobham, and a host of others, went bravely to the stake; and this question became the natural and almost universal test-question for the discovery of Lollardism.

“Ah! answer me truly,” said the bishop. “What sayest thou, Gilbert? Dost thou believe that after the consecration of the Sacrament, there remaineth the substance of bread or not?”

“I never busied myself, reverend father, in this matter; more fit is it for the sophistry of the schools. I follow Christ’s Word.”

“Nay, nay! thou escapest not so,” exclaimed Prior John; “test him, my lord, test him.”

“Sir,” said the bishop, angrily, “have a care, for by St. Thomas I will have an answer!”

“Put it plainly to him, my lord,” urged the prior; “oppose you him on this point, that we may hear from his own mouth.”

“Believest thou,” sternly demanded the bishop, “that the sacramental bread of the altar is Christ’s body, after the consecration?”

“Nay, I cannot so believe; for if every piece of sacramental bread were the body of Christ, there would be an infinite number of Christs, because a thousand priests, or more, make a thousand such Christs daily. I can only worship *one* Christ, and no *bread*-Christs.”

A sardonic smile passed over the gloomy face of the prior, whilst the bishop, striking his hand violently on the table, exclaimed:

“By — ! but if thou leave not such evil errors, I’ll send thee to the fire.”

“This cometh of reading Wycliffe’s writings,” added the Monk Stephen; “kneel down, Loller; and pray our reverend father’s grace.”

But Gilbert was silent, yet with uplifted eyes sought the help of Him who giveth strength to the weak. Exasperated with this patient firmness, the monk, in a still more angry tone, exclaimed:

“Submit thyself to Holy Church; confess thy error and thy sorrow.”

“Nay, reverend Sir, I sorrow not, for Christ hath given me joy.”

“By St. Thomas!” exclaimed the bishop, “I’ll turn thy joy into sorrow.”

“As I told thee, my lord, he is indurate, and doeth great spite to Holy Church, by spreading these heresies.”

“I prithee no,” said Gilbert; “my heart chideth me in this matter, that I have *not* made known Christ’s words.”

“Thou *hast*, and joyed greatly in spreading thy Lollard errors,” exclaimed the prior. “Why, thy cursed sect is ever busy sowing popple among the wheat.”

The prior whispered to the bishop, and then gave a sign to Monk Stephen, who left the room.


“I wot well, Loller, thy evil work at Master Barton’s,” said the prior, addressing Gilbert; “Mistress Alice Chatfield had not been on the presentment, but for thine evil teaching.”

“Alice!” exclaimed Gilbert in alarm; “thou surely hast not ——”

At this moment the door opened, and Alice Chatfield, pale and trembling, was led into the room by Anthony Barton.

CHAPTER X.

ALICE BEFORE THE BISHOP.

HEN Alice entered the Refectory she looked pale. Grief had left deep traces of her visit on that fair young face. During the last week her sufferings had been great, and the fond hopes of her opening life had become dark and overcast. But amidst this furnace of trial, a holy presence had strengthened her. It was marvellous, what bravery and nobleness of spirit the Truth had kindled in that slender girl. Gentle and undemonstrative, some would have thought her incapable of those deeper feelings that stir up the heart to heroism. Yet, such quiet natures can often bear more, withstand more;—can love with a stronger and more unselfish love, than those who sparkle with all the vivacity of robust energy, and the glow of life. The love of such, if not so warm in its outward aspect, burns with a steadier faith, and

endures for ever. Such a love, we can trust. In its quietness and depth, it is safe from many influences that disturb more restless natures ; and is not likely to be kissed away, by the most brilliant wooer. In holier things than those of earth, and for great purposes, these are the natures that surprise us with their abiding strength, and the readiness with which they clothe themselves with martyrdom, in their sacrificial devotion to the Truth.

And so now, entering into the presence of those stern men, Alice, girl as she was in years, was spiritually stronger than they. No hesitation—no weakness, were visible. Faith had filled her heart with courage. Yet, with that maiden shyness so natural to her age, and quite unconscious of a presence so dear to her, she advanced, with downcast eyes, towards the table, led by her uncle. Suddenly she started at the sound of a voice that had never left her in her solitude, or her dreams.

“ Alice ! ”

“ Gilbert ! ”

And love, which conquers fear, rejoiced in a moment of redeeming bliss. Before bishop, prior, or monk could interpose, the lovers were clasped in each other's arms.

The prior, amazed and scandalized at this disregard of the presence of my lord bishop, seemed for a moment too astonished to speak. He soon recovered himself, however, and turning to Master Barton, exclaimed :

“What meaneth this foolery? How dare they show this unseemly conduct here? Separate them instantly!”

“Stay! stay!” said old Anthony, “grudge them not this sorry comfort; they need something in their misery, poor things.”

“Let them alone,” said the bishop, and then turning to the prior, he whispered :

“Methinks I see how this may be useful in bringing them to submission.”

“How, reverend father?” asked the prior.

“Appeal to each through their affection. Gilbert will confess all, to save this jade; and she, poor fool——”

“Ah! I see,” said the crafty prior.

Whilst this conversation was going on, Alice and Gilbert were not idle.

“Courage! my sweet one,” said Gilbert, “and fear not for me. But why art thou here?”

“Because of the book; it was seen in mine hand.”

“And thou hast given it up.”

“Nay! Gilbert, it is in safe hiding.”

“Hast thou read it, darling?”

“Oh, yes; again and again!” said Alice eagerly, “and it has made me *so* happy.”

“Thanks be to God!” exclaimed Gilbert.

The bishop now commanded them to stand apart, and addressing Alice said:

“It grieveth me much, my daughter, to find thee set down in the presentment. I fear that Gilbert hath seduced thee from the faith, with his evil counsel.”

“Not so, reverend Sir!” said Alice, with courage, “thou knowest not Gilbert Wright, else thou would’st think no evil of him.”

“Well, well, we will not dispute with thee on this matter,” said the bishop, “show thy dutifulness, daughter, by gentle obedience.”

“It is so my desire, reverend Sir,” replied Alice.

“Good, my daughter; but we hear,” said the bishop, smoothly, “that thou hast some Lollard writings in hiding, doubtless in ignorance of the danger and sin of keeping such. I charge thee to discover them.”

“Pardon me, my lord,” replied Alice, “the little book I have is but holy St. John’s Gospel.”

“So I wit,” said the bishop, “but it is, I hear, the translate by that arch-heretic, Wycliffe—the same evil book that hath wiled thy companion into heresy.”

“Where hast thou hidden the book, Alice? Tell my lord, Alice, tell my lord where thou hast hidden the book,” urged her uncle.

“Press me not, uncle, in this mater. I dare not give up the book!”

“Ah! ah!” exclaimed the bishop, with an angry frown. “What! art thou to beard us with thy malapert ways and whims? Thou hast read the book then, I ween?”

“Sooth, my good lord,” gently replied Alice, “and comfort have I had therefrom.”

The bishop bit his lip, and marvelled at the courage of this frail young girl; for her eyes, so sad in expresion, nevertheless, looked fearlessly into his own.

“Daughter,” he exclaimed in anger, “thou hast done wrong. I fain would arrest this matter for thine uncle’s sake. But have a care! Confess that

thou hast erred ; deliver up the book ; and receive our absolution. Thy penance shall be light."

"The book is dear to me, my lord. I pray thee grant me its use."

"This obstinacy beseemeth thee not! *Thou* hast infected her lossel!" said the bishop, turning to Gilbert, "with the vile contagion of thy lollardry! Give up the book, daughter, or it will go the harder with him."

"Oh! I pray thee, reverend Sir," exclaimed Alice, turning deadly pale, "let no word of mine anger thee against Gilbert, for——"

"Fear not, Alice, my darling!" said Gilbert, eagerly. "As thou lovest me, be brave, and do as thy conscience bids thee."

"Silence!" shouted the prior ; and then turning to the bishop, he said : "Test her, my lord ! make sharp work with the jade ; she is far gone in lollardry, I ween."

"It seemeth so," replied the bishop, and thereupon he plied her with many intricate questions upon the orthodox doctrines of Rome. But Alice knew nothing of theological dogmas, or disputes. Her faith was too simple in its purity, to be troubled about such abstruse questions.

She had learned the one great saving truth, that Jesus had died for her. To *this* she clung. Her whole faith was a resting on that mighty fact, and she felt in its satisfying greatness, the vanity of all those spurious accessories, on which the priestly teachers of her girlhood had taught her to rely. Instinctively, with her loyalty to Christ, she would have shunned confession, and priestly absolution; but she was not prepared to give her reasons. She was guided, not so much by reason, as by the loyalty of her heart. And so, in the matter of the book. She had recognised and received it as the Word of God. To give it up as a thing fit for the flames, seemed like treason to her faith; and with the spirit and enthusiasm of a true disciple, she was prepared to suffer reproach, rather than thus seemingly to cast discredit upon the Word of God.

When, therefore, the bishop wound up his questions, which from their length and the cruel pertinacity with which they had been repeated, had utterly exhausted the physical strength and spirit of the persecuted girl, by demanding of her, on peril of incurring the penalties of the law, to deliver up the Gospel book; she lifted up her head, and in a

voice of calm and suddenly renewed strength, and with a look of holy determination that made her beauty shine as the beauty of an angel, she said :

“ My lord, I will *never*, God helping me, so dishonour His blessed Word ! ”

“ May our heavenly Father bless and strengthen thee, my darling ! ” exclaimed Gilbert, with a face glowing with joy, and at the same instant, he sprang impulsively towards her : but he was suddenly held back, for at that moment two lay brothers entered, with the constable and Geoffry Tryon, and, forgetting in their eagerness, the homage demanded by the presence of the bishop, shouted in one breath :

“ The book is found ! ”

So it was ! and discovered, too, by the cunning and treason of Geoffry, who was a paid tool in the hands of the monks. He had been, ever since his conversation with Dame Mostyn, watching his opportunity, and so soon as Master Barton left his home with Alice, for the priory, Geoffry had met, by arrangement, the lay brothers and the constable, who, armed with authority from the prior, immediately commenced their search, and, in spite of

the indignant protestations of Dame Mostyn, insisted on ransacking the sleeping chamber of Mistress Alice. The result of this search was the discovery of the secret hiding-place, and the capture of the book, with which they then hurried to the priory.

“Thou hast done well!” said the prior, taking the book and turning to Geoffrey; “and thou hast proved thyself a faithful servant of the Church. We will see that thou art fully rewarded.”

“That book is mine!” exclaimed Gilbert, “and I beseech thee restore it to me!”

“Thou art mad, lossel,” said the bishop, turning over the leaves of the little volume. “It is, as I weened, one of the accursed translates by Master Wycliffe’s, and fit for the flames of hell! See to it, Sir Prior, that we have a burning to-morrow!”

“And the prisoners, my lord?” asked the prior.

“Let Gilbert Wright be taken to Winchester, and handed over to the secular authority, as an inveterate and obstinate heretic! As to this silly fool, let her go with her uncle, until we inquire further into the matter; for by St. Thomas, her pretty face shall not save her from the fagot

unless she submit!" and pushing back the high chair in which he sat, the wrathful ecclesiastic arose, and left the refectory, followed by the prior, who glared upon the youthful Gospellers as he passed, with a look of malignant triumph.



CHAPTER XI.

“DIS’PLING” OF A GOSPELLER, AND BRAVE BURNING
OF YE SCRIPTURES.

IN spite of the anathemas of Rome, the Bible became endeared to the English people. In the providence of God, the Gospellers prepared the way for its glad reception, when the invention of printing placed it within reach. Through them it was known to the unreading masses that the Bible was *not* a book to be dreaded and shunned, but a book full of freedom, and hope, and promises of kindly blessings, and altogether opposed to that priestly thralldom which had so long oppressed the national mind. But before the invention of printing, very few could possess the Bible. It was only to be multiplied by the tedious process of the pen, and a fair copy was the labour of months. Its commercial value was a little fortune. A complete Bible was rarely found in the largest monasteries,

and scarcely a parish church in the kingdom possessed it. Yet, perhaps, at no period anterior to the age of printing, could the Scriptures have been so easily and cheaply procured, as at the time of our tale. The translation of Wycliffe had caused such an eager demand for the Word of Life, that the copyists found profitable employment in its transcription. The demand, as in all other commodities, produced a supply, and to suit the means of an humbler class of buyers, the scribes wrote out little volumes of one or more of the Gospels, and tractates containing a few precious chapters. These were sold at prices varying from a load of hay, to thirty pounds. In the smaller books a considerable but secret traffic was carried on by clerkly packmen, who, under cover of other wares, brought out these richer treasures for their Lollard customers. Lord Cobham had greatly encouraged this mode of spreading the Truth. These Gospel tracts found a ready sale, and thus that seed was scattered which was to germinate in the national mind, and to grow into the fulness of the Reformation.

A free Gospel has ever been the terror of Rome. So long as it was swathed in a dead language, it was harmless to the interests of priestcraft ; but a verna-

cular Bible was a sharp weapon, dangerous to their whole system. Its popular use was therefore suppressed at all costs. Fear drove Rome to sacrilege and profanity, and numerous were the fires she fed with the leaves of the Divine Word. In England, in the time of the Gospellers, Bible-burning was a common sight; and the people were warned by flaring bonfires, to regard the written Word of God as an evil book, to be shunned or cast into the flames.

But there was something more than Bible burning to take place on this Feast of St. Editha. Prior John and his monks had not only made great preparations for a grand holocaust of Scripture, but had arranged certain matters, by which to strike terror into the hearts of all persons tainted with heresy and Lollardism.

“It is necessary,” said the prior, “to uphold with a strong hand the authority of the Church, against the rising tide of inquisitiveness and independence about doctrine and practice. These wretched Gospellers would upset everything; and if their new doctrines about the Christian verity were to prevail, what would become of the monks of Greyleye?”

So Prior John determined to crush out the spirit of Lollardry in Studmore, and his bitter, intolerant heart rather gloried in the prospect of the work before him.

The Feast of St. Editha was the day after the examination of Gilbert Wright and Alice Chatfield, and by noon the Bishop, the Prior, and the twelve monks of Greyleye, left the priory in solemn procession, to witness the scene that was to take place in the market-place of Studmore.

And a quaint little market-place it was. Some features of it still remain, and old records help us to realize others that have long disappeared with the changes in social life.

It was an irregular square of unpaved, down-trodden land, surrounded with straggling, low, straw-thatched houses, rarely rising to an upper storey, but with projections or penthouses of timber-work, that formed the emporiums of Studmore commerce. The goods displayed on these open booths were neither grand nor dazzling to the eye. It could be seen at a glance that this was not an age of luxury. There was Peter Snell, who sold candles, that smelled horribly, and gave out flickering gleams of uncertain light, for home comfort of an evening; and who

supplied this dim age with good train oil for the horn lanterns, with which the good folks trudged home through the quagmires and mud, after vespers on winter nights. *He* didn't do much of a trade, for Studmore was content to be in darkness. There, too, was Master Jocelyn, the Flemish draper, who sold Kersey; and green cloth from Kendal, woollen blanket from Bristol, stuff of homespun by the yard, and bobbins and ribbons and hosen and caps, of statute quality, for lads and men of all grades; and pattens and leather shoes, and kerchiefs of gaudy hues, for village maidens. Ah! that was a winsome stall, and the cynosure of all the bright eyes in Studmore! Then, just where a cluster of noisy rollicking fellows in smock frocks were always to be seen, stood the market tavern, the best hostelry in the village, and belonging, of course, to the monks of Greyleye. It was known at once by its red lattice, and its ale-pole in the front, to which a great bush was tied when the "goodman" of the house had finished his new brewing; and the ale-conner had declared it "double double" of statute quality. Further on was Tom Cornford's stall, covered with crayfish and eels, and small fry from the prior's fishponds—being the refuse, after brother Sampson,

the cook, had picked out the best for the priory kitchen. It was curious to note, how the interests of my lord prior were mixed up here, there, and everywhere, with the commerce of Studmore. The fine beeves in the shop of Sands, the butcher, had been fattened on the priory lands; the hares and birds hanging up in yonder booth, with those fat capons, were from my lord prior's preserves, and even the fagots and logs in the penthouse of Roger, the charcoal-seller, came from Greyleye wood. Besides, didn't the very market tolls all belong to my lord prior? and, as every one knew, farmer Noakes dared not sell a peck of corn, nor old widow Thomas a bunch of kale, without sharing the profits with the lazy drones of Greyleye.

In the middle of this old-fashioned market place, just opposite to the closed shop of John of Brenton, the tailor, were the Stocks, and the "Post of Reformation," at which sturdy rogues and naughty women were soundly whipped; and behind these rude instruments of justice, and close to the great leystal of the village, there was a small building shunned by all the quiet folks of Studmore. This was the closely barred up cage, or prison, into which evil-doers were cast, heavily chained until the head-

borough and the constables could take them to the great jail at Winchester. Some of the clowns who got muddled and maddened with the "double double" at the Greyleye arms, were its frequent occupants, and roared their spirits into subjection within its filthy cell. Frequently, too, it was occupied for days together by poor mad Tom, the fool of Studmore, who, when his fits were upon him, was soundly thrashed and cast into this hole of despair, naked and heavily chained, to drive the evil spirit out of him. But just now, on this feast of St. Editha, it was occupied by one, who, in the eyes of the Greyleye monks, had done greater despite than any burglar, or drunkard, or madman in Studmore:—was occupied, indeed, by one of those "accursed" Gospellers, who had dared, in defiance of Holy Church and monkish prohibition, to read the New Testament in the vulgar tongue!

Tilly, the constable, and Nicholas Wyffen, with a noisy rabble around them, were mightily busy carrying fagots from the penthouse of Roger, the charcoal-seller, and piling them up in the open space before the cage. Great was the excitement as the bishop and the cowled monks were seen coming down the road from Greyleye, and much curiosity was

manifested, to know the meaning of all this preparation. Only a few seemed to be in the secret, and ominous whispers grew into dark conjectures. Some said that a Gospeller was to be burned.

"I say, Nicholas," said one, "a brave burning, I ween, eh?"

"Thee 'll see if thou hast patience, gaffer," replied Nicholas.

"Art going to roast a Loller, Tilley?" asked another of the crowd, addressing the constable.

"Not quite, neighbour, only a scorch," said the constable, with a grin.

When the preparations were completed, and the bishop was on the spot, the constable and Nicholas Wyffen entered the cage; they soon came forth again, the constable holding a whip of leathern thongs and Nicholas a lighted torch. Between them, pale and trembling, was poor John of Brenton, with bared head and feet, and but half clad, being stripped to the waist. In his left hand he carried a long taper of a pound weight, and in his right hand, the very New Testament that he had bought with his hard earned savings in London.

John, thus dressed as a penitent, was led at once to the bishop, and, kneeling abjectly before him,

remained in that posture whilst the vicar read the bishop's sentence. It was a long, wordy document, addressed to "our well-beloved Roger de Whyttenham, Vicar of Studmore," and recited that for the correction of the soul of John of Brenton, who had confessed to erroneous doctrines, and had been found reading the evil writings of Wycliffe, called the New Testament, the said John was to be disciplined, and the details of his degradation were minutely set forth in the sentence.

A solemn procession was now formed. First came the wretched "penitent," walking barefooted, and carrying the taper; then followed the constable with the whip; and after them the bishop, Roger de Whyttenham, John the Prior, and the monks of Greyleye.

Slowly and "solemnly," in compliance with the sentence, they walked round the market-place, the crowd being kept back by the constable's men, as best they could. As the procession paused after the first round, Roger de Whyttenham ordered the constable to inflict the "dis'pling." The people shuddered, and looked on with gloomy and contracting brows, as the sturdy constable lashed the naked back of poor John of Brenton. The thongs

came down sharp and strong, making the flesh quiver, and the skin to rise in blisters.

Then the procession slowly moved round again, this time pausing at another spot, and, as it paused, the vicar again gave the dreaded signal, and the lash descended with fearful violence on the back of the Gospeller, literally flaying the swollen skin, and causing the blood to start and trickle down in streams. The pain was so cutting, that poor John writhed and groaned, and at last could not forbear a cry. But it was evident that this was wrung from him against his will, for no sooner did it escape his lips than he looked nervously towards the closed shop on the other side, in which he knew his wife and children—for whose sakes, indeed, he had reluctantly confessed—were hiding their shame.

Again, headed by the suffering "penitent" as before, the procession encircled the market-place, this time, with vindictive purpose, pausing at the very door of the tailor's shop. Here the vicar lifted his hand, and once more the blood spurted from the lacerated back of the Gospeller. Again was that cruel hand uplifted—when the door of the shop flew open, and a woman, pale, haggard, and with hair dishevelled, rushed out. Pushing aside the crowd,

she ran to the penitent, and throwing her arms around him, piteously cried :

“ Oh ! spare him ! spare him ! Oh, my husband—my dear husband ! ”

This touching scene deeply affected the crowd, and loud murmurs rose in an angry hum.

“ Enough ! enough ! spare him ! spare him ! ” cried many voices.

But neither bishop, nor vicar, nor prior showed any signs of pity, but looked angrily at the poor wife. At last the prior exclaimed :

“ Take her away, constable, take her away ! ”

But an English crowd, even in that down-trodden, priestly age, had a rough sympathy in their hearts, which would make itself heroically heard sometimes ; and the murmurs now grew ominous as distant thunder, startling the monkish crew, and causing the constable hastily to drop the uplifted whip. Some eager whispering took place between the bishop and the prior, and the result was, that the bishop, raising his hand, motioned the constable to desist, saying :

“ Come, our time is brief, proceed and let the fire be lighted.”

Nicholas at once applied the lighted torch to the

heap of fagots, and in a few minutes a blazing bonfire sent its lurid glare over the motley crowd.

The poor wife, fearful as to the meaning of the new sign, clung tenaciously to her husband, and, looking wildly at the flames, shrieked out :

"Oh ! John ! John ! what meaneth this ?"

"Hush ! wife, be still !" whispered John, "it's not me but God's Word they would burn. Would that I had never confessed ! my conscience is ill at ease."

"But, John, think of thy babes."

"Ah, wife, but this denying of Christ is what Peter did, and methinks even now——"

"Nay, nay, John, cast away the book, else it's woe and beggary for us."

John was weak, and this appeal of his wife, smothered for a time his rising courage ; and stepping towards the fire, he held forth the New Testament, and repeated after the vicar the fearful, treacherous words, "I confess that I have erred and done wrong in reading this evil book, and do repent, and am heartily sorry, and so of my own will, cast the book into the fire, as devilish and untrue."

With these words, spoken in a low trembling voice, and with lips white and quivering with shame,

H

John of Brenton threw God's Holy Word into the flames!

The prior stepping forward, and throwing back his cowl, then cast in the little volume of St. John's Gospel, which had been such a comfort to Gilbert and Alice; and the horn-book, taken from the cupboard of Simon the smith, and as he did so, he passionately exclaimed:

“Thus perish all the accursed writings of the Lollards, and may thus perish all obstinate heretics!”



CHAPTER XII.

GILBERT IN GREYLEYE TOWER.

IN compliance with the Bishop's sentence, Gilbert was taken to Winchester, and handed over to the tender mercies of the secular power. The secular power was a mere puppet, set in motion by strings drawn by the priests, who craftily used it to impart a seeming legality to the cruel vindictiveness of the Church. Gilbert underwent another worrying examination, in which he displayed the sublime, but simple, faith of a Gospeller, though very little of the acumen of a scholastic disputant. There was such a noble courage in his whole bearing—such a quiet meekness and faithful trust in his manner—that the Court was greatly moved in his favour; but the malignant influence of the ecclesiastics predominated. The secular power had little more to do, than to carry out the sentence of the spiritual authority. Gilbert

was of course condemned, and a writ *de heretico comburendo* came down from the King, directed to the mayor, sheriffs, and justices of Winchester.

The brave Lollard was now taken back to Studmore. It was the wish of the Prior that the heretic should suffer there, as a warning to the disaffected; and through the Bishop's influence, the warrant was so worded, that his subordinate's malignity could be fully gratified. The heartless monk looked upon this as a triumph, and as a means of re-asserting the power and authority of the Greyleye fraternity.

To Gilbert, indeed, there was comfort in this cruelty. The knowledge that he was so far away from those he loved, had increased his sufferings. Neither his great trial, nor the sacrifice of all his cherished hopes for his religious faith, had for one moment diminished the endearing tenderness of his heart-ties. His love for Alice was even intensified by their co-partnership in suffering. Since his last hurried interview with her, he had felt more than ever, that they were one, not only for time, but for evermore. High and noble faith—iron-like in its endurance, and its sacrificial strength, is compatible with the tenderest emotions and sympathies of the soul. His very consecration to a martyr's glory,

seemed to have purified his affection from that selfishness which leavens all human love. So great was his yearning and chivalrous love for Alice, that it was a solace to him to know that he should be nearer to her, although he had but little hope of seeing her again.

Nor did it seem that there was much to cheer the Gospeller even in this. He was to be kept in "close prison," and the gloomy chamber of Greyleye Tower, in which he was confined, was a wretched hole. But it had *one* feature which afforded sweet consolation to Gilbert. Through the bars of the open, narrow, lancet-shaped loophole—which admitted wind as well as light—could be seen a portion of the "grete house" at the east end of the village, with its low roof; and, as the sun shone upon it, the glazed bay-window in the parlour, glowed and glittered like rubies and diamonds, in the distance.

It may seem a little thing to those who have never truly and tenderly loved, but even this glimpse of the home of his beloved was a joy to Gilbert. When he prayed for her—as he ever did—it seemed to localize his prayers, and to give grasp and reality to his thoughts of her for whom he pleaded. Poor Gilbert! how often did his heart yearn towards that

spot, and how busy was his fancy with the inner life of that saddened home. Yes, it may seem a little thing, but love feeds upon such fancies, and lives the happy past again, as it colours them with beguiling memories.

Even after his condemnation, Gilbert was not left long unmolested. Now that the fearful consequences of his "obduracy" were before him, the monks hoped to conquer the heretic. Brother Stephen was the first to visit him, and he strove, by long arguments and theological bludgeons, to overpower the man of simple faith. But Gilbert had read the Gospel to profit, and the pure word, given in all the sweet, idiomatic simplicity of Wycliffe's version, was a very sword in the hands of the Gospeller. Monk Stephen left him, somewhat staggered, maybe, in his own convictions, but with increased bitterness in his heart. Prior John, too, gave him a solemn visit, and with much austerity exhorted him to submit; and backed up *his* arguments with mighty threats of flame and tar barrels, which, to the marvel of Prior John, seemed but to light up a stronger glow of enthusiasm in the Lollard's breast! Ah! these simple Gospellers had right valiant hearts, and were made of true martyr stuff.

But there was one who came to Gilbert with kindlier feelings. This was Roger, one of the lay-brothers. To him had been deputed the care of the prisoner. The rule was, that attendance was to be given in the strictest silence. Scarcely a word was to be spoken, and all communications were to be made by signs. But Gilbert recognised no such restraint, and to the silent brother he did not hesitate to speak. From mere commonplace words of thanks and courtesy—for the “gentle life” was in the Gospeller—he gradually spoke about other things; asked questions about the dear ones in Studmore; and, now and then, gave some expression to the great subject uppermost in his mind. At first these remarks were replied to by signs and motions, and many evidences of fear at this breach of monastic rule; but by degrees, Roger became interested in the words of the Gospeller; and after the performance of his duty to the prisoner, he would wait, with folded hands and immobility of face, to listen to the fervid, simple eloquence of Gilbert, as he spoke of Christ and the glorious tidings of the Gospel.

One day, after placing on the board a sparse meal of oaten porridge and rye bread, Roger, as usual, took his standing position half-way towards the door,

in this attitude of silent attention, whilst Gilbert repeated from memory, some verses from the twelfth chapter of St. John's Gospel. Before Gilbert had finished, Roger suddenly turned and held up his hand. He was pale and agitated, and tears glistened in his eyes, and in a low, trembling voice he cried :

“Repeat those words again!—slowly—slowly.”

“‘I am come,’” repeated Gilbert, “‘a light unto the world, that whosoever believeth in Me shall not abide in darkness.’”

“‘*Whosoever*’?” eagerly inquired Roger.

“‘WHOSOEVER,’” continued Gilbert, “but ‘he that rejecteth Me, and receiveth not My words——’”

“Stay!” exclaimed Roger, “art *sure* that those words were in the Book?”

“*Quite* sure,” replied Gilbert, “my memory faileth not.”

“Go on—Oh! go on!”

“‘He that rejecteth Me, and receiveth not My words, hath one that judgeth him; the *Word* that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.’”

“Great God!” muttered Roger, as he left the cell, “and *that* is the *Word* that we burned in Studmore.”

After this there was much earnest talk between them. Gilbert was never tired of repeating, nor Roger of listening to the life-giving words of Christ. The latter drank them in as the parched and thirsty land drinketh in the refreshing rain and dews of heaven. The quickening of the Word, soon became manifest, in its illuminating, hallowing, and saving influences on the poor, benighted lay-brother's soul; and, through the comfort of the Holy Scriptures, his hitherto desponding heart was cheered with heavenly hope; the dull, despairing eye, that kept watch over the captive, sparkled with new life and joy; and, from the lips of the Lollard he daily learned many verses of St. John's Gospel. But Roger was not content with this—delightful though it was to his heart. One morning he took from beneath the folds of his gown a small roll of parchment and a horn of ink, and asked Gilbert to repeat to him, slowly, the precious Words of the Saviour, that he himself might write them down. This he did again and again. And Roger the Novitiate and Gilbert the Gospeller became as brothers.

CHAPTER XIII.

A LETTER FROM GILBERT.

AFTER her severe examination before the Bishop, poor Alice was weary, and ready to faint; and, as her uncle led her away, she was scarcely conscious. Outside the Priory gate, Dame Mostyn was in waiting, and slowly and silently they all returned home. The kind-hearted, but garrulous dame, attended Alice with touching solicitude; and, on the next morning, she felt so much better, that Anthony had the unspeakable joy of seeing his niece take her usual place at the breakfast-table.

“Thou art a brave-hearted lass,” he exclaimed, as Alice took her seat.

“Nay, I fear me, that mine heart trusteth not enough. Pray for me, dear uncle, that I may have strength.”

“Yea, truly, niece, and more; I will this very

morning to Master Whyttenham, with a goodly offering; and bespeak a prayer to the Holy Virgin and the saints."

"Not so, dear uncle! prayers so purchased have little comfort for me now."

"Hush, Alice! hush!" said Anthony, looking alarmed; "thou art talking heresy, I ween."

"I trow not, dear uncle; but——"

"But what?" inquired her uncle, as Alice hesitated.

"Christ says," replied Alice, "'Come unto ME, all ye that are heavy laden, and I will give you rest;' and I would, dear uncle, rather go to *Him*."

"Thou hast thine head full of strange fantasies, Alice; but be it as thou wilt. Come, come, lass, sigh not so; maybe all will *yet* be well.

"Dear uncle, I doubt not, all *will* be well, come what may. Would that my faith were strong to see it; for suspense in such peril and sorrow, is hard to bear."

As she spake these words, a tear fell unbidden on her pallid cheek.

Nothing more was said, and but little was eaten, at that morning's meal. The early sun shone brightly through the casement, but a wintry silence reigned

throughout the house. It was no longer like the joyous home it had been so short a time before. The days seemed dreary and purposeless, as if the bowl of life was about to be broken, and its silken cord was ready to be loosened. The poor, suddenly-trying heart could not but mourn over its shattered idols; and, although, now and then, some blessed promise of the Gospel came, as a merciful message from heaven to cheer her, poor Alice, in spite of her brave and noble courage, sank beneath the weight of her sufferings—beneath her blighted hopes and anxious fears—into such sad despondency, that she prayed, again and again, that God would shorten her young life, and spare her the sad and lonely journey, which now so certainly, and drearily stretched out before her.

And greatly did it add to her sorrow, that she had no longer the solace of the Book. We, enjoying to the full, and too often to satiety, the blessed feast of the Gospel, can hardly realize the craving, hungry desire for the literal Scriptures, which filled the hearts of the early Gospellers. Brief as had been her acquaintance with the Word, young Alice had learned to love it with her whole heart. Some sayings of the Lord were firmly stamped upon her

memory ; but she could not help bitterly repining at the loss of that precious transcript of the Gospels, which the monks had so ruthlessly dragged from her, and so recklessly and blasphemously burned in the market-place at Studmore.

But, amidst all, her faith was greatly strengthened, in answer to her simple prayers ; and, although deprived, as it seemed to her, of all that had made life dear, she was yet enabled, feebly indeed at first, but more fully as she prayed, to cast the great burden of her care upon Him, who had promised “never to leave her—never to forsake her,” and who always tempers the wind to the shorn lamb. In even the fiercest tempest of her troubles, the sweet subduing “peace, be still !” of Him who hushed the wild hurricane of Gennesaret into silence, came softly and gently to her soul ; and she adoringly wondered at the marvellous power of the Master’s voice.

With this oft-recurring spiritual help, came bolder faith. Her own feelings were subdued in her recognition of the courageous testimony of her noble and beloved Gilbert. She never loved him so tenderly and truly, as when her heart swelled with holy joy, in the knowledge that *he* had the boldness which would enable him, should God permit it, to *die* for

Jesus. And, stimulated by her lover's example, she resolved, for CHRIST's sake, to bear, with patience, the shame and agony of the cross; let it come in what form it might.

Thus, she passed several comparatively quiet days, thinking much, but saying very little. Nothing had been heard at Winchester, for news travelled slowly in those days; and all saddening rumours, which were rife and gloomy enough, were concealed by old Anthony, with fatherly and compassionate consideration, from the knowledge of his niece. But, when Gilbert was brought back to Greyleye, and the fatal news was known that he was doomed to die, it was impossible to keep poor Alice very long in ignorance of the fact, for it was the terrible theme of sympathetic but common gossip, and caused general lamentation in the little town. Very gently did Anthony break it to her, when it could be no longer hidden, and with a soothing tact which affection only knew how to suggest and guide.

"Dear niece," said he, "mine heart doth bleed for thee, and all the more so now, that I seem powerless to help thee."

"Dear uncle," replied Alice, "say not so. Thou art ever kind to thy poor kinswoman."

“Ah! sweet one, but thou hast now so heavy a load. Would that I could share it!”

“The Lord will help me,” said Alice, “an’ I trust Him.”

“Thou wilt sorely need it, darling: sorely, sorely need it!” said Anthony, in a tremulous voice.

“Ah!” exclaimed Alice, with a piteous, startled look; “thou hast news, then?”

The old man covered his face with his hands, and his big frame quivered with emotion, as he sighed:

“Alas! alas!”

“Is it as we feared, uncle?” tremblingly asked poor Alice.

“As we feared!” said Anthony.

Alice neither spoke nor moved. An expression of unutterable woe stamped its grave, rigid lines on that marble face; and not a muscle relaxed, even when her uncle drew her gently within his arms, and, fondly stroking her hair, as if she were a child, looked beseechingly through his tears into her face, and begged her, for *his* sake—for his *life’s* sake,—to look not so; but to have pity on his old age! But her eyes were still fixed in blank despair; and her

thoughts, if she thought at all, were far, far away, in the by-and-by of time.

One morning, soon after Gilbert's return to Grey-leye, as Alice was sitting deeply entranced in thought, Dame Mostyn hurriedly entered the chamber. It was evident that something had occurred to startle her; for, in spite of her eagerness, she was scarcely able to speak.

"Well, well!" she gasped, "a-deary-me! I hope it's—I hope it's nought——"

"What, good dame?" asked Alice.

"Oh, dear! I hope it's nought amiss. But oh! a-deary-me, I'm feared out of mine wits."

"What hast so affrighted thee, good dame?" again asked Alice.

"Why, Mistress," said Dame Mostyn, "going just now out of the berne, carrying a ferdel of white linen into the applegarth, to dry; a-deary-me, who should'st think came right upon me, making me feel quite daffe?"

"Who?"

"Why, one of the monks of Greyleye!"

"Ah! and what sought he?" inquired Alice.

"Whist, said he, whist! and beckoned me apart, and then, spearing about that none should ken, he

put this paper into mine hand, saying, I was to give it to thee;" and, as she spoke, she fumbled in her capacious satchel, beneath her petticoat.

"A letter for me! Who from? Oh! who from?"

"Certe! and did he not say it was from Gilbert Wright?"

"From Gilbert!—Haste thee, good mother! haste thee! I'm all impatience. From Gilbert! Oh! from Gilbert!" and the sunshine of a bright joy gladdened the poor weary face again.

"Why, a-mercy-me!" exclaimed the excited dame, as she plunged deeper into the depth of her satchel—"I fear me it's——"

"Fear *what*? Haste thee, good dame, haste thee!"

"Tut, tut, tut, a-deary-me! Alack! alack! I fear it hath been witched way!" said Dame Mostyn, as she hurriedly turned out of her pocket a whole heap of keys, bobbins, and plaisters; with charms, crooked coins, and the most indescribable sundries.

"Oh! dame, dame! say not that it is lost!" exclaimed Alice, with anxious distress.

"Hist! I wist it now!" said Dame Mostyn, in a whisper: "Old Mother Redfern passed me as I came in by the kitchen door! By the Blessed

Virgin! *she has it!* For was she not, the other day, before the justices of Andover, for witching Farmer Greenstalk's kine?"

"Nay! perhaps thou hast dropped it in thine haste. Oh, dame! dame! would that thou hadst guarded it well! Alas! poor me!" And who can wonder, that tears of bitter disappointment, washed the sudden and short-lived smiles from the face of poor Alice?

"Oh! the vile old crone!" exclaimed Dame Mostyn, "I'll hie me to the constable, and by the Holy Virgin! if she gives it not up, I'll have her in the cage!—Stay! what's *this?*"

"Oh! dame!"

"Ah! I wist now! surely did I put it into my bodice for safety! and here it is, thanks to my good care!" and Dame Mostyn drew forth a small, folded paper, directed to—"The trew and gentil mayden, Mistres Alyce Chatfyeld."

Alice opened it with trembling eagerness. Written, indeed, in unclerkly style and quaint orthography, it was, nevertheless, in Gilbert's own handwriting, and therefore doubly precious. It was dated from, "My cell atte Greyleye;" and ran thus:

“MYNE OWNE SWEETHERT,—God, our Father, seeth yt well to try us. Be of ryghte good courage, dearest; for He loveth more those whom He chasteneth wyth hys rod, as Master Warton, one of my Lord Cobham’s pore pryests, did read to me from the Newe Testament. Dear heart, I thynk of thee from morn till nyghte, and from nyghte till morn, and pray for thee, ryghte heartily. Mine owne love, thy face is ever wyth me, and thy brave wordes, when laste we met in my lord bishop’s presence, comfort me now, and will cheer me even to the laste. Thynk of me, sweet Alyce, as gone but for a holydaye; and soon wyll the glade dawn break, when our wedded hearts will part *no more, for ever*. Oh! for that home, and peace, and reste! I hear from brother Roger, who hath shown much kyndness unto me, of the despite done to God’s Word, and how they burnte the Gospel Boke I gave unto thee. I grieve much at this; but pray that by some good chance a little Boke may come in thy way. Get yt if thou can’st, and as thou loveth me, be faithful, and show thyne affection by makyng known, as best thou mayest, the ryghte good newes for which I die.

“Good-bye, sweet wyfe, for so thou art to me; and as so I love to thynk of thee. Pray for me. To

know that my sweet one prayeth for me, gives me courage and lyghtens alle. From thyne owne, now and in the lyfe beyonde,

“GILBERT.”

Ah! that letter! treasured as a memorial of his love, how sacredly was it kept! Years and years afterwards, when kings had followed kings upon the throne, and England was another England, in clerkly lore; that letter—yellow with age, and stained with many a tear—was still preserved; and read with curious interest, as evidence of the feeling and the love, of the bravery and nobility of soul, of Gilbert Wright, the Gospeller.



CHAPTER XIV.

HOW THE GOOD SEED WAS SCATTERED IN "YE
OLDEN TIME."

THE monks had no suspicion of the change in the mind of Roger. Amidst the espionage, which is the spirit of the monastic life, there had appeared nothing to arouse distrust, so that Roger was free to go and come, unquestioned and unmolested. Gilbert knew this, and one day he said to Roger :

"Would'st thou do me a kindness?"

"Yea, in good sooth," replied Roger, "right heartily will I."

"Go, then," said Gilbert, "to my mother, Dame Wright, and tell her that her son is happy, and greeteth her with filial love. She needeth comfort, I ween. Say some soothing words to her, and assure her that I am content; and—and ask, before thou leavest, how fareth it with Mistress Alice.

Roger lost no time in fulfilling his promise ; and having occasion to go into the village, he made his way to Godlingstone Grange.

Dame Wright, since these troubles had come upon her, had suffered much. Gilbert was everything to her in this world, and now she seemed bereft indeed. At first she was so prostrated with her grief, that they feared she would have died. But it was not to be. Very slowly she recovered, but the joy of life was gone, and she wondered why her days had been prolonged. Her misery was increased by her helplessness, for although her neighbours were kind, she had, at first, none with whom to talk about her son. She was too feeble yet, to seek him, even if the monks would grant her an interview ; and Alice, poor lass, had been too ill to visit her, until very lately. Now, indeed, she came often to the Grange, and tended her as a daughter. With her came no little comfort ; for Alice had a noble heart, that could hide its own sorrow, out of pity to another's grief.

Thus, Alice was sitting with Dame Wright, on this very afternoon, as Roger visited the Grange. You could see at once that these women were in deep trouble. The solemn gravity of the elder, and the pale, wan face of the younger, told their own tale of

bitterness. As if dreading to hear the truth in accents too loud, they were talking in a subdued tone, of the coming doom of Gilbert. Human love, tossed and torn, was seeking some haven of rest and hope, in the resources of faith. But the strife, just now, was wearying and trying, to hearts so heavy with the stern realities of present woe.

“Dear Alice,” said the dame, in a feeble voice, and rocking herself on her stool, “would that we had the Gospel book now; methinks it would comfort me to hear those sweet words of Christ’s that my Gilbert used to read.”

“Good mother, let me try and remember them.”

“You, Alice! I wist not that thou hadst heard them oft enough for that.”

“The Spirit hath helped me, dear mother; and a little of Christ’s Word hath abundant comfort.”

“Tell me, Alice, if thou canst remember it, that verse about the heart not being troubled.”

“‘Let not your heart be troubled,’” repeated Alice; “‘ye believe in God, believe also in Me.’”

“What gentle words, Alice!”

“‘I will not leave you comfortless,’” continued Alice; “‘I will come to you.’”

“Go on, dear Alice,” said the Dame; “these

words soothe me, and sound to me as the bells of evensong. Hast thou yet another ? ”

“ Yea, a sweet one. Listen, mother ! ‘ Peace I leave with you—my peace I give unto you ; not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.’ ”

And so they conversed, until disturbed by a gentle knocking at the door. Without waiting for a bidding, Roger entered. The sight of him, in the grey gown of his order, drew from Mistress Wright an exclamation of fear ; but Roger, with a smile that betokened sympathy, repeated the words he had overheard :

“ ‘ Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.’ ”

Nevertheless, the women were silent. The coming of one from Greyleye Priory must surely betoken evil.

“ Good lady,” said Roger, “ be not alarmed. I come from thy son.”

“ Then I pray you speak quickly ! ” said the Dame.

“ He sendeth thee greetings of love and duty, and asketh thee, out of thine affection, to help him with a brave bearing of thy trial for his sake.”

Tears filled the eyes of poor Dame Wright, and

she could not speak for sobbing ; whilst Alice hid her face, and wept noiselessly. Soon, however, Alice looked up, saying :

“ And Gilbert ! His heart faileth not, I trow ? ”

“ Master Wright knoweth naught of fear, for Christ is with him,” solemnly replied the brother.

“ My own brave, noble Gilbert ! ” impulsively exclaimed Alice, her pale, sweet face lighting up with the beauty of enthusiasm.

“ Mistress Alice Chatfield, I ween ? ” inquired Roger.

“ The same.”

“ Then, truly will Master Wright rejoice in the opportuneness of my visit, for he talketh much of thee.”

“ Doth he ? Even amidst his sufferings ? ”

“ The more perhaps because of them. As the strange power of the magnet draweth iron, so the sympathy of sorrow draweth true hearts the nearer,” said Roger, with a sigh, and with an abstracted look, as if his thoughts were unburying some tender memory of the long ago.

For a few minutes they sat in silence, so busy with their own thoughts, as to be forgetful of each other. A rap at the outer door disturbed them, and Alice

went to open it ; when she did so, she saw there a man with sandalled feet, his dress poor and travel-worn, with a satchel at his girdle, a stout staff in his hand, and a small pack slung across his shoulders.

“Nay, good master,” said Alice, “we lack none of thy wares to-day.”

“Fair mistress, grant me thy patience,” said the packman ; “it will pleasure me to show, and thou need’st not buy.”

“Waste not thine own time and mine,” said Alice ; “we are in sore trouble here, and cannot chaffer with thee now.”

“In trouble!” exclaimed the packman ; “then, indeed, have I something thou needest—a rich cordial for sorrow.”

“Nay, good man, we need not thy cordials. Spare me, I prithee, from further speech,” said Alice, partly closing the door.

“Fair mistress, pardon my importunity, while I crave thine hospitality. I have travelled far to-day, and am weary and foot-sore ; grant me a rest, and a cup of water, for Christ’s sake.”

Had not the inbred hospitality of the age prompted acquiescence, these words, “for Christ’s sake,” would have been enough for Alice. Opening the inner

door, she bade the packman enter, and briefly explaining the matter to Dame Wright, she brought, with her own hands, a cup of water and a small wheaten loaf, and set them before the stranger.

The packman looked askance at Roger, and keenly watched him as he conversed with Dame Wright. Finding his opportunity, he turned to Alice, and gaining her attention by a motion, as if he needed the replenishment of his cup, he whispered :

“ What meaneth this monkish visitor in the home of a Gospeller ? ”

Alice was startled at this unexpected question from a stranger ; the more so, perhaps, as there was something in the packman's manner that robbed it of all impertinence.

“ What,” she said, “ is that to thee ? ”

“ Pardon, I prithee,” said the packman, “ the seeming rudeness of my question, but wolves are dangerous visitors to the sheep.”

“ But the monk,” said Alice, “ although from Greyleye, cometh as a friend.”

“ A friend ! ” replied the packman, incredulously. He kept his eye upon Roger, and munched his bread in silence. By-and-by, catching the attention of the novitiate, he said aloud, “ I heard in the village as I

came along that the master of this house was in trouble. Sir, how fareth it with him now?"

Brother Roger glanced at the packman with a suspiciousness natural in those dangerous times, when it was hard to distinguish between friend and foe; but, after a little hesitation, he said—"Master Wright beareth the matter bravely."

"But hath my lord the Prior brought him to reason? Will he recant and escape the burning?" inquired the packman.

"No!" exclaimed Roger; "his heart feareth not the flames. The Gospeller will die, and die rejoicingly, for the Word's sake."

"For the *Word's* sake?" said the packman. "Why, good master, thy tone bespeaketh praise; which seemeth, methinks, somewhat contrary to thy garb and to thy deeds."

"My deeds!" exclaimed the monk.

"Yea, good master, be not offended; but a gossip told me as I came along, of the brave burning of the Scriptures the other day, by the holy brethren of Greyleye."

A cloud, more of sorrow than of anger, passed over the face of Roger; and the sigh that escaped him was noted by the inquisitive packman, who,

again, in a tone of indifference, but with latent sarcasm, said :

“Hast thou really purged the village of these Gospel writings, good Sir? Hast thou thoroughly burned up every bit of parchment writ with Scripture?—purged it thoroughly, eh?”

“I fear me it is so,” answered Roger, with a stammering tongue; “at least—that is to say—I believe they have.”

The hesitating manner, the evident sorrow of the novitiate, did not pass unnoticed by the keen watchfulness of the packman. It seemed to satisfy him, and, after a moment’s thought, he made a bold venture.

“Methinks, good Sir, that the Word, for all that, might yet be found in Studmore.”

“Maybe,” said Roger, “but only, alas! in the hearts and memory of some.”

“I meant not that.”

“What more, then?”

“Why, that I could put mine hand on a New Testament featly writ, without much search, or even the aid of master constable.”

“Where? *where?* Tell me where, I pray of thee!” demanded Roger, with glad eagerness.

“That thou mightest burn it, eh?” asked the packman.

“God forbid!” impulsively exclaimed the novice.

The eyes of these two men met. Each read in the other, a testimony that inspired confidence and mutual faith.

Without another word the packman arose, opened the door, looked cautiously out into the hall, closely shut the door again, and resumed his seat. Then, from the folds of his robe, he drew forth a copy of the New Testament.

All eyes were upon him, and his every movement. The very sight of the volume brought looks of joy and thankfulness. The packman glanced round upon them, and was reassured.

“Good friends,” said he, “this is a copy of the four Gospels, with the Acts of the holy Apostles, featly writ by one of my Lord Cobham’s scribes, in common English tongue. I have brought it from afar, with some smaller Scriptures, that I sold at slender costs, to yeomen in country villages, as I came along. Hearing at Andover of the troubles here, and how the Word had been burnt by the monks of Greyleye, it was put into mine heart to bring this

precious volume to Studmore, that it might, with God's blessing, shine as a light amidst the gathering gloom."

"What," asked Roger, "is the price?"

"Five marks," said the packman; "a large sum; but little when compared with the labour of transcribing, and incomparable altogether with its worth."

The book changed hands. Dame Wright gladly gave the money, and added to it warm and abundant thanks to the packman, for bringing to her lonely heart this great consolation.

Ah! how much does posterity owe to those *colporteurs* of the olden time! Humble sowers of the seed, when to sow the seed was death! Wycliffe's "poor priests" in his day, and Lord Cobham's "scribes" in the times of which we write, carried, at much personal risk, the written Word of God into the homes of English franklins and craftsmen—into the upland towns and country villages, and sowed, not for lucre, but with love and holy faith, the Bible seed of the English Reformation.

And the seed thus sown in faith, was by-and-by to germinate in a kindly and productive soil; and, despite the chilling and unpropitious blasts of dis-

favouring priestcraft, to send up vigorous stems of soul-saving truth all over the land, rich and beautiful with foliage and flowers of heavenly promises, in spite of all the furious winds and storms of persecution that were to shake them.

Nor could all the malignant power of the popedom, the scowling discouragement of adverse princes, and the blasting cruelties of the "Holy Inquisition," prevent those flowers of scriptural truth from developing, in myriads of human hearts and lives, into a heavenly fruitage of "peace, joy, and righteousness in the Holy Ghost."

No! nor could the combined hostility and prejudicial influences of all those retarding and destructive forces, hinder the heavenly seed that had thus germinated, blossomed, and fructified, from maturing into the glorious liberty of the Reformation; the emancipation of the human heart and mind from mental darkness and spiritual thralldom; and into that national freedom and greatness, neither of which has ever been found associated for any length of time, in any country, with monkish superstition and Popish rejection of the Holy Scriptures.

Well done, then, brave-hearted Thomas the pack-man! Rich beyond all powers of human imagination

will be the eternal harvest of blessedness that thou hast long since begun to reap, from the "seed of the kingdom" so faithfully sown by thy hands, in the mental and moral fields of Studmore. Little didst thou, and thy fellow-labourers, fancy, when scattering the sacred seed in its once unpromising soil, how greatly your humble efforts were contributing to lay the foundation of England's future greatness, and to fill up the measure of her children's happiness.



CHAPTER XV.

ANTHONY BARTON AND HIS NIECE.

ANTHONY BARTON looked upon all that had so hurriedly occurred, and which had so disturbed the even tenor of his life, with much astonishment, and with some feelings of humiliation. He saw that his position and importance were gone for ever in Studmore. The whole training and prejudices of years had sustained a shock ; and it seemed to him as if the world had been turned upside down, and had become so jumbled together in the process, that there was no distinguishing between right and wrong.

But Anthony felt in his heart too much real sorrow to be bitterly angry. He looked upon Lollardry as a crime, and thought that Gilbert was presumptuous in setting up his own opinion against that of the Church ; but he could hardly bring himself to believe that he was really guilty of heresy. He

felt indignant at the conduct of Prior John and the monks of Greyleye. He was a thorough Englishman, and therefore loved straightforwardness in all things; and he did not like this cowardly, priestly system of entrapping and catching people unawares. Besides, "whatever they might find against Gilbert Wright, what could they possibly want to worry his niece about? If she did read the book, about which the monks made so much fuss, what harm could it do her, poor thing? She was innocent enough, he could vouch! *His* Alice an heretic! A pretty thing, indeed, to say in the face of the churchwarden of the parish!"

But when the dread news came, that Gilbert was to die, the heart of Anthony was stirred with bitter feelings, not so much, perhaps, on account of Gilbert, as out of compassion for the sorrow of his niece. A few days after he had broken the news to Alice, he hurried off to the Vicar, and besought his intercession with the Bishop—then he gained an interview with Prior John; but from neither, to his indignation and surprise, did he meet with any hope, or even with any sympathy. Indeed, he was told by the monk that "he had better mind his own business, and keep a sharp eye upon Alice; for, unless she

showed speedy submission, by St. Dunstan, it would go hard with her !”

When Anthony returned home from this interview, he found Alice in tears. The fatal day was fast approaching, and her heart yearned to see Gilbert; yet, knowing the vindictive spirit of the monks, she saw no way to accomplish this. It seemed so hard, that whilst Gilbert was passing through the furnace of this bitter anguish, *she* should have no power to comfort him.

Her uncle told her the unsuccessful result of his interview with the Prior, with a gentleness full of loving sympathy for her sorrow.

“Oh, uncle, uncle !” she cried, “is there no hope that the hearts of these stern men will soften ?”

“None !” impatiently replied Anthony. “Why did he not recant ? Why not submit ? Methinks, if he loved thee truly, Alice, Gilbert would not be so obstinate.”

“Uncle, think not so. Gilbert is true and brave. I know,” continued Alice, as a blush overspread her sweet face, “how much he loveth me !”

“Poor Alice ! my poor Alice !” said Anthony, in a tone full of trembling tenderness ; “would, Oh ! would that I could help thee !”

“But I fear, dear uncle, thou canst not: yet, I must see Gilbert.”

“‘*See Gilbert!*’” exclaimed Anthony. “Impossible!”

“Why?” said Alice. “Surely these men, if they have one spark of the love of Christ in them, cannot deny me that.”

“Alice, my darling,” replied the old man, “they have no mercy, no compassion; and Prior John is wrathfully bitter. Besides, they say that heresy is as infectious as the sweating sickness; and, seeing that thou art under a ban already, they will never let ye meet, I fear.”

There was a flush over her pale face, a trembling of the lip, a tear in the eye—but there was a strange determination in her voice, as she replied: “See Gilbert, I will, uncle, even if I were to walk to Winchester, and crave the boon of the Bishop!”

Old Anthony looked at his niece, in amazement. He could scarcely believe that this was the quiet, gentle Alice of a few weeks ago. She had scarcely passed her girlhood; yet now she seemed old, by having travelled through this agony of sorrow and disappointment.

“Tush! my dear,” said Anthony; “thou art

beside thyself. The roads are rough, and dangerous, too, for stronger limbs than thine; and it's a good day's ride. Be patient, Alice, and let us weigh this business in our minds, and see if it can be compassed."

He sat silent for a few minutes; then hastily rising, exclaimed: "I will again to Master Roger de Whyttenham, and urge the suit."

"God speed thee, uncle!" said Alice, with a sigh, and giving him a parting kiss.

"I will use me all diligence," said Anthony. "If I fail, I will go myself to Andover, and see Father Garnard, who hath some influence with Prior John, and hath avowed a friendship for me."

Anthony found his mission more successful than he had anticipated. His position as churchwarden, the respect with which he was held in Studmore, and his known loyalty to the Church, were considerations of no little weight with the Vicar; who, after some hesitation, sat down and wrote a few words in Latin on parchment, and having affixed to it a weighty seal, and elaborately addressed it to the "Venerable John, Prior of Greyleye," gave it into the hands of Master Barton.

Thus strengthened, Anthony's request was received

with favour by Prior John. Not out of any sympathy for Alice, but because that astute monk saw at a glance, that this interview might be the means of weakening the stubborn faith of the Gospeller. Would not the sight of Alice kindle afresh the passion of his love? and would not her distress, and the bitterness of parting, conquer his obduracy, and lead him to a full recantation of his heresy? Ah! he was a keen psychologist, and thought he could probe the depth of the human mind—but he knew nothing of the ennobling and self-sacrificing power of love.

“How beareth Mistress Alice?” he inquired.
“Doth the girl show any signs of submission?”

“Poor lass! Methinks,” replied Anthony, “her grief drives away all other thoughts.”

“See to it, Master Anthony; see to it!” said the Prior, with an ominous frown; “we expect thee to answer for thy niece.”

Nevertheless, the Prior sent for brother Roger, and, giving him strict orders to observe due care and watchfulness over the heretic, told him to admit Master Anthony Barton and Mistress Alice Chatfield, to an interview with Gilbert, on the morrow.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PARTING.

IT was with a sad, melancholy pleasure, that Alice prepared for her meeting with Gilbert. At the grey dawn she was on her knees; for with that wisdom which is best learned in the school of sorrow, she knew that it was vain to trust in her own strength, for the great trial that was before her. She dressed herself with care, as her habit was, and when she had finished her toilet, sat down to think. She felt like one about to enter into the presence of death, for the time had come, when the saddest words that lips can speak—the last good-bye—had to be spoken. Could she bear it? Yes, her love was so great, so self-denying in its strength, that it could even look beyond the bitter present, into the great Eternity, and find there its consolation. Such love knows no separation. "I go to prepare a place for you," was the sweet promise of

Him in whom they both trusted; and the words seemed to impart a sense of joy to her soul, enabling her, in the very thickness of this dark cloud of sorrow, to recognise the great truth, that the martyrdom of her beloved would be for him the glorious beginning; and for her a tie, to knit the dark, wintry present, with a bright and endless future.

And when her uncle that morning saw her soft, sweet face, so sad—so very sad, yet so quiet and patient, he wondered how it was. He knew nothing of that early, prayerful preparation, and little knew how, even amidst the ruins of that broken heart, the Spirit had strengthened her with His great comfort, and had taught her the highest and noblest heroism of love—the subjection of self, for the sake of the loved. And even afterwards, when the great heavy gate of the gloomy priory had been closed behind her uncle and herself, and she stood in the dim corridor leading to the tower in which Gilbert was, and saw Roger, the lay-brother, with his finger on his lip motioning her to follow him; although well knowing that she was about to meet her beloved for the last time in this world; and she could almost hear her heart beat in the violence of its pulsation; yet she was outwardly calm, and her pale, still face, so fair,

yet so aged in her sorrow,—gave no sign of the sharp, inward struggle that was piercing her very soul.

Ascending a flight of narrow stone steps, they reached a halting place, and Roger stood by the door of the cell in which Gilbert was confined ; he then paused, and said : “ Mistress Alice, peradventure it would please thee best to see Master Wright alone, whilst thine uncle and I remain for awhile in the corridor below.”

Alice looked gratefully at the brother, and bowed her thanks.

Roger, unlocking a narrow, low, heavily-barred door, signed for Alice to enter. As she did so, the door was re-closed, and she heard the bolt outside fastened with a click.

The cell was so dark, that at the first moment, Alice, coming in from the brightness without, did not see her beloved. To Gilbert, in that gloomy abode, she came like an angel of light ; and, in spite of the huge chain with which he was manacled, he sprang from the bench and clasped her in his arms, softly exclaiming : “ Dear, dear Alice ! mine own gentle Alice ! this is kind and brave of thee ! ”

But both hearts were full, and they scarcely spoke at first. Love, which has ever so much to say when

absent, is often powerless to unseal its lips in the presence of the loved.

Gilbert drew her to the rough bench, and they sat, hand clasped in hand, each gazing into the other's eyes, as if to read there, each other's tale of suffering since last they met.

A cloud of sorrowful tenderness gathered on the brow of Gilbert, as he looked upon that dear face, so wan with sleepless watching, yet so gentle, and pleasant, and peaceful even now.

"My poor Alice! my poor, poor Alice, how sore has been thy trouble!"

She sat for a moment motionless and silent. Under the violence of her struggle to be calm, under the intensity of mental suffering, and in the dreary sense, that the bright past was gone for ever, her nerves gave way, and she sank into a helpless agony of tears. Yet, in that moment of bitterness and temptation, the faith of Gilbert triumphed. As a flash of thought, the whole picture of what he had lost, of what he might regain—love, joy, life—came in one tempting, smiling form before him. Satan never appealed to the heart of man with voice more alluring. With that sweet, helpless form—whose life seemed to hang upon his word—clinging to him

in her love, no wonder, if the faith of the Gospeller trembled; no wonder, if, in the weakness of the flesh, the spirit shrank from the sacrifice.

But lowly and tremblingly uttered, as if wrung from the very soul, came from the white and feeble lips of Alice, words that revived the martyr's spirit—

“Dear Gilbert! not *our* will, but *His* be done!”

And then, both instinctively fell on their knees in prayer, and received from the ministering angels of His love, such comfort in the present, such bright hopes for their future in their Father's home, as robbed the present of its sting; knit their hearts eternally in one; and blessed them, in spite of their bitter trial, with a foretaste of that peace which they were to realize in heaven. Then, calmly they talked of the brief space that should intervene, before they met in glory. On the threshold of the great Eternity, the life here seemed so very brief! But the martyr spoke as if inspired, and with such noble words, as to stir up in the heart of Alice, a yearning desire to fill up that brief space with deeds of self-sacrificing love, in the service of Him for whose Name they had been called upon to suffer.

Then came the terrible moment of parting. As Roger gently tapped at the door, the warning came

like a death-knell. Both arose, each with the heroism of love, striving to cast a smile of hope upon the other.

“God be with thee, dearest!” sobbed Alice, as Gilbert wrapped her in the full embrace of his noble heart.

“Fare thee well, mine own sweet wife, until we meet to part no more, in our Father’s dwelling!”

And so they parted; and to Alice, thenceforth, the days were without sun, and the nights without stars.



CHAPTER XVII.

THE SECRET CONVENTICLE.



DARK and cloudy night, and the village of Studmore was as still as death. Save in times of war, or civil strife, who ever heard of sound of man in Studmore after ten of the clock? The light behind the red lattice of the "Greyleye Arms" was darkened, and the rustics, noisy with "double ale," had stumbled home a full hour ago; the constable had gone in peace, and all honest folk were slumbering in their beds. Not a step was heard—not a lamp was seen—not even a moon at which the dogs could bay; and scarcely light enough between the breaks in the heavy clouds, to see the swift flitting of the bats, as they whirled around the old turrets of Godlingstone Grange.

Yet, there were some awake and watching, that night. A little company had met in fear and trembling, and at great risk of personal danger, in a

room selected with due regard to privacy, at the Grange. It was at the back of the house; a room with only one narrow ivy-encircled window looking out upon the ancient apple-garth, and shut in from outer view by the trees; an upper chamber removed from the possible prying of the spy, or the eaves-dropper. A large room, with mighty beams of oak stretching across its low ceiling, with dark grained panels covering its walls, with a great settle or locker in the deep embrasure of the narrow window, which showed at once the vast thickness of the masonry.

On a rough table at one end of the room, was a huge, rough, metal-backed lantern, a fit representative of the light of other days, which cast its red flickering glare upon Roger the Novitiate, seated at the head of the table, and left all the rest of the apartment in gloom and shade.

It was a strange scene, and there was ample materials in its grim surroundings—in the feelings and anxieties working in the features of those assembled; in the strong light thrown upon the wan face of the novitiate, and the dark shade through which peered the faces of the Lollards—to inspire the genius, and employ the pencil of a Rembrandt. They were but

a little company of eight, but they were true and faithful Gospellers, who had met for secret worship, and to offer special prayers for God's benison on the martyr of to-morrow.

Mistress Dame Wright and Cicely, her maid, were there, with Alice Chatfield and Dame Mostyn, all looking sad and careworn. Then there was Simon the smith, and Thomas the pedlar; and, seated between them, none other than poor John of Brenton, who, in spite of his sad "dis'pling," had returned again, penitent, to the faith; humbled, but more loving than ever.

All drew their stools closer to the table, and for a few moments remained in silence. It was midnight, and the peril of meeting thus, caused some feelings of timidity to creep into their hearts, which, in spite of their courage, were manifested in a nervous apprehension at the slightest sound.

"Hark!" said Dame Mostyn, "what noise is that? Oh, dear! alack-a-day, I fear we shall be discovered."

"It's nothing, good dame," replied brave Simon the smith, "but the wind scraping the ivy against the lattice."

Roger—yes, Roger, the lay brother of Greyeye,

was the leader of this little company, and he was brave and valiant now. "Friends in Christ," said he, "I would that we could, as did the Christians of blessed Apostolic times, when they met, chant an hymn of praise; but because of the danger, whilst our hearts rejoice in the Lord and His mighty power, let us content ourselves with reading and prayer."

Then, all kneeling down, Roger poured forth words of earnest supplication. He pleaded for help and strength, that they might all patiently endure. He besought the Holy Spirit's aid for Gilbert, that he might be bold in the Truth, and faithful to the end, even to the glorifying of God in the flames; and he concluded, almost in the words of the prayer used in the ancient liturgy of St. Ambrose, and which forms, to this day, our Collect for the Sunday next before Easter.

The response was a deep "amen" from every heart, and the eyes of all were wet with tears, as they rose from their knees, and again seated themselves at the table.

Dame Wright and her maid now left the room, and in a short time reappeared, the good dame carrying the very Book which she had purchased, a

few days before, from the pedlar. She placed it reverently before Roger, on the table.

Roger opened the Book, and drawing towards him the lantern, turned over the leaves, seeking in silence a passage for their comfort.

"Hist!" exclaimed John of Brenton, in a whisper, "was not that a step on the grees?"

All listened with bated breath, but no sound was heard.

"'Tis but thy fancy," said Simon; "thy fears have made a coward of thee, John."

Roger now asked a blessing upon the reading of the Word, and in a solemn voice began the fifth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel. As he read, his face glowed with love and enthusiasm, his voice rising louder and louder, until he came to the words, "Blessed are the persecuted, for they shall inherit the kingdom of God."

Dame Wright was melted into tears by the sweetness of the words.

When Roger closed the Book, Simon said: "Master, why shouldn't we, like our friends at Andover, celebrate the Lord's death? We are all here true to the Gospel, and it would much comfort us on this solemn night."

"Soothly said, Simon," replied Roger, "and if Mistress Alice will fetch bread and wine, we will together commemorate the merciful love and sufferings of our dying Lord."

Both Dame Mostyn and John of Brenton looked somewhat anxious at this announcement, and glanced timidly at the door.

"Nay, John," said Simon, reprovingly, "thou needest not look so scared, the doors are safely barred below."

It was well they were, for the celebration of the holy rite, in simple Lollard fashion, without ceremony or pretence of superstition or priestcraft, was of all heresies decreed the rankest, and, if discovered, would have condemned them all to the stake. But every precaution had been taken, and every door and window had been well shuttered and barred.

Alice, assisted by Cicely, soon appeared, carrying a flagon of red wine and a cup, with a plain wheaten loaf on a platter, all of which were laid on a snow-white linen napkin, on the table.

Roger, standing up, very reverently consecrated the elements, whilst all the little company kneeled around the table. Pouring out the wine, and breaking the loaf into pieces, he placed the platter in

the centre of the table, so that all could help themselves to a portion. They ate the bread kneeling, and in silent meditation. So they continued for a time. Then Roger, taking the cup, put it to his lips, and drank, with holy joy and grateful reverence, a little of the memorial symbol of his Saviour's Blood; and then, as it was passed round from one to another, he reminded them in a few words of that precious Blood of Jesus which had been shed for them. It was a simple ceremony, quiet and solemn.

“And now, dear friends, we will repeat together, our dear Lord's own sweet Prayer——”

It was not to be: for just as the hands of all were lifted in the attitude of supplication, a sharp rustle was heard at the window—so sharp, that Simon, seizing the lantern quickly, turned the light upon it, when, to the consternation of all, was revealed the cunning, malignant face of Geoffry Tryon peering through the casement. The next moment, with a loud and exultant scream, the spy suddenly disappeared, and the Gospellers gazed at each other in breathless terror, at this unexpected treachery.



CHAPTER XVIII.

GEOFFRY TRYON THE EAVESDROPPER.

THE alarm of the Gospellers was great. For a time it seemed impossible for them to calm their fears sufficiently, to enable them to look their position in the face. Poor John of Brenton trembled like an aspen leaf, and Dame Mostyn, with uplifted hands, moaned incessantly :

“Alack! alack! a-deary me, to think that I should come to be burned in mine old age. Oh! alack! alack! alack!”

Those of stronger will, sat for a time in silence, realizing the full measure of their peril. The face of Roger alone bespoke serenity. Nay, it indicated more than that; for in his far-off gaze he seemed lost to the present, and joy spread a glow over his thought-worn features. Simon was the first to speak a word of counsel.

“Come,” said he, “let us put our wits together; it’s no use sitting gaping at each other in this wise.”

"It feareth me," said the pedlar, "thou hast but one way out of the snare. Let those who are known bedight themselves in strange gear, and leave the village."

"What!" exclaimed Simon the smith, "turn cowards? Deny the Lord, and run away, scared by such a scoundrel as that villainous eavesdropper? Nay, nay, Sir Pedlar, such disguises ill fit soldiers of the Cross, methinks!"

"Nor doth fool-hardiness, good neighbour," replied the pedlar a little testily, "become the followers of the Lord. Christians are of more use in the world than to make priests' bonfires, I ween; and, forsooth, did not the Master Himself say, 'When they persecute you in one city, flee ye into another'?"

"True, true, good Sir," said John of Brenton, "and we might, if we bestir ourselves, tramp half way to Andover before dawn."

"Good folks," said Roger, "our peril is great. Doubtless this prying knave will use despatch, and will hasten to give speedy intelligence to the Prior. Our friend, the pedlar, counselleth wisely. Let each one see to it, whilst there is a chance of escape."

"And thyself, good Sir?" inquired Alice.

"Heed me not, fair lady," replied Roger. "I

shall return to Greyleye, come what may. It would grieve me, were I not with Master Gilbert at the last."

"Oh! that I could be with him!" exclaimed Alice. "Tell him, good Sir, tell him that my spirit is with him, and that his Alice glories in his bravery; and tell him that on her knees she thanks God for his noble love—and," she added with a blush, and forgetting all about their present danger, "ask him for a lock of his hair, that with his letter I may keep it near my lonely heart."

"Fair Mistress," said Roger, in a tone of sympathy, "I will see to it. But now let us think of thy safety."

"Alice," said Mistress Wright, "hath agreed to stay with me until all is over," and the poor mother shuddered as she thought of the morrow.

"Ah! but if this villain goes to ——" began Simon the smith.

"It matters not now," said Alice, with a sad smile. "Better so, perhaps, better so."

"It seemeth me," said the pedlar, "that ye are all losing time. Let me, who am a stranger in Studmore, and not likely to be known to that spying caitiff, be the first to essay forth. If all's clear, I'll return and ——"

“Nay! nay! thou goest not forth alone. I’ll go with thee,” said Simon, speaking through his set teeth, and firmly doubling his massive fist; “and if that lazy, sleeveless loord of a dog cometh in my way, by St. Dunstan, I’ll ——!”

“Good Simon, good Simon,” gently spoke Alice, “remember thou art a Gospeller!”

“True,” said Simon, “and I crave thy pardon, gentle lady; but for thine admonition, his life, an’ I caught him, wouldn’t a’ be’n worth a flea’s.”

So it was decided that Simon and the pedlar should sally forth. Cautiously they opened the chamber door, and then crept noiselessly down the stairs. In the hall they stood and listened. All was silent as the night. The great bolt was drawn back, and the outer door unlatched, when they heard a noise that sounded like a groan.

“Hark!” said the pedlar, in a startled whisper. “That’s not the note of owl or bat. Hist! hist!”

“Let us go forth, man,” said Simon, grasping firmly a huge staff that he held in his hand, “I fear not a dozen such sneaking hounds!”

With this he pushed open the door sufficiently to allow of their exit, then closing it securely, stepped boldly from the threshold. As they did so, the

groan, which seemed to come from the back of the house, was again repeated, and they heard a rough voice say :

“Why Geoffry ! Geoffry, is't thou ? What ! hast thou been after the codlings, eh ? and by St. Thomas, thou hast met with thy reward, it seems. Speak, man ; art hurt ?”

Another deep, deep groan—the groan as of a dying man.

Simon and the pedlar hastened to the spot, and there stood Tilly the constable over the blood-stained, prostrate form of Geoffry Tryon. The wretched eavesdropper had, from a ladder which he had taken from the rick-yard, watched the Gospellers at their secret worship. When the lamp was turned so suddenly upon him, he endeavoured to evade detection, and by so doing overbalanced the ladder, which, slipping, precipitated him violently to the ground. His head had struck against one of the stone buttresses in his fall, and he lay there, a ghastly, disfigured form, bleeding and insensible.

“Help ! help ! good master,” cried the constable, “or it'll be a crowner's case. Run ! Simon, run to Master Pottleton.”

“Rather let us take him to the leech,” said Simon
“it’ll save time.”

“Not so,” said the pedlar, “the knave is dying
fast. Let us carry him into the barn.”

They did so; Simon, all his anger gone now,
lifting him gently and tenderly, and placing him
softly on the litter.


The groaning man opened his eyes, and fixed
them in a glassy gaze; but there was no sign of
consciousness.

The constable then hurried off for the village
doctor, and soon Master Pottleton came, puffing and
blowing with his exertion in carrying an enormous
wallet, full of plaisters and potions, and curious
instruments of surgery. But it was too late; Geoffry
was past the help of leechcraft, and before Master
Pottleton came, the wretched spy had breathed his
last.



CHAPTER XIX.

JOINING "THE NOBLE ARMY OF MARTYRS."

HE fatal day was ushered in with a blithesome morn. The fresh breeze came perfumed and redolent with the breath of flowers. Fanned by the soft and balmy air, and beautified by the sunny brightness of June, how peaceful and happy looked the village of Studmore! The merry chirp and songs of birds, on trees and straw-roofs, twittering and love-making under cosy eaves; the busy hum of insects; the stir and rustle of awakening Nature; and those innumerable evidences of active, joyous life, that make up the music of a bright morning in early summer; preached everywhere, homilies of peace.

How often it is so, that Nature thus smiles in our saddest moments; not in mockery, but in the beneficence of hope, and teaching us, that amidst all our troubles, and the dire consequences of human sin and folly with which we are surrounded, there is a

sweet peace, and promise of better things in that work of our Father, which is beyond the meddling of man.

But oh! what hearts of sorrow were beating that morning in Studmore, after the vigils of a sleepless night. We will not pry into the bitterness of that mother's heart, who, in the anguish of desolation, prayed so fervently to die. It was piteous to hear her broken sobs, and her monotonous moan, "My son! my son! oh! my dear son!" and still more touching to hear her struggling faith, murmur, in a trembling whisper, "O Lord! Thy will be done!" "God help her!" the neighbours said, for *they* could find no words to comfort her. Her face seemed turned to stone, and she heeded nothing in the abstraction of her sorrow.

Poor Alice, too. That bright, young, girlish face, that but a little while ago outrivalled the fairest and sweetest flower in Studmore, and seemed all sunshine and loveliness—how greatly was it changed by the solemnity of her grief! Beautiful, indeed, ever beautiful; but a beauty now that was scarcely of this world. It was difficult to think those features had ever smiled, for the sorrow that curtained them, seemed older than the face. Poor Alice!

Passing through a fire of tribulation which had burnt up all her fondly cherished hopes, she was coming out, by the mighty grace of God, a seraph in spirit, and with a martyr's faith. Marvellous it was to see, how the strength of God was manifested in the weakness of this gentle maiden, and how, with that sacrifice which is the test of all love, she had consecrated herself—her affections, her very will—to the guidance of the Divine Spirit. Marvellous, too, to see how brave she was on this sad morning, when already from the bell-tower of Greyeye, was tolling the death-knell to all her earthly affection—to all those bright hopes of happiness that lovers weave, and which are seldom destroyed but with broken hearts.

But not only with those we have named, but in many homes, there was that morning the sense of a great sorrow in Studmore. Sympathy for Alice and her hapless love; admiration of the Lollard's courage; some secret fretfulness at the meddling oppression of the monks; some angry feelings and doubts left rankling in the minds of many since the burning of the Scriptures, and the cruel "dis'pling" of poor John of Brenton; together with gloomy uncertainty as to what all this might lead to; had caused here

and there a reaction, which even the long teaching of the monks could not repel. But, although this feeling was slowly spreading and permeating the mind of common folk, it was not expressed; and many there were who, with a horrid desire for religious revenge, awoke that morning with almost pleasurable excitement in the anticipation of a fearful holiday.

Already they were busy in the market-place, with the dread preparations. A stout stake bound round with iron, had been driven firmly into the ground, dry fagots had been brought and piled in a heap, and a strong barrier had been set up to keep off the crowd, which was gathering thick and fast from all parts, as if some holiday sights were to be seen. Young and old were there. Some with sad, foreboding faces; others with restless and wrathful looks; but the majority were untouched by any deeper feeling, than that of curiosity to see a Lollard die.

Anon the crowd grows thicker; and the hum of many voices, and the tramp of many feet, and the ghastly mirth of many tongues, swell into an exciting whirr.

And now the dull, heavy toll of the great bell at

Greyleye, strikes the ear ; and, with one consent, the silence of death falls upon the crowd. Well is it understood that the Gospeller is leaving the priory, and is on his way to martyrdom. Eager eyes are turned towards the road, and the excitement grows intense. For awhile the chattering, thoughtless tongues are hushed to whispers, and none speak above their breath.

On they come, in funeral pageant and solemn procession. The sheriff is there on horseback, with justices of the peace, and ecclesiastics from Winchester ; together with my Lord Prior and the monks of Greyleye, the lay brothers and the Vicar of Studmore ; besides the headborough, the constables, and officers and men from Andover. A brave, grim parade of power.

Between Prior John and Roger de Whyttenham, bare-footed and bare-headed, walked the Gospeller. Noting how upright he was ; with what a firm step and dauntless courage he came ; none would have taken him to have been the victim. His quiet, upward look, and his placid, trustful smile, betokened that all fear and strife had passed away, and that in the anticipation of a martyr's glory, death had no sting or terror for him now.

When all was ready ; when the Gospeller had been fastened to the stake by an iron chain around his waist ; when the fagots had been piled high about him, with straw and pitch, and it only needed the lighted torch to set the whole ablaze—a curious incident occurred. An old woman, carrying a single fagot, tottered feebly towards the pile, and with a look of triumph cast it upon the heap, exclaiming—“ Ah ! let me throw in a stick well pitched, and may the Lord bless it ! ”

And she believed, poor thing, in the darkness of her priest-taught soul, that she was doing God a service ; but, in that heart-hardening, and cruelty-prompting delusion of her Romish creed, she was only a type, in the dark age in which she lived, of myriads whose blind fanaticism and persecuting proclivities, not even the noontide Gospel radiance of the nineteenth century has been able to dispel.

Around poor Gilbert Wright, the undaunted Gospeller, the officials now form a ring inside the barriers, and the last cruel mockery of priestcraft to tempt the faith of the martyr, takes place. Preceded by six monks, each carrying two waxen torches, Prior John steps forth, and walking slowly round the pile, stands before the victim. He bears in one

hand a crucifix, in the other a small paten of consecrated bread. Holding the crucifix aloft, he shows the bread to the Gospeller, saying: "This is the Sacrament of the Lord's body. How dost thou believe it?"

The uplifted eyes of the Gospeller are stedfastly fixed on heaven, whilst his lips move softly in prayer, and for a moment he hears not the monk.

"Wist ye not that I spoke?" loudly inquires the Prior; and the thoughts of the Gospeller, being thus recalled to earth, he listens as the priest repeats his question.

"Trouble me not, I pray thee, with these matters, but hasten me on my way. I would be *there*, for methinks I see already," said Gilbert, again looking upward into the bright, blue sky, "the golden gate opening into the heavenly home."

"Answer me, heretic!" impatiently exclaimed the prior, as he again offered the bread, "wilt thou receive this, believing it to be the very body and blood of Christ?"

"Why wilt thou disturb my prayers?" said Gilbert. Then, turning to the people, he added, in a clear, loud voice: "Good friends! God has revealed to me since I have been in prison, the evil teaching.

of these men. That which is now offered to me thus, is, I admit, hallowed bread, but not the body of our God and Saviour. It's not Christ in the bread ye want, but Christ *in your hearts*. The monks would give us what *they* call Christ, only as they please, or as ye pay them; but Christ will come to ye all without priests, or monks, or price, if ye will seek Him for yourselves. This is what the Gospel tells us. This is the good news the monks would keep from ye; and this is the reason why they burn God's Word, rather than ye shall read it."

"Hold thy peace, heretic!" angrily shouted the Prior.

"Nay, reverend Sir, be patient with me," said Gilbert; and then turning to the crowd, he continued:

"I die, neighbours, because I refuse to forsake the teaching of Christ's Word, and ——"

"Not Christ's Word, but Lollardry!" warmly interposed the prior.

"Yea, good neighbours, for Christ's Word, which thou, Sir Prior, and thy brethren, are burning in the market-places of England. The monks would keep ye in darkness, but learn, my friends, to read, that ~~ye~~ may search the Scriptures for yourselves. Be

brave, and believe me the time is coming when the Word of God, written for common folk like you and me, will be free for all Englishmen to read."

This speech was not what the monks had hoped to extort. Enraged at its boldness, and at the Lollard's refusal to acknowledge the sacramental doctrine of the Real Presence, the prior passionately exclaimed:

"Cease thy presumptuous babbling, heretic! Give the order, Sir Sheriff, and let the fire be lighted."

"Yet one word more," said Gilbert, turning to the sheriff.

"Nay! nay!" said the prior, but the sheriff had bowed consent, and the Gospeller went on:

"See, my friends, how they desire to keep the Truth from ye. Christ says, 'Search the Scriptures;' but I am to burn to-day, as a warning that ye shun them! I die happy and without fear: right willingly do I die, thanking God that he has opened to me His blessed Word; and I lay down my life gladly, to testify to my countrymen the preciousness of the Gospel of Christ!"

Gilbert ceased: then clasping his hands together, he exclaimed:

"Good Lord, receive my soul!"

At the brave words of the Gospeller, a murmur of admiration ran through the crowd. Here and there a voice bolder than the rest, was raised for mercy. "Let him live!" cried one. "His words are true!" cried another; and the crowd swayed to and fro in its excitement, straining the barriers until they creaked again. The monks, fearing the consequences, urged the sheriff to use despatch; and the sympathizing, but hesitating and frightened spectators of the *auto-da-fé*, left the noble-souled martyr to his fate.

The torch was quickly applied, and soon a lurid glow reddened the summer sky. The flames, fed by dry fagots and pitch, shot up in huge tongues, and hissed and roared around the martyr; but in the midst of all, to the wonderment of the staring crowd, the uplifted face of Gilbert wore a smile of expectant joy, and, to the last, showed the possession of a quiet and settled peace that was beautiful to see, but was far beyond their understanding.

And so the Gospeller died, but died not in vain; for he left behind him the undying influence of the noble sacrifice of a strong heart in defence of Truth and Right. The fire burned slowly out; but there were torches kindled in the glowing ashes of the

Gospeller, that were to light the way to the glorious Reformation.

Weeks and months passed by, and the little world of Studmore fell into its quiet round of rural industry. For some few weeks, a heap of ashes within a blackened circle, marked the spot on which the martyr died. Although lying in the open market-place, none disturbed it—no foot desecrated it. It seemed to be instinctively revered by all. During that summer-tide, on Sabbaths, after even-song, many turned thence to look upon the spot, and they would go away with tearful eyes, talking of the brave bearing of the martyr, and repeating his dying sayings, until they became familiar as household words in the lowly homes of Studmore. Long after all traces had disappeared—ay, even to this day!—that spot is hallowed in the memory. Generations of fathers have told their children the story of Gilbert Wright; and lads and maidens have grown up loving their English Bible, yet the more for the record of his sufferings; and with a sturdy spirit of Protestantism in their hearts, which, by God's grace, may preserve the Church in Studmore for ever, from the bondage of the priests.

And there came often to that spot, a maiden with a widowed heart. At early dawn, and sometimes, too, in the pensive gloom of evening twilight, she would steal away to the scene of the martyr's victory. There, standing alone in silent meditation, now with downcast eyes, that bedewed the hallowed ground with tears of tenderest love; and now with upturned gaze, and features radiant with heavenly smiles, she seemed unconscious of ever being observed, while she presented a picture to the eye of every one that chanced to behold her, of such commingled joy and sorrow, affection and fidelity, womanly feeling and Christian fortitude—that no one, even amongst the rudest and most ignorant of the village boors, was ever known to obtrude upon the sacredness of her sorrow.

Whilst the monks frowned upon her, and threatened her, as being “suspect of heresy,” with the vengeance of the Church, the universal sympathy and respect with which she was regarded restrained them; for the neighbours, young and old, instinctively loved her good deeds, and her sweet tenderness to the sick; and when she died, every heart was filled with grief, and every village home with gloom; for all felt, not only that they had lost a sister and a

friend, but that a sweet ministering angel of mercy had been taken from among them ; and never did they forget the holy devotion with which she secretly read, out of a little Book in English, those blessed Words of Life, which had inspired heavenly hope and consolation to many, in hours of sickness and of death.

The good and gentle Alice was laid to rest in the quiet little churchyard of Studmore. In her coffin, and nestling in her maiden bosom, according to her own ardently expressed desire, a long-treasured lock of hair was buried with her, as the last earthly gift of—GILBERT WRIGHT THE GOSPELLER.



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