R. D. BLACKMORE

PERLYCROSS: A TALE OF THE WESTERN HILLS

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CHAPTER I. THE LAP OF PEACE.

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In the year 1835, the Rev. Philip Penniloe was Curate-in-charge of Perlycross, a village in a valley of the Blackdown Range. It was true that the Rector, the Rev. John Chevithorne, M.A., came twice every year to attend to his tithes; but otherwise he never thought of interfering, and would rather keep his distance from spiritual things. Mr. Penniloe had been his College-tutor, and still was his guide upon any points of duty less cardinal than discipline of dogs and horses.

The title of "Curate-in-charge" as yet was not invented generally; but far more Curates held that position than hold it in these stricter times. And the shifting of Curates from parish to parish was not so frequent as it is now; theological views having less range and rage, and Curates less divinity. Moreover it cost much more to move.

But the Curate of Perlycross was not of a lax or careless nature. He would do what his conscience required, at the cost of his last penny; and he thought and acted as if this world were only the way to a better one. In this respect he differed widely from all the people of his parish, as well as from most of his Clerical brethren. And it is no little thing to say of him, that he was beloved in spite of his piety.

Especially was he loved and valued by a man who had known him from early days, and was now the Squire, and chief landowner, in the parish of Perlycross. Sir Thomas Waldron, of Walderscourt, had battled as bravely with the sword of steel, as the Churchman had with the spiritual

weapon, receiving damages more substantial than the latter can inflict. Although by no means invalided, perhaps he had been pleased at first to fall into the easy lap of peace. After eight years of constant hardship, frequent wounds, and famishing, he had struck his last blow at Waterloo, and then settled down in the English home, with its comforting cares, and mild delights.

Now, in his fiftieth year, he seemed more likely to stand on the battlements of life than many a lad of twenty. Straight and tall, robust and ruddy, clear of skin, and sound of foot, he was even cited by the doctors of the time, as a proof of the benefit that flows from bleeding freely. Few men living had shed more blood (from their own veins at any rate) for the good of their native land, and none had made less fuss about it; so that his Country, with any sense of gratitude, must now put substance into him. Yet he was by no means over fat; simply in good case, and form. In a word, you might search the whole county, and find no finer specimen of a man, and a gentleman too, than Colonel Sir Thomas Waldron.

All this Mr. Penniloe knew well; and having been a small boy, when the Colonel was a big one, at the best school in the west of England, he owed him many a good turn for the times when the body rules the roost, and the mind is a little chick, that can't say—"Cockadoodle." In those fine days, education was a truly rational process; creating a void in the juvenile system by hunger, and filling it up with thumps. Scientific research has now satisfied itself that the mind and the body are the selfsame thing; but this was not understood as yet, and the one ministered to the other. For

example, the big Tom Waldron supplied the little Phil Penniloe with dumps and penny-puddings, and with fists ever ready for his defence; while the quicker mind sat upon the broad arch of chest sprawling along the old oak bench, and construed the lessons for it, or supplied the sad hexameter. When such a pair meet again in later life, sweet memories arise, and fine goodwill.

This veteran friendship even now was enduring a test too severe, in general, for even the most sterling affection. But a conscientious man must strive, when bound by Holy Orders, to make every member of his parish discharge his duty to the best advantage. And if there be a duty which our beloved Church—even in her snoring period—has endeavoured to impress, the candid layman must confess that it is the duty of alms-giving. Here Mr. Penniloe was strong—far in advance of the times he lived in, though still behind those we have the privilege to pay for. For as yet it was the faith of the general parishioner, that he had a strong parochial right to come to church for nothing; and if he chose to exercise it, thereby added largely to the welfare of the Parson, and earned a handsome reference. And as yet he could scarcely reconcile it with his abstract views of religion, to find a plate poked into his waistcoat pocket, not for increase, but depletion thereof.

Acknowledging the soundness of these views, we may well infer that Perlycross was a parish in which a well-ordered Parson could do anything reasonable. More than one substantial farmer was good enough to be pleased at first, and try to make his wife take it so, at these opportunities of grace. What that expression meant was

more than he could for the life of him make out; but he always connected it with something black, and people who stretched out their hands under cocoa-nuts bigger than their heads, while "come over and help us," issued from their mouths. If a shilling was any good to them, bless their woolly heads, it only cost a quarter of a pound of wool!

Happy farmer, able still to find a shilling in his Sunday small-clothes, and think of the guineas in a nest beneath the thatch! For wheat was golden still in England, and the good ox owned his silver side. The fair outlook over hill and valley, rustling field and quiet meadow, was not yet a forlorn view, a sight that is cut short in sigh, a prospect narrowing into a lane that plods downhill to workhouse. For as yet it was no mockery to cast the fat grain among the clods, or trickle it into the glistening drill, to clear the sleek blade from the noisome weed, to watch the soft waves of silky tassels dimple and darken to the breeze of June, and then the lush heads with their own weight bowing to the stillness of the August sun, thrilling the eyes with innumerable throng, glowing with impenetrable depth of gold. Alas, that this beauty should be of the past, and ground into gritty foreign flour!

But in the current year of grace, these good sons of our native land had no dream of the treason, which should sell our homes and landscapes to the sneering foreigner. Their trouble, though heavy, was not of British madness, but inflicted from without; and therefore could be met and cured by men of strong purpose and generous act.

That grand old church of Perlycross (standing forth in gray power of life, as against the black ruins of the Abbey)

had suddenly been found wanting—wanting foundation, and broad buttress, solid wall, and sound-timbered roof, and even deeper hold on earth for the high soar of the tower. This tower was famous among its friends, not only for substance, and height, and proportion, and piercings, and sweet content of bells; but also for its bold uplifting of the green against the blue. To-wit, for a time much longer than any human memory, a sturdy yew-tree had been standing on the topmost stringing-course, in a sheltering niche of the southern face, with its head over-topping the battlements, and scraping the scroll of the south-east vane. Backed as it was by solid stone, no storm had succeeded in tugging its tough roots out of the meshes of mortar; and there it stood and meant to stand, a puzzle to gardeners, a pleasure to jackdaws, and the pride of all Perlycrucians. Even Mr. Penniloe, that great improver, could not get a penny towards his grand designs, until he had signed a document with both Churchwardens, that happen what might, not a hair of the head of the sacred yew-tree should perish.

Many a penny would be wanted now, and who was to provide them? The parish, though large and comprising some of the best land in East Devon, had few resources of commerce, and not many of manufacture. The bright Perle running from east to west clove it in twain; and the northern part, which was by far the larger, belonged to the Waldrons; while the southern (including the church and greater part of village) was of divers owners, the chiefest being the Dean and Chapter of Exeter. It is needless to say that this sacred body never came nigh the place, and felt no obligation towards it, at the manhood of this century.

"What is to be done?" cried the only man who could enter into the grief of it, when Richard Horner of Pumpington, architect, land-agent, and surveyor, appeared before the Clergyman and Churchwardens, with the report required by them.

"One of two things," answered Mr. Horner, a man of authority and brevity; "either let it crumble, or make up your minds to spend a thousand pounds upon it."

"We should be prepared to spend that sum, if we had only got it;" Mr. Penniloe said, with that gentle smile which made his people fond of him.

"We han't got a thousand, nor a hundred nayther You talk a bit too big, Dick. You always did have a big mouth, you know."

The architect looked at his cousin, Farmer John (the senior Churchwarden of Perlycross, and chief tenant of the Capitular estates), and if his own mouth was large, so was that of his kinsman, as he addressed him thus.

"John Horner, we know well enough, what you be. It wouldn't make much of a hole in you, to put down your hundred pounds—to begin with."

"Well," said his colleague, Frank Farrant, while the elder was in labour of amazement; "if John will put down his hundred pounds, you may trust me to find fifty."

"And fifty to you is a good bit more than a thousand to him, I reckon. Book it, Mr. Penniloe, before they run back; and me for another five and twenty."

"I never said it; I never said a word of it"—Farmer John began to gasp, while cousin and colleague were patting him on the back, crying,

"Don't go back from your word, John."

"Now, did I say it, Parson Penniloe?" he appealed, as soon as they would let him speak; "come now, I'll go by what you say of it."

"No, Mr. Horner; I wish you had. You never said anything of the kind."

"Parson, you are a gentleman. I do like a man as tells the truth. But as for them fellows, I'll just show them what's what. Whether I said it, or no—I'll do it."

Mr. Penniloe smiled, but not with pleasure only. Simple and charitable as he was, he could scarcely believe that the glory of God was the motive power in the mind of Farmer John.

CHAPTER II. FAIRY FAITH.

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At the beginning of July, work was proceeding steadily, though not quite so merrily perhaps, as some of the workmen might have wished; because Mr. Penniloe had forbidden the presence of beer-cans in consecrated ground. A large firm of builders at Exeter (Messrs. Peveril, Gibbs & Co.) had taken the contract according to Mr. Horner's specifications; and had sent a strong staff of workmen down, under an active junior partner, Mr. Robson Adney. There are very few noises that cannot find some ear to which they are congenial; and the clink of the mason's trowel is a delight to many good people. But that pleasant sound is replaced, too often, by one of sadder harmony—the chink of coin that says adieu, with all the regret behind it.

Perlycross had started well on this, its greatest enterprise; every man was astonished at his neighbour's generosity, and with still better reason at his own. Mr. Penniloe's spirit rose above the solid necessity of repairs, and aspired to richer embellishment. That hideous gallery at the western end, which spoiled the tower entrance and obscured a fine window, should go into the fire at last; the noble arch of the chancel (which had been shored with timber braces) should be restored and reopened, and the blocked-up windows should again display their lovely carving. In the handsomest manner, Sir Thomas Waldron had sent him a cheque for five hundred pounds; which after all was only just, because the vaults of the Waldron race lay at the bottom of half the lapse. The Dean and Chapter of

Exeter had contributed a hundred pounds; and the Rector another hundred; and the Curate's own father—an ancient clergyman in the north of Devon, with a tidy living and a plump estate—had gone as far as twenty pounds, for the honour of the family.

With this money in hand, and much more in hope, all present designs might well be compassed. But alas, a new temptation rose, very charming, and very costly. The Curate had long suspected that his favourite church had been endowed (like its smaller sister at Perlycombe) with a fair rood-screen; perhaps a fine one, worthy of the days, when men could carve. And now, when the heavy wooden gallery of Queen Anne's time had been removed, it happened that Sergeant Jakes, the schoolmaster, who had seen a great deal of old work in Spain, was minded to enquire into the bearings of the great bressemer at the back. He put his foot into a hole beneath it, where solid brickwork was supposed to be; but down went his foot into a lot of crumbling stuff, and being no more than a one-armed man, Mr. Jakes had a narrow escape of his neck. Luckily he clung with his one hand to a crossbeam still in position, and being of a very wiry frame—as all the school-children knew too well—was enabled to support himself, until a ladder was clapped to. Even then it was no easy thing to extricate his foot, wedged between two trefoils of sharply cut stone; and for more than a week it was beyond his power to bring any fugitive boy to justice. The Parson was sent for at once, and discovered the finest stone-screen in the diocese, removed from its place by a barbarous age, and plastered up in the great western wall.

There was little of that hot contention then, which rages now over every stock and stone appertaining to the Church. As the beauty of design, and the skill of execution, grew more and more manifest to his delighted eyes, Mr. Penniloe was troubled with no misgivings as to "graven images." He might do what he liked with this grand piece of work, if the money were forthcoming. And the parish suspected no Popery in it, when after much council with all concerned, and holding the needful faculty, he proposed to set up this magnificent screen as a reredos beneath the great Chancel window, and behind the stone Communion-table, generally called the Altar now.

Yet brave as he was and of ardent faith, some little dismay was natural, when the builders assured him that this could not be done, with all needful repairs and proper finish, for less than three hundred and fifty pounds, and they would not even bind themselves to that; for the original was of the best Beere stone, difficult to match, and hard to work. Mr. Penniloe went to the quarries, and found that this was no exaggeration; and having some faith in mankind—as all who have much in their Maker must have—he empowered the firm to undertake the task, while he cast about zealously for the cash.

With filial confidence he made sure that his reverend father must rejoice in another opportunity for glorifying God; and to that effect he addressed him. But when the postman wound his horn at the bottom of the village, and the Parson hurried down from the churchyard to meet him, at the expense of eightpence he received the following dry epistle.

"Son Philip,—We are much surprised and pained by your extraordinary letter. You speak very largely of 'duty to God,' which ought to be done, without talking of it; while you think lightly of your duty to your parents, the commandment that carries the blessing. If you had not abandoned your Fellowship, by marrying and having a family, it might have been more in your power to think of Church-windows, and stone-carving. We did not expect to be treated like this, after our very handsome gift, of not more than three months agone. Look for no more money; but for that which a good son values more, and earns by keeping within his income—the love of his affectionate parents,

"Isaac, and Joan Penniloe."

"Ah! ah! Well, well, I dare say I was wrong. But I thought that he could afford it;" said the Curate in his simple way: "'tis a sad day for me altogether. But I will not be cast down, for the Lord knoweth best."

For on this very day, a year ago, he had lost the happiness of his life, and the one love of his manhood. His fair wife (a loyal and tender helpmate, the mother of his three children, and the skilful steward of his small means) had been found lying dead at the foot of the "Horseshoe Pitch," beneath Hagdon Hill. While her husband was obliged to remain in the village, waiting for a funeral, she had set forth, with none but her younger boy Michael, to visit an old woman on the outskirts of the parish, very far advanced in years, but still a very backward Christian.

The old woman was living at the present moment, but could throw no light upon her visitor's sad fate, and indeed denied that she had seen her on that day. And the poor child who must have beheld what happened, though hitherto a very quick and clever little fellow, could never be brought to say a word about it. Having scarcely recovered from a sharp attack of measles, he had lost his wits through terror, and ran all the way home at the top of his speed, shouting "Rabbits! Rabbits! Rabbits!"

From the child's sad condition, and a strict search of the "Horseshoe," it appeared that he had leaped after his poor mother, but had been saved from death by a ledge of brambles and furze which had broken his fall. Even now, though all trace of his bruises was gone, and his blue eyes were as bright as ever, the tender young brain was so dazed and daunted, by the fall, and the fright, and agony, that the children of the village changed his nickname from "Merry Michael," to "Mazed Mikey."

Mr. Penniloe had been fighting bravely against the sad memories of this day. To a deeply religious mind like his, despondency was of the nature of doubt, and sorrow long indulged grew into sin. But now a cloud of darkness fell around him; the waves of the flood went over his soul, his heart was afflicted, and in sore trouble; and there was none to deliver him.

All men have their times of depression; but few feel such agonies of dejection, as the firm believer and lover of his faith, when harrowing doubts assail him. The Rector of Perlycross, Mr. Chevithorne, though by no means a man of vast piety, had a short way of dealing with such attacks,

which he always found successful. To his certain knowledge, all debility of faith sprang directly from "lowness of the system;" and his remedy against all such complaints was a glass of hot brandy and water. But his Curate's religion was a less robust, because a far more active power; and his keener mind was not content to repel all such sallies, as temptations of the Devil.

Sensitive, diffident, and soft-hearted, he was apt to feel too acutely any wound to his affections; and of all the world now left to him, the dearest one was his mother. Or at any rate, he thought so for the present; though a certain little tender claim was creeping closer and closer into the inmost cell of love.

"Can mother have forgotten what day it would be, when I should receive these cruel words?" he said to himself, as he went sadly up the hill towards his white-washed dwelling-place, having no heart left for the finest of stone-carvings. "If she did, it was not like her; and if she remembered, it seems still worse. Surely he would not have dared to sign her name, without her knowledge. But whenever he thinks of that Fellowship—well, perhaps it was wrong on my part to attempt so much. It is high time to look more closely into ways and means."

That was the proper thing to do beyond a doubt, and he hastened inside to do it. But when he sat in his lonely bookroom, with the evening shadows of the dark ilex slowly creeping over him, his mind went back into the past, and a mighty sadness conquered him. Instead of the list of subscriptions for the church he had drawn from the long portfolio (which his wife had given him on the last wedding-

day they should ever keep together) a copy of a sad despondent hymn, which he had written in the newness of his grief. As he read the forgotten lines, once more their deep gloom encompassed him; even the twinkle of hope, in which they ended, seemed a mockery.

"Will it ever be so, or is it all a dream, inspired by our longings, and our self-conceit? Whatever is pleasant, or good, or precious, is snatched from our grasp; and we call it a trial, and live on, in the belief that we are punished for our good, and shall be rewarded tenfold. If so, it can be for those alone who are able to believe always; who can dismiss every shadow of doubt, and live with their Maker face to face. Oh that I could do so. But I cannot; my shallow mind is vexed by every breeze. When I was a young man, I felt pity, and even contempt for Gowler's unfaith—a man of far superior powers. He gave up his Fellowship, like a conscientious man; while I preach to others, and am myself a castaway. Oh, Ruth, Ruth, if you could only see me!"

This man of holy life, and of pure devotion to his sacred office, bent his head low in the agony of the moment, and clasped his hands over his whitening hair. How far he was out of his proper mind was shown by his sitting in the sacred chair,[1] the old "dropping-chair" of the parish, which had been sent back that morning. Of this, and of all around, he took no heed; for the tide of his life was at the lowest ebb, and his feeble heart was fluttering, like a weed in shallow water.

But his comfort was not far to seek. After sundry soft taps, and a shuffle of the handle, the door was opened quietly, and a little girl came dancing in, bringing a gleam of

summer sunshine in a cloud of golden hair. The gloom of the cold room fled, as if it had no business near her, and a thrush outside (who knew her well) broke forth into a gratitude of song. For this was little Faith Penniloe, seven years old last Tuesday, the prettiest and the liveliest soul in all the parish of Perlycross; and Faith being too substantial perhaps, everybody called her "Fay," or "Fairy." Nothing ever troubled her, except the letter *r*, and even that only when it wanted to come first.

"Father, fathery, how much colder is the tea to get?" she cried; "I call it very yude of you, to do what you like, because you happen to be older."

As the little girl ran, with her arms stretched forth, and a smile on her lips that was surety for a kiss—a sudden amazement stopped her. The father of her love and trust and worship, was not even looking at her; his face was cold and turned away; his arms were not spread for a jump and a scream. He might as well have no child at all, or none to whom he was all in all. For a moment her simple heart was daunted, her dimpled hands fell on her pinafore, and the sparkle of her blue eyes became a gleam of tears.

Then she gathered up her courage, which had never known repulse, and came and stood between her father's knees, and looked up at him very tenderly, as if she had grieved him, and yearned to be forgiven.

"Child, you have taught me the secret of faith," he cried, with a sudden light shed on him; "I will go as a little one to my Father, without a word, and look up at Him."

Then, as he lifted her into his lap, and she threw her arms around his neck, he felt that he was not alone in the

world, and the warmth of his heart returned to him.

Footnote

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[1] In country parishes an easy-chair, for the use of the sick and elderly, was provided from the Communion offerings, and lent to those most in need of it. When not so required, it was kept under cover, and regarded with some reverence, from its origin and use.

CHAPTER III. THE LYCH-GATE.

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The old church, standing on a bluff above the river, is well placed for looking up and down the fertile valley. Flashes of the water on its westward course may be caught from this point of vantage, amidst the tranquillity of ancient trees and sunny breadths of pasture. For there the land has smoothed itself into a smiling plain, casting off the wrinkles of hills and gullies, and the frown of shaggy brows of heather. The rigour of the long flinty range is past, and a flower can stand without a bush to back it, and the wind has ceased from shuddering.

But the Perle has not come to these pleasures yet, as it flows on the north of the churchyard, and some hundred feet beneath it. The broad shallow channel is strewn with flint, and the little stream cannot fill it, except in times of heavy flood; for the main of its water has been diverted to work the woollen factory, and rejoins the natural course at the bridge two or three hundred yards below. On the further side, the land rises to the barren height of Beacon Hill, which shelters Sir Thomas Waldron's house, and is by its conical form distinct from other extremities of the Black-down Chain. For the southern barrier of the valley (which is about three miles wide at its mouth) is formed by the long dark chine of Hagdon Hill, which ends abruptly in a steep descent; and seeing that all this part of the vale, and the hills which shape it, are comprised in the parish of Perlycross, it will become clear that a single Parson, if he

attempts to go through all his work, must have a very fine pair of legs, and a sound constitution to quicken them.

Mr. Penniloe, now well advanced in the fifth decade, was of very spare habit and active frame, remarkable also for his springy gait, except at those periods of dark depression, with which he was afflicted now and then. But the leading fault of his character was inattention to his victuals, not from any want of common sense, or crude delight in fasting, but rather through self-neglect, and the loss of the one who used to attend to him. To see to that bodily welfare, about which he cared so little, there was no one left, except a careful active and devoted servant, Thyatira Muggridge. Thyatira had been in his employment ever since his marriage, and was now the cook, housekeeper, and general manager at the rectory. But though in the thirty-fifth year of her age, and as steady as a pyramid, she felt herself still too young to urge sound dietary advice upon her master, as she longed to do. The women of the parish blamed her sadly, as they watched his want of fattening; but she could only sigh, and try to tempt him with her simple skill, and zeal.

On the morrow of that sad anniversary which had caused him such distress, the Curate was blest with his usual vigour of faith and courage and philanthropy. An affectionate letter from his mother, enclosing a bank-order for ten pounds, had proved that she was no willing partner in the father's harshness. The day was very bright, his three pupils had left him for their summer holidays, and there happened to be no urgent call for any parochial visits. There was nothing to stop him from a good turn to-day among trowel and chisel

and callipers; he would see that every man was at his work, and that every stroke of work was truthful.

Having slurred his early dinner with his usual zest, he was hastening down the passage for his hat and stick, when Thyatira Muggridge came upon him from the pantry, with a jug of toast-and-water in her hand.

"Do'e give me just a minute, sir," she whispered, with a glance at the door of the dining-room where the children had been left; and he followed her into the narrow back-parlour, the head-quarters of his absent pupils.

Mr. Penniloe thought very highly of his housekeeper's judgment and discretion, and the more so perhaps because she had been converted, by a stroke of his own readiness, from the doctrines of the "Antipædo-Baptists"—as they used to call themselves—to those of the Church of England. Her father, moreover, was one of the chief tenants on the North Devon property of Mr. Penniloe the elder; and simplicity, shrewdness, and honesty were established in that family. So her master was patient with her, though his hat and stick were urgent.

"Would you please to mind, sir,"—began Thyatira, with her thick red arms moving over her apron, like rolling-pins upon pie-crust—"if little Master Mike was to sleep with me a bit, till his brother Master Harry cometh back from school?"

"I dare say you have some good reason for asking; but what is it, Mrs. Muggeridge?" The housekeeper was a spinster, but had received brevet-rank from the village.

"Only that he is so lonesome, sir, in that end hattick, by his little self. You know how he hath been, ever since his great scare; and now some brutes of boys in the village

have been telling him a lot of stuff about Spring-heel Jack. They say he is coming into this part now, with his bloody heart and dark lantern. And the poor little lamb hath a window that looks right away over the churchyard. Last night he were sobbing so in his sleep, enough to break his little heart. The sound came all across the lumber-room, till I went and fetched him into my bed, and then he were as happy as an Angel."

"Poor little man! I should have thought of it, since he became so nervous. But I have always tried to make my children feel that the Lord is ever near them."

"He compasseth the righteous round about," Mrs. Muggeridge replied with a curtsey, as a pious woman quoting Holy Writ; "but for all that, you can't call Him company, sir; and that's what these little one's lacks of. Master Harry is as brave as a lion, because he is so much older. But hoping no offence, his own dear mother would never have left that little soul all by himself."

"You are right, and I was wrong;" replied the master, concealing the pain her words had caused. "Take him to your room; it is very kind of you. But where will you put Susanna?"

"That will be easy enough, sir. I will make up a bed in the lumber-room, if you have no objection. Less time for her at the looking-glass, I reckon."

Mr. Penniloe smiled gravely—for that grievance was a classic—and had once more possessed himself of his hat and stick, when the earnest housekeeper detained him once again.

"If you please, sir, you don't believe, do you now, in all that they says about that Spring-heeled Jack? It scarcely seemeth reasonable to a Christian mind. And yet when I questioned Mr. Jakes about it, he was not for denying that there might be such a thing—and him the very bravest man in all this parish!"

"Mrs. Muggeridge, it is nonsense. Mr. Jakes knows better. He must have been trying to terrify you. A man who has been through the Peninsular campaign! I hope I may remember to reprove him."

"Oh no, I would beg you, sir, not to do that. It was only said—as one might express it, promiscuous, and in a manner of speaking. I would never have mentioned it, if I had thought——"

Knowing that her face was very red, her master refrained from looking at it, and went his way at last, after promising to let the gallant Jakes escape. It was not much more than a hundred yards, along the chief street of the village, from the rectory to the southern and chief entrance of the churchyard; opposite to which, at a corner of the road and partly in front of the ruined Abbey, stood an old-fashioned Inn, the *Ivy-bush*. This, though a very well conducted house, and quiet enough (except at Fair-time), was not in the Parson's opinion a pleasing induction to the lych-gate; but there it had stood for generations, and the landlord, Walter Haddon, held sound Church-views, for his wife had been a daughter of Channing the clerk, and his premises belonged to the Dean and Chapter.

Mr. Penniloe glanced at the yellow porch, with his usual regret but no ill-will, when a flash of bright colour caught his

eye. In the outer corner he described a long scarlet fishing-rod propped against the wall, with the collar and three flies fluttering. All was so bright and spick and span, that a trout's admiration would be quite safe; and the clergyman (having been a skilful angler, till his strict views of duty deprived him of that joy) indulged in a smile of sagacity, as he opened his double eye-glass, and scrutinised this fine object.

"Examining my flies, are you, Reverend? Well, I hope you are satisfied with them."

The gentleman who spoke in this short way came out of the porch, with a pipe in his hand and a large fishing-creel swinging under his left arm.

"I beg your pardon, Dr. Gronow, for the liberty I am taking. Yes, they are very fine flies indeed. I hope you have had good sport with them."

"Pretty fair, sir; pretty fair"—the owner answered cheerfully—"one must not expect much in this weather. But I have had at least three rises."

"It is much to your credit, so far as I can judge, under the circumstances. And you have not had time to know our water yet. You will find it pretty fishing, when you get accustomed to it."

The angler, a tall thin man of sixty, with a keen grave face and wiry gray hair, regarded the Parson steadfastly. This was but the second time they had met, although Dr. Gronow had been for some while an important parishioner of Perlycross, having bought a fair estate at Priestwell, a hamlet little more than a mile from the village. People, who pretended to know all about him, said that he had retired

suddenly, for some unknown reason, from long and large medical practice at Bath. There he had been, as they declared, the first authority in all cases of difficulty and danger, but not at all a favourite in the world of fashion, because of his rough and contemptuous manners, and sad want of sympathy with petty ailments. Some pious old lady of rank had called him, in a passionate moment, "the Godless Gronow;" and whether he deserved the description or not, it had cleaved to him like a sand-leech. But the Doctor only smiled, and went his way; the good will of the poor was sweeter to him than the good word of the wealthy.

"Let me say a word to you, Mr. Penniloe," he began, as the Curate was turning away; "I have had it in my mind for some short time. I believe you are much attached to Sir Thomas Waldron."

"He is one of my oldest and most valued friends. I have the highest possible regard for him."

"He is a valuable man in the parish, I suppose—comes to church regularly—sets a good example?"

"If all my parishioners were like him, it would be a comfort to me, and—and a benefit to them."

"Well said—according to your point of view. I like a straightforward man, sir. But I want you to be a little crooked now. You have an old friend, Harrison Gowler."

"Yes,"—Mr. Penniloe replied with some surprise, "I was very fond of Gowler at Oxford, and admired him very greatly. But I have not seen him for some years."

"He is now the first man in London in his special line. Could you get him to visit you for a day or two, and see Sir Thomas Waldron, without letting him know why?"

"You astonish me, Dr. Gronow. There is nothing amiss with Sir Thomas, except a little trouble now and then, caused by an ancient wound, I believe."

"Ah, so you think; and so perhaps does he. But I suppose you can keep a thing to yourself. If I tell you something, will you give me your word that it shall go no further?"

The two gentlemen were standing in the shadow of the lych-gate, as a shelter from the July sun, while the clergyman gazed with much alarm at the other, and gave the required promise. Dr. Gronow looked round, and then said in a low voice—

"Sir Thomas is a strong and temperate man, and has great powers of endurance. I hope most heartily that I may be wrong. But I am convinced that within three months, he will be lying upon this stone; while you with your surplice on are standing in that porch, waiting for the bearers to advance."

"Good God!" cried the Parson, with tears rushing to his eyes; then he lifted his hat, and bowed reverently. "May He forgive me for using His holy name. But the shock is too terrible to think of. It would certainly break poor Nicie's heart. What right have you to speak of such a dreadful thing?"

"Is it such a dreadful thing to go to heaven? That of course you guarantee for your good friends. But the point is —how to put off that catastrophe of bliss."

"Flippancy is not the way to meet it, Dr. Gronow. We have every right to try to keep a valuable life, and a life dear to all that have the sense to feel its value. Even a scornful man —such as you appear to be, unable to perceive the childish

littleness of scorn—must admire valour, sense of duty, and simplicity; though they may not be his own leading qualities. And once more I ask you to explain what you have said."

"You know Jemmy Fox pretty well, I think?" Dr. Gronow took a seat upon the coffin-stone, and spoke as if he liked the Parson's vigour—"Jemmy is a very clever fellow in his way, though of course he has no experience yet. We old stagers are always glad to help a young member of our Profession, who has a proper love for it, and is modest, and hard-working. But not until he asks us, you must clearly understand. You see we are not so meddlesome as you Reverends are. Well, from the account young Fox gives me, there can, I fear, be little doubt about the nature of the case. It is not at all a common one; and so far as we know yet, there is but one remedy—a very difficult operation."

Mr. Penniloe was liable to a kind of nervous quivering, when anything happened to excite him, and some of his very best sermons had been spoiled by this visitation.

"I am troubled more than I can tell you,—I am grieved beyond description,"—he began with an utterance which trembled more and more; "and you think that Gowler is the only man, to—to——"

"To know the proper course, and to afford him the last chance. Gowler is not a surgeon, as I need not tell you. And at present such a case could be dealt with best in Paris, although we have young men rising now, who will make it otherwise before very long. Sir Thomas will listen to nothing, I fear, from a young practitioner like Fox. He has been so knocked about himself, and so close to death's door more

than once, that he looks upon this as a fuss about nothing. But I know better, Mr. Penniloe."

"You are too likely to be right. Fox has told me of several cases of your wonderful penetration. That young man thinks so much of you. Oh, Dr. Gronow, I implore you as a man—whatever your own opinions are—say nothing to unsettle that young fellow's mind. You know not the misery you may cause, and you cannot produce any happiness. I speak—I speak with the strongest feelings. You will think that I should not have spoken at all—and I dare say it is unusual. But you will forgive me, when you remember it is my duty as a clergyman."

"Surely you are responsible for me as well"—replied the doctor with a kinder tone; "but perhaps you regard me as beyond all cure. Well, I will promise what you ask, good sir. Your sheep, or your foxes, shall not stray through me. Will you do what I suggest about Gowler?"

"I will try to get him down. But from all that I hear, he is one of the busiest men in London. And I dislike procuring his opinion on the sly. Excuse me—I know how well you meant it. But perhaps, through Lady Waldron, he may be brought down in the regular course, and have the whole case laid before him."

"That would be the best thing, if it could be managed. Good-bye! I go a-fishing, as your prototypes expressed it."