

THE CURATE OF ST. MARY'S.

BY F. HODGSON.

"Oh! Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world,

"Grant us thy peace.

"Oh! Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world,

"Have mercy upon us."

The solemn softness of the voices, chanting the divine words, swelling and rising, filled the groined arches of St. Mary's with floating, low-breathed echoes of the wondrous prayer, and, with the rest, a fresh, pure young voice floated upward—a voice so fresh, and pure, and tender, that it seemed almost in itself divine.

To this young voice one man had listened through the whole of the previous service. Its first sound had struck him with a strange sense of the sudden thrilling of some subtle, startled chord, touched for the first time in twenty-eight quiet years of life. He had listened for it, in the sounding of the responses, with an eagerness which was almost nervous in its intensity; he had lost consciousness of all else, and had waited for it, wondering vaguely at himself.

The congregation, looking up at the carven pulpit, saw only in this listener, to whom a girl's voice was a new pulsation of the heart, a practical, steady-faced young man, neither prepossessing nor brilliant; only one of the many mediocre respectable young men, who work hard to support their mediocre respectability, though, perhaps, the congregation of St. Mary's had some undefined sense of their obligation to be somewhat interested in this one of the many since he was the hard-worked, not too liberally paid curate of their church.

The Rev. Marcus Nugent, who was then rector, had been absent a few days, and, in his place, Noel Lowther had officiated; and it was, as he led the morning service, that the sweet, young voice broke upon his ear, echoing the responses from the rector's pew. He could not see the face of its owner, clear as the voice was to him. So it was that he was fain to content himself with the listening, which had become so strangely nervous in its eager intensity; and so it was that he was conscious of the listening, in its intensity, being anything but a content. Few of the people who knew him, even though they had been the people who knew him best, would have imagined the existence of such an excite-

ment in this commonplace, respectable, hard-worked young curate. He was not, by any means, a brilliant man, as I have said already; he was scarcely even a popular man. His quiet, inexpressive face, had the look of all such faces, which is more a lack of youthfulness than anything else. His life had been full of silent labor. Perhaps, in its commonplace quiet, there had been a pathetic, undefined incompleteness, and perhaps the sense of it sometimes came home to him with a dull pang; but even at such times, he had worked on in the leaden groove of his everyday-labor as steadily as ever.

The service was over at length, and, as the voluntary pealed forth in parting benediction, the door of the rector's pew opened, and, with the rector's wife, the owner of the voice passed down the broad aisle. She was a fair, pretty, school-girl looking young creature, with one of those rare, purely untouched faces, we see and wonder at, now and then, in some fair girl-woman, before whom lies the world's sad depth of experience, and whose past holds only the innocent memory of childhood. Just such a face as this Noel Lowther singled out of the crowd of onward passing faces. Just such a face as this he saw for a moment—soft-lipped, dove-eyed, and tender, and then she was hidden from his sight. But, as he passed out of the church-door, chance led him by a group of men, who were sauntering homeward slowly, and, as he crossed their path, a few words fell upon his ear.

"The fair, innocent-faced girl, with the yellow hair? Oh, yes," one of them said. "Nugent's daughter—Lilias Nugent. She has just come from school, I believe. Mere child, though—not more than sixteen."

The curate passed on, a strange, quick color flooding his sallow face. Lilias! Lilias! The name seemed so purely fitting, that it thrilled him, just as her voice had done. Lilias! Lilias! He said it to himself, again and again, with something like a tremor. He was afraid of himself. Does it seem impossible or incongruous, that to this staid, hard-worked man, whose life had known no touch of poetic brightness, the innocent girl-face, and innocent, soft voice, were a revelation, and the beginning of an era. And yet this was the case. In a moment he had awakened to a wild passion of tenderness, that

would grow as the hours grew, and strengthen, as nothing else on earth could gain strength. It was a revelation so clear, and also so bitter, that almost, in a moment's thought, he saw to its ending—to the result of pain into which it would ripen. Is this strange and inconsistent? It may be, perhaps, but it is true.

He went home to his dull, respectable lodgings slowly, pondering as he went. His dingy, little parlor, in the dull, neat street, was cheerless and silent as usual. Oh! the slow working in the leaden groove, that this small room had seen; the prayers that the dingy walls had echoed back—the prayers he had tried to make fervent, and had fancied he failed in, not daring to murmur so far as to think that the dull, unresponsive life made him slow in spirit, and unresponsive also. He was a conscientious man, this curate of St. Mary's. Even the people who liked him least were compelled to acknowledge that, and the most reluctant confessed that he neglected no duty. As he sat by the fire in the small grate, he looked back over his life with a heavier sadness than he had ever felt before. He was pondering over what he had scarcely before put into the form of distinct thought, though its shadow had often hovered over him. He was thinking of the undefined barrier that lay between himself and the world. He glanced at the shabby little pier-glass over the mantel, and found himself coloring awkwardly. He was always awkward; he knew that well—he felt it, constantly. And this one glance at the shabby glass told him all he had unconsciously asked. Poor fellow! That respectable, mediocre face, without one redeeming, or actually condemning point. He only glanced at it, and turned away.

He rose at last, and began to pace the floor. What was he thinking of so steadily, and what was it that the muffled echoes of his footsteps seemed to say? He could see a face like a flower, pure as a child's—a face with tender eyes, and a light shadow of blonde hair on the white brow. The muffled echoes of his feet were saying, with steady regularity, "Lilias! Lilias! Lilias!"

He spoke aloud at length, bitterly.

"Is there a man in the world," he said, "who would believe what I might say to-day, without thinking me a madman? No; there is not one."

There was even a touch of self-reproach in his mind. What right had he to think thus of her—a child, untouched by any thought of love as yet? He almost felt that he was doing her an irreverent wrong, reverent as his thoughts were.

He sat down to his modest dinner, when it was brought to him, and loitered over it for an hour, and then sent it away, almost untasted. Then

he took up a book, and began to read, trying to steadily ignore everything else. He could not sneer at his sudden, inconsistent weakness, as some men might have done. This was the birth of love, in spite of its sudden inconsistency, and he had an old-fashioned reverence for it, which put beyond the pale of possibility a sneer, even at its mad weakness, in himself. But it was a hard task he had set himself, this one of forcing forgetfulness. The pretty face looked upward from the pages of the book, it seemed. He forgot his resolve, and wandered back into his sad dream-land again. Should he ever speak to her, and listen to her sweet voice in answer? He had almost unconsciously noticed the little hand she had laid upon the pew-door, as she came out, and quite as unconsciously he had seen the pretty, pale-violet glove she wore. What, if the time should come when he held this small-gloved hand in his own? For a second his heart quickened into a heavy pulsation, and then he smiled bitterly. Why, he might hold her hand a thousand times, and she would never know that there was a struggle of fierce love going on under the staid, respectable exterior of her father's curate.

The smile had scarcely faded from his face, when a summons at the door aroused him from his reverie. Perhaps there was a touch of fate in it, that the door's opening, revealed to him the son of his reverend employer, who brought to him a message. Mr. Nugent had returned unexpectedly, and wished to see his curate at once, if he was at home.

He would come at once, the curate answered, taking his hat and gloves from their usual corner, in his grave, methodical way.

A queer, stiff silence was upon both man and boy as they walked together down the respectable street. Noel Lowther was not a favorite among children, for the same reason that he was not a favorite among older people. They could not see deeper than the stiff, uneasy manner which the aristocratic members of St. Mary's described as "unfortunate."

"Mr. Nugent is well, I hope?" he said at length, feeling somewhat nervous under the silence.

"Yes, sir," was the child's answer. To any one else he would have said more, but not to Noel Lowther.

It was a mere trifle, the lightest of trifles, this lack of ease in a child's manner, and yet it struck a dull pang into Noel Lowther's heart. He knew what it meant. He had felt it so often, and it had so often forced upon him the recognition of some strange, unconquerable deficiency in himself. He had tried to understand it, and had

failed; he had tried to conquer it, and had failed so often, and with such a dull despair.

The shadow of these thoughts was upon him when he was ushered into the luxurious stillness of the rector's library. It was very still this evening. He had fancied that the whole house was stiller than usual as he ascended the staircase, and when he entered this room, where he was always received, he saw the reason. A soft-cushioned couch was drawn before the fire, and by this couch the rector was sitting, bending over the cushions, and looking somewhat depressed as he stroked the heap of pretty, bright hair that lay upon them. The curate only saw this pretty, shining hair at his first glance, but his next showed to him the face that it floated back from, and the outline of a slender figure under the soft folds of a scarlet shawl.

A moment more and he was recognized, and had advanced to the fire, and the quiet, girlish eyes were upraised to his.

"Lilies," said the rector, "this is Mr. Lowther. Mr. Lowther, this little girl of mine is not very well."

There were several faint troubled lines on his forehead as he uttered the words, and, in spite of his evident effort to speak lightly, they were very significant lines to his curate, for they revealed an anxiety which defied him with its secret strength.

A slight, quiet hand slipped from beneath the scarlet shawl, and was extended toward the stiff, embarrassed figure, with a few sweet-toned words of welcome; and then the curate of St. Mary's had touched this hand, and released it, and was sitting a few paces from the couch, pale with inward excitement. He had known it would be so. Just a few words of welcome, a sweet, upward glance, and nothing more. He was to her, in her innocent ignorance, only a staid-faced curate, whom she had glanced at, and welcomed, and simply passed by in thought.

It is possible that no other words would have been exchanged between them, beyond these first words of greeting, had they not chanced to be left alone together for a while; and even then there was a long pause before either of them spoke, for Noel Lowther sat silent, stung afresh with the old sense of his deficiency.

"I hope," he faltered at length, "I hope that your indisposition is not very severe—that you are not seriously ill?"

She looked up with a grave curiosity.

"No," she said, smiling faintly. "Not ill—only not very strong."

When Noel Lowther went back to his cold, dull room, and low, dull fire that night, he carried

within his long unawakened heart a fiercely restrained glow of passionate pain. Before his eyes rose constantly the picture of the quiet, rich room, and the slight, girlish figure lying in the fire-glow, with the light touching her pretty bright hair. He could not forget it—the time would never come when it would be forgotten. It was not for him—the innocent, school-girl face. In his maddest mood he could never hope that the dove-eyes would be raised to his with any shadow of deeper feeling than had been in their depths when they smiled upward, and drooped away, and forgot him. She would never know that he would have fallen upon his knees, to have reverently touched the pretty hair with hand or lip. She would never dream this of him—of this quiet, respectable individual, with the staid face. He sneered at himself then, but only at himself.

He paced the floor restlessly for hours that night, and when, by accident, his eyes fell upon the mirror, he started backward at the reflection it showed to him: the face, a dead white; the dark eyes hollow and haggard.

"If she could see me now," he said, sadly. "If she were to see me now, she would be terrified, dear, dove-eyed child."

She would not have understood him, he knew, even if he had, at that moment, dared to bare to her gaze his innermost soul. She was a child, he a man; and he could imagine how she would shrink from him, if she knew the truth, in all its strange, inconsistent details.

A very sad romance was the love-story of the Curate of St. Mary's. No one dreamed of its quiet life; no one would have comprehended it, if they had guessed at its existence: and all its concentrated, hidden force wreaked itself upon the single strength of the man whose secret it was. There was not a line deepened upon his face, perhaps, in the first months that followed the Sabbath, when he listened with such intensity to the sweet voice echoing his words; the methodical figure that passed to and fro, and stood in the pulpit, had not altered one whit; but a terrible, inward change had come upon the man. In the past he had tried to subdue himself to something that was at least the likeness of content—and he had fancied that he had not failed; but now a passionate unrest had come upon him. He could not be content—he was not. A wretched nervousness took possession of him, and he could not overcome its strength. The days went by. But every week he heard the girlish voice, and every week he saw the slight-gloved hand laid upon the pew-door, as the girlish figure passed out, and down the aisle, among

the sea of moving faces. And thus his torture fed upon itself. He was so utter a nothing to her. Scarcely a week passed without his being forced to stand in her father's house; and he never stood there without seeing her, and holding, for a moment, her innocent, unresponsive hand. There was a pile of her school-books in the library, laid away upon one of the shelves in girlish exultation, and the evening she laid them there, business called the curate to the house, and he entered this room to find her standing before the shelf, setting them in order.

It was one of the things that no after years could cause to fade from his memory—this night, and, above all, the moment when the door opened, and showed to him the slight, blue-robed figure, standing in the rich, half-darkness of twilight and fire, the slender arms upraised, as she replaced a book; the pretty, shining hair, tied back, child-fashion, with a blue ribbon. It seemed that he should remember every detail, from shining hair and ribbon-bow, to the simple little ruffles of white lace around her throat and wrists; even the very pose of the instant in which she turned her fair, tranquil young face to greet him.

"I am putting away my school-books, Mr. Lowther," she said. "They are done with now, quite, and I thought I would put them here, where I can see them every day, and not forget them altogether."

It seemed as though a faint pang struck him. She was laying them away forever, and with them the childhood that was so soon to be of the past alone. What was she burying? What dreams were shut in between the closed pages, that might never be aught but dreamings—mockery?

"You do not wish to forget them?" he said aloud, feeling nervously uncertain as to whether he was speaking steadily or not. She answered him with the sweet seriousness habitual to her, touched withal, at this moment, with that shadow of innocent curiousness, for he did not speak steadily. He rarely did speak steadily to her, and his wretchedness of unrest always brought its own wretched shadow of constraint.

"No," she said, speaking slowly, and letting her hand rest upon the shelf, with a lingering touch. "Not forget them. I hardly know why," a half-sad thoughtfulness hovering about her voice. "But I don't want to forget them quite. I think if I did, it would seem a little like—Death."

They had never exchanged as many words before; and, simple as they were, Noel Lowther

clung to them in after years as a memory, and held with the mad passion of despair to the tender echo of her voice. There were hours then when the simple words seemed fraught with a meaning, and when the unconscious touch of sadness seemed to have been almost prophetic.

His last remembrance of her that night was his memory of seeing her stand at the head of the broad stair-case as he went out. She had come out of the library to deliver an added message from her father, and, having delivered it, stood there a moment, one hand resting upon the balustrade, watching him, half-unconsciously, it appeared, the swinging hall-lamp concentrating its full flood of light upon her quiet, blue-robed figure, and pretty, bright hair. Such a serene, maidenly young figure it was; such a pure personification of girlishness, that the very sight of her innocent face was a fresh pang to him.

And so, for the Curate of St. Mary's, the days went on. There was no change in their steady, onward passing—no hope of change. But there came a change at last in the staid, commonplace face. The few people who noticed it most saw it, and wondered at it carelessly; but no one of them understood its meaning. It was such a slight change, after all. Only a little added salowness, and a greater heaviness of the eyes; but it had grown out of the intolerable unrest of wretched days, and the ceaseless passings to and fro of sleepless nights, of which the dingy walls of the small parlor might have told their own story. There had even been nights, too, when the dull, little room had not confined these sleepless paces, and when the stone-pavement before the rector's house might have told its story.

Though there were many fair women in the human tide that flowed down the carpeted aisle each Sunday at St. Mary's, there was not one with the radiant, untouched loveliness of this girl-woman. There were men and women who watched for, and loved her, for the simple sake of her rare beauty, and there were none who passed it by unnoticed.

"A pretty child," said one of these watchers one day, as he chanced to be talking to the curate. "Only a child, though, as yet. When she is a woman——!" And he shrugged his indolent shoulders, in careless admiration, for this was but a pretty girl to him, after all, not one of God's angels, as she seemed to the pale-faced, breathless creature who listened.

But one night the door of the rector's pew opened, and the hand in the small, pale-violet

glove did not close it, nor the slight, graceful, girlish figure pass out. Lilius was not well, the rector said to his curate, when they met in the vestry. She had not seemed strong of late—he scarcely knew why. Well, the truth was, she never had been strong; and then the faint lines showed themselves again upon his forehead.

Not strong! This was what he said at night; but the next day there floated to Noel Lowther a darkened cloud. She was ill, dangerously. The long night-hours had brought forth this much, that there was no vague anxiety, but a terrible, agonizing fear, in the hearts of those who watched about the pillow where the sweet face rested in unresponsive silence.

Among the many who raised the muffled knocker at the rector's house, that day, came the methodical figure of the curate, who made his few, stiff inquiries, in his usual constrained manner. He had heard that a member of the family was unwell, and so had stopped on his way home, to inquire as to their progress. This was all; but his mediocre face was pale, in its sallow way, and when the servant replied to his question, it became paler still. The invalid was not better, indeed was even worse; and then the woman who gave the answer stood for a moment, looking in uncertain wonder at the odd change which had come over the caller. His pallor had become actually ghastly, and, as he hesitated, he was constrained to remove, with his handkerchief the slight moisture which stood upon his white, upper lip, even on this chilly November day.

"I am—very sorry to—to hear this," he faltered, hoarsely, at last. "I did not imagine there was any danger. I— She is so young. Perhaps there will be a change for the better to-night. I hope so. I will call again in the morning." And then he turned hurriedly away.

Through the slowly dragging hours of that sad winter night, a light burned steadily in one window of the rectory, and inside the room its brightness fell upon a shining, tumbled mass of pretty hair, forming a halo about an innocent face upon the pillow; and the watchers who moved noiselessly to and fro, turned back to this pillow always, whatever might have been the task, they left it to perform; and every time they turned to it anew, their wearied eyes bore a fresh shadow of anxious fear. They lifted the quiet, little hand sometimes, and held it for a moment; they bent and kissed the white brow; they touched the shining hair with a touch whose very lightness was an agonized caress; but in their fear and grief, not one of them dreamed that there might be near them other watchers than them-

selves. And yet if one of them had but raised the curtain for a moment, and glanced down into the cold darkness of the street below, she would have seen another watcher—a watcher, of whose despairing dread they knew nothing, but who watched with them, nevertheless. They would have seen a solitary figure pacing to and fro in the dimness, sometimes on one side of the street, sometimes on the other, but always pacing before the lighted window, and never leaving it to go far into the shadow beyond. They would have known nothing of the wild passion of unrest that ruled this watcher's tortured breast; they would have known nothing of the wild appeals that were going up to the Mercy Seat from his wretched soul; they would have known nothing of the voiceless moan his dumb despair was making; but they would have seen that a solitary man watched with them, and, perhaps, those who had seen the watching form before, might have recognized in it the Curate of St. Mary's. They might have seen this figure any night of the many that the light fell in subdued, prophetic dimness upon the bright, fair hair upon the pillow, and they might have seen it any morning of the many that Noel Lowther called to make his methodically-worded, constrained inquiries; but their hearts were so bound within the four walls of the dim room, that not one of them had even the lightest shadow of a thought of its nearness, even when the end came to them, and he shared it with them.

And this was the end. One night as this watcher paced before the glimmering window, he stopped suddenly in his walk, and, standing upon the pavement, looked up—up at the dimly-lighted room. There seemed to be a sudden confusion in the chamber. The street was so still in its midnight quiet that he could hear the hurried pacing of feet, and through the lace curtains he saw figures moving about. Then came the sound of opened doors, and the glimmering of lights in other rooms; and, before many minutes had passed, there were other hurried figures in the chamber where the midnight lamp had burned so long, and then—

He looked up, in the blind purposelessness of desperation; he stood still, laboring for breath, and, in a moment more, he had uncovered his head, almost unconsciously, and waited, dumbly looking upward, with the night air blowing on his damp, bare brow, and white, stricken, upturned face. There was silence in the room now—a strange, solemn silence. Ah, my friends! there is only one silence such as this—only one—the silence that falls upon us when we wait—wait and watch the slow change creeping up upon

the cold face, and stand beneath the shadow of the wings of Death.

And in the still street, below the glimmering window, the silence fell upon the outer watcher, too. He stood outside—he had stood outside all his dull, weary life. A wall of stone was between him and this death-room—a wall of stone had been between him and all human breasts all his life before. There are no words to tell the whole of this man's silent agony; there are no words to tell the whole truth, and show it as it was—as it was in all its height, and breadth, and depth. The innocent life had been so far beyond him; it had been so utterly apart from his, he had never entered into it for one breath's space; he never even stood upon the threshold of its brightness; he had never gained from it a thought or glance, that might have comforted him now. The whole world had stood between them before; the curse of his own dull mediocrity had stood between them—he was not as other men. And now here was death, and he who had suffered the agony of death in life, stood outside, in the chill of the winter's night, and watched the dim light in the window of the room where she lay dying—this girl, this child-woman, whose school-books lay upon the shelf, only a few feet from her death-bed. He waited there; he stood there silent, and deathly faced, for two long hours—for so long the silence reigned, deep and profound. Then he turned away.

There was nothing more for him to do; no more watching, no more waiting. The silence was broken at last, and he who had stood without so long, need stand without no longer. It was over. There was a light moving of the hurried feet again; the window was thrown wide open to the night air, and from the room within floated down to the listener, low, passionate cries, and the murmur of comforting, weeping voices. There was no more to do. Even now he might be observed—and what right had he to watch with them? So, from the dim light, which might have been the glimmering of hope for him, he turned away, and passed into the shadow—into the shadow of despair—into the shadow of death.

There was a knot of crape on the door the next morning, when the staid, respectable figure stood there, and the servant who replied to his summons met his glance with eyes heavy with weeping.

"It is useless to ask," he said, in the strange, breathless way the woman had noticed before. "She is——" And he stopped, and pointed with a mute gesture at the crape upon the door.

"Dead!" was the low-spoken answer. "Yes, sir; last night!"

He passed into the house without another word. He had the right there now. They would expect him. Dead! Yes; he had known that hours ago; and yet he had not taught himself to believe it anything but a torturing dream. Dead! with the golden vista of pure, happy life before her, and the school-books only just laid aside in the room beyond. Dead—silent—cold; the sweet face settled into unanswering marble, the luxuriance of pretty, bright hair, floating back from its fairness, with a touch of heaven's own glory caught in its meshes, to tell of the halo that shone about it now.

He stood in the mysterious dimness before the marble presence at last. The closed blinds shut out all life, it seemed, and the soft gloom was Death's shadow. There was only one thing in the room to this man, the slender, black casket; wherein rested the lost jewel—Life's purest pearl in Death's setting of ebony. The pure cheek rested against the softly-rising pillow of satin; the bright hair flowed softly over it; fair flowers lay in the fairer hands. He had no right to weep. He had been so far apart from her life, and he was so far apart from her innocent, dead body. He stood at the casket's side, and looked down in the utter silence of agony. He had never hoped to wake her to a realization of his man-love; but life's despair was not the despair of death, the dumb pang of looking down upon her sweet, dead face. There was only for him this silence, and this last look. A flower had fallen from its place, and he took it up reverently, and laid it back, near the soft, white cheek, and so dared to touch it. It was despair's fiercest throe, his last farewell—his last. And then he turned away, just as he had turned away in the stillness of the midnight-watch. He passed down the stair-case, where her bright, blue-robed figure had stood, as she looked down at him. He passed out of the door, and into the fast darkening street. The dull room waited for him beyond, the dingy walls, and the old torture of the leaden groove of labor. And to this he went, with his memory of the fair, dead face, in its setting of gold; with the memory of the words the sweet, young voice had uttered, and the echoes had caught up, and carried into the vaulted roof.

"Oh, Lamb of God! who takest away the sins of the world!"

"Grant us thy peace."

"Oh, Lamb of God! who takest away the sins of the world!"

"Have mercy upon us."