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## Ruth Bergen's Limitations



# Ruth Bergen's Limitations

A Modern  
Auto-da-Fe

BY

MARION HARLAND

*Terhone, Mary Virginia (Harland)*



New York Chicago Toronto

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## Prologue

I, who write this true story, am neither theologian nor logician. Therefore I have no disposition to lend an officious laical finger to the composition of the lordly dish to be set presently before King Public by theological pundits and logical critics.

Nor do I obtrude the subject of my story, —who was in no wise a heroine—upon the notice of my reader, as a type of a class, large or limited. This is biography, not fiction. The obligation to write it is laid upon me by a great compassion which I cannot resist. If a lesson goes with the telling, it is for those who read to find and to apply it.

*New York, 1897.*      MARION HARLAND.



## Ruth Bergen's Limitations

### I

#### AN OLD-FAITH GIRL

IN Connecticut, New Jersey or Minnesota, Briardale would have been a Borough. It had outgrown the chrysalid of the hamlet and the larva of the village without attaining to the light and life of the town. Built several miles back from the river and upon a spur of a great railway, it could not be commercial. Although cuddled by hills that leap up into mountains just beyond the township limits, it has nothing that would make it a fashionable resort, unless accident or the caprice of a millionaire or two were to break up the order of nature and conservatism *à la Hollandaise*. The oldest families in the place lived in houses that were originally the objective points of extensive plan-

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tations, then, as the population increased, of farmsteads, becoming, at last, the residences of burghers whose "grounds" meant ornamental lawns and kitchen gardens.

Garrett Bergen was a leading man in Briardale. The woolen mills of Bergen & Craig had contributed more than any other single industry to the growth and prosperity of the inland community. Mr. Bergen's great-great-grandfather had held thousands of acres between and upon these hills, as a grant from the crown. His great-grandfather had deeded for that purpose the land on which the Reformed Dutch church of Briardale was built. To his father's liberality was due the fact that the commodious stone edifice in which the congregation now worshipped the GOD of their fathers, was the handsomest church within a radius of twenty miles from the green square in which it stood. Garrett Bergen had held the office of elder there for thirty years, and for twenty had been Superintendent of the Sun-

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day School. His only living son was a lad of ten, at the date of my chronicle, and he had three married daughters. The fourth and youngest girl, Ruth, was engaged at eighteen, after an eight years' courtship, to Robert Craig, the son of Mr. Bergen's partner. Robert was then a senior in Rutgers College. After his graduation he entered, at his own wish, an undenominational Theological Seminary, within reasonable visiting distance of his native place and his betrothed.

The combination of the young peoples' destinies was entirely acceptable to both families. Elder Bergen and Deacon Craig exchanged congratulations in gruff and guarded fashion after the manner of men, over business papers, upon the fact that "family affairs seemed, on the whole, to be shaping themselves very sensibly," and the father of the inchoate divine returned thanks at the family altar, and in the Thursday evening prayer-meeting, that the GOD of

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the Covenant was faithful to His promises to those who put their trust in Him and brought up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. It was an open church-secret that Robert, Mr. Craig's eldest-born, was dedicated by his parents to the work of the ministry while in the cradle, and had narrowly escaped the name of Samuel.

Mrs. Craig discoursed, cheerfully and tearfully, of the auspicious betrothal to her most intimate neighbor, Mrs. Bergen.

"It does seem as if none of us had ought to doubt the leadings of Providence now that my Robert is called to the ministry, and your Ruth is going to be a minister's wife," was the application of her "remarks." "If ever a girl was cut out for that place in the Lord's vineyard, it's her. They're a pair of chosen vessels,—there's no manner of doubt of that, and foreordained for one another. Such matches don't happen. They are the Lord's work and marvellous in unbelieving eyes."

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Ruth had no misgiving as to so much of her future as depended upon Robert's ability and intention to make her happy. She had acknowledged this to him, many times and in divers ways in reply to loverly questionings. She said it, voluntarily, one Saturday evening in May, when, as was his custom, he had come home for the Sabbath.

To the betrothed couple was assigned the back parlor on these hebdomadal visits. It was a large, square, low-browed room, overlooking the garden through the back windows. The Bergens were not more provincial than their neighbors, and this apartment was a fair sample of the best room in the best houses of Briardale. In the pattern of the carpet, blue and scarlet roses alternated with fine impartiality and a just disregard of possibilities in the matter of natural growth. The wall-paper had a great (and expensive) deal of gilt in it; the old mahogany furniture—rich and ripe with fullness of years that had driven the color down into

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the heart of the wood, where it gleamed as though seen at the bottom of a tankard of old port,—had been re-covered last winter with brocaded plush, selected by Mrs. Bergen. The color just missed being carmine because it came so near being magenta. It put the mahogany hopelessly out of countenance, but as Ruth was the only one of the household who suspected this, little harm was done. The square piano was bought when Anneke, the eldest daughter, began "to take music" thirty years ago. The three tall glass shades on the mantel, the one in the middle protecting a gilt clock, the others match vases filled with artificial flowers made by Charlotte, the second girl, belonged to the same era. The portrait of Cornelius Bergen, the founder of the family in the New World, hung above the clock, just below the ceiling; that of the present owner of the homestead and the likeness of his wife, taken shortly after their marriage, occupied the niches on each side of the

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chimney. Other pictures, large and small,—a couple of cheap landscapes in oil, a costly, —if time and toil were considered—picture of Hagar in the Wilderness, wrought in colored silks by Garrett Bergen's mother; an engraving of Hope and Memory; a lithograph of The Angelus, and various family photographs were disposed between ceiling and the chair-board below which the walls were wainscoted. A mahogany bookcase with small paned glass doors, stood between the windows. The contents were mainly historical, memoir-ial and religious. On the shelf devoted to fiction were *The Wide, Wide World*, *Melbourne House*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Schonberg-Cotta Family*, *Ester Reid*, *The Prince of the House of David*, *Stepping Heavenward* and four of the *Elsie Dinsmore Series*.

I describe this room and would convey a whiff of the atmosphere in which Ruth Bergen was born and had lived from babyhood, because these tell for much in her character

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and history. She had, it is true, spent two terms in a New York school, but her home while there was with a married sister whose husband was in business in that city, and she was in Briardale from Friday evening to Monday morning of each week. Her Sunday School class was prominent on her list of duties, and she preferred her pastor's sermons to those of the "big preachers" of the metropolis. She was esteemed a "rather pretty girl" by her acquaintances. The qualifying word would have seemed invidious to one seeing her for the first time on this evening. She was twenty-two years of age, with the still unformed figure of a girl of fifteen. Her chest was flat and her shoulders sloped sharply from their junction with the neck. The gown she wore remedied these defects to the beholder's eye. She had made it herself and exultantly announced the fact to her lover. All ministers were poor, according to her showing—or ought to be. Their wives ought, assuredly, to study and to



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practice economy. She had taken lessons in dressmaking privately, running down to New York once a week for the purpose, for two months and more.

“But I made this myself—every stitch—and here at home. Even mother did not see it until tea time this evening. Aren’t you just a little bit proud of me?” she had said, making a bewitching pretence of strutting up and down the room, turning her head over her shoulder to see how the back-breadths hung, and picking at the fullness of the upper parts of the sleeves with professional touches of her deft fingers.

The gown was of soft woolen stuff, creamy white, and falling naturally into generous folds in the skirt and in the full, round waist girdled by a silken sash, also cream white, with broad bows at the back. She looked almost plump and undeniably graceful. A bunch of cinnamon roses was in her corsage and her cheeks had caught color from them. She wound up the exhibition by a little

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whirl upon her toes that came near being a pirouette and which surprised her full skirt into sinuous swirls, dipped dexterously under the arm that would have caught her, and was straightway as demure as a nun.

“That’s enough of nonsense for one evening,” she declared with a resumption of her habitual decorum and speaking like a matron of twice her years. “Saturday evening, too! I am ashamed of us both. I think the Spring weather has got into my head—and my heels.”

Yet it was a good hour later when she brought out her Bible and “Lesson Paper,” and asked Robert’s assistance in preparing for to-morrow’s class. She looked grave, but none the less happy—Robert thought her prettier—than when the frolicsome mood had possessed her, as she glanced up at him from her low chair under the centre-table lamp. Her hair was light chestnut and the semi-pirouette had separated the natural waves into fluffy rings. As Robert contemplated them

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from one particular point of view they had a nimbus effect about the pure face. Her gray eyes showed soft and clear under long lashes. Her betrothed could not have recalled if he had tried—which he did not think of doing—a moment of his twenty-four years of conscious existence in the which he had been better satisfied with her, with his lot in life and with himself, than he was now.

Robert Craig's eyes were black and well-rounded; his hair and neat moustache were likewise black; his fine teeth made a pleasant gleam between red lips that parted readily in smiling speech. He had an intelligent face and an easy address that made him popular wherever he went. He loved Ruth Bergen sincerely—he would have said, devotedly. He also loved his profession and honestly meant to quit himself like a man in it. His devotion to Robert Van Wyck Craig, who would be a "Reverend" in thirteen months, and a D. D. in ten years, or

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less, was above doubt as to genuineness and degree. He was the first college-bred man in the Craig family. That tells the whole story to those who have made self-made men and their kindred a study.

I like to think of Ruth as she looked and behaved that evening. The sweet humility and delicate spiciness of the old-fashioned spring roses had affinity with the honesty of belief and rectitude of purpose, the singleness of faith in her GOD, the loyalty to her lover, the artlessness of happiness, that informed her nature. These characteristics were Herself. Beyond these, and a fair share of sterling common sense inherited from her father, there was little in her that was not commonplace. Robert had enjoyed her little outburst of girlish gayety to-night the more because it was unusual. She was uniformly cheerful and never morbid, but, as he had often told her, in tender chiding, she took life too seriously. Sometimes he named her his "quaint little saint." Had she found

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and used the key to the "Little Green Door" of Miss Wilkins's charming fantasy, and walked, just as she was, into a New England Puritan household of 1696, she would have been comfortably at home. By the time she was six years old she knew the Apostles' Creed, the Golden Rule, the Ten Commandments and the first sixteen verses of the fifth chapter of Matthew. At ten, she was awarded a prize Reference Bible—an Oxford Edition—for reciting, without once tripping or faltering, the whole of The Shorter Catechism. This Bible she had read through every year since that Anniversary-Sabbath, never skipping one of the Sons of Levi, or slurring over a chapter of molten brass or a moan of Lamentations. Three chapters on each working day and five on Sunday, brought her through at an easy pace and invariably, on December thirty-first. After saying her prayers that night with especial fervency, she slipped the ribbon bookmark with "GOD IS LOVE," em-

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broidered upon it, back to the first chapter of Genesis, and fell to work upon it in good heart on New Year's Day. She read one—sometimes two—chapters before leaving her room for the breakfast table. Perhaps it would not be an actual sin to read a secular sentence the first thing in the morning, but she never did. She told Robert once, shyly, of her feeling that even a few verses sanctified the new day. It would be surprising, if it were not natural, she added yet more timidly—like one who lifts a corner of the cloth covering the sacramental board—how often the lesson for the morning was exactly what she most needed.

Upon her sixteenth birthday a class was assigned to her and she became a teacher in the Sunday School in which she had sat as a pupil from the day of her enrollment in the Infant Department,—a sedate little tot of three. She was an active member of the Society of Christian Endeavor—no idle title so far as she was concerned—a King's

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Daughter who lived earnestly and meekly up to her pledge to walk and to work "In His Name." Happy, sincere and useful, she found her sphere as wide and as high as she could have desired. When Robert Craig decided to enter the Theological Seminary, she was almost terrified at thought of the sacred eminence awaiting her as a pastor's wife. For days thereafter, she went quietly through her round of simple duties with a look upon her young face that actually awed her parents—a look of tender joy, of profound humility, of high resolve, she had no words to express. It was like—" *Be it unto me according to Thy word.*"

This was not her first excursion into the realm indicated by the Lesson Paper dated "*May 16th.*" She was too conscientious to scamp a religious duty. Her habit was to make a note of such points as were not clear to her, and to seek illumination from Robert during his Saturday evening visit.

The lesson for the morrow, as she had

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abundant cause to recollect forever, was the twelfth chapter of Matthew, from the thirty-eighth to the fiftieth verses inclusive. She had consulted the Book of Jonah in obedience to marginal references, and appealed to her betrothed for information as to the city of Nineveh. His sketch of her history, overthrow and antiquities, was hardly love-talk, but the softly shining eyes rested admiringly upon his face while the lecture was in progress. When he ceased to speak, she caught his hand and laid, first, her flushed cheek, then a kiss, within the palm, in a modest ecstasy of adoration.

“Oh!” she sighed, rapturously. “How much you know, and how good and handsome you are! and I am afraid that I love you better than I love my own soul.”

Robert stooped to the tremulous lips and patted her head benevolently and indulgently before deprecating the imputation of milk-white saintliness which, for reasons occult to the simpler sex, is no more flat-



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tering to men of his profession than to the laity.

“That shows how little you know of naughty human nature, my sweet. I am the chief of sinners except in my love for the dearest girl in the universe, who is a thousand times too good for me, or for any other coarse-fibred man.” Holding her in the hollow of his left arm, he picked up the Bible that had slidden to the floor from her lap.

“We will make an end of business before talking of our own affairs. Leaving profane for religious romance, have you any questions to ask about Jack-and-the-bean-stalk, alias Jonah-and-the-gourd?”

Accustomed, as a divinity-student, to handle Scripture as a carpenter takes hold of plane and adze, he did not at once interpret the shocked pallor of the upraised face.

“O, Robert!”

“What is it, dear?”

“You startled me a little—that’s all! I know you didn’t mean to say that. You

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would be the last person in the world to speak lightly of GOD'S WORD."

Robert pulled down the waistcoat that already showed an inclination in cut toward the strait-breasted vestment which would, ere long, cover his consecrated heart. He swallowed something he analyzed as a foolish scruple, before replying. There was to be a time in his future when he would recall sensation and effort, and the memory would salve remorse.

"You are right there, dear child—when I am assured that it *is* the Word of GOD."

"But the Bible is that, Robert!"

Even then,—or so he would fain have persuaded himself in that remorseful after-time—he would have let the matter drop, but for a touch of prim severity in her tone and look that irked his manly sense of superiority to censure or schooling from his neophyte. True, Ruth had not yet been told that his thesis upon "*The Authors of the Alleged Prophecy of Isaiah*," had been but

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yesterday commended by his Professor of Biblical Theology as "thoughtful and suggestive." Still, she knew him for her senior in years, her master in mind and her prospective husband. Furthermore,—the chain of thought-lightning reaching fast and far—as the wife of a man of advanced thought, she must be lifted out of her limitations. She was a dear girl and a sensible, or she would not appreciate him so thoroughly. But Briardale was a stunted twig of Christendom. The rocky ramparts and the Dutch element in the settlement had kept from it even the knowledge of the world's forward march. The tone of the community was essentially provincial and in nothing more provincial and slow than in religion. Ruth was capable of better things. He would educate her up to them.

All this was thought out so consecutively and rapidly that, if his companion noted his hesitation it went naturally with the tug to his waistcoat which she had already observed

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had one more button and showed less of his shirt-front than had the garment discarded for this.

“You refer to King James’s version of the, then, so-called Canon of the Holy Scriptures, dear child. It was translated three hundred years ago ‘out of the Original sacred Tongues’ as the address to the ‘most dread Sovereign’ sets forth,”—opening her Bible at the introductory pages—“by learned men of that time. The scholars of to-day have more learning than they, and other sources of knowledge—ancient manuscripts and the like—of which those early translators were ignorant. So we are finding out new things about the Bible every day.”

He chose everyday modes of speech in concession to her limitations. The alarmed gaze of the gray eyes made him uncomfortable. He must allay her fears before she could be enlightened.

“Yes, Robert, dear, but they can’t find out that any part of it isn’t true, because it

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is GOD'S Word. All the learned men in the world can't do away with that."

He put his hand upon the fingers spread over the open page. They were tense and cold, and he felt that they pressed the book hard.

"Little one! let me tell you a story"—playfully tender. "Once upon a time,—more than two thousand years ago—a sibyl, (that is a sort of prophetess, you know) brought a book to the King of Rome and offered to sell it to him at a large price. When he refused to buy it she tore out a handful of leaves, burned them before his eyes, and went away. The next day she was at court again and wanted the same price she had asked before, although so many leaves were gone. The king would not listen to her. She burned another handful of leaves and went her way. On the third day she was there once more, demanding the same price for what was left that she had asked for the whole. Then, the king consulted the

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wise men, the augurs. They told him that he ought to have bought the book at the woman's price in the first place, and, by all means, to secure what was left.

“That is the fable of The Sibyl's Leaves. Now, what is called The Higher Biblical Criticism has done to the Bible what the Sibyl did to that book, with one very important difference. It has torn out and thrown aside doubtful and worthless matter, burned away the dross from the pure gold of Revelation, and claims for what is left the same price, that is, the same tribute of reverence and love, that used to be given to the Old Bible.”

If Robert Van Wyck Craig had ever had misgivings as to the genuineness of his call to preach, they would have been swept away by the tide of complacent surprise that flowed in, upon, and over him, with the delivery of this little speech. The anecdote was an inspiration. So apt was it, so cogent and so elegant in finish, that he docketed it mentally

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for future use. He experienced a fleeting pang of regret that the inspiration had not been "on time," that it might have been incorporated in his thesis. But there would be other and finer opportunities, as there would be other and finer audiences. He was, next, aware of a distinct disappointment that no glimmer of admiration relieved the shocked pallor of which he began to be impatient. The tight, chilled fingers did not yield themselves to his fondling. Indeed their owner seemed not to be aware that they were caressed. Her lips were lax when she would have formed words, and she put up her left hand to press them into steadiness.

"They ought to be *very* sure what they are doing," she said, in her commonplace phraseology, but solemnly. "There ought not to be any doubt whatever. It is an awful thing to add to anything, or take away from anything that is written in this Book. You remember what St. John says of that

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sin in the last chapter of Revelations. I heard Dr. Van Saun say once that it seemed as if, when the Spirit had dictated everything else to St. John, He held the Book open for a few moments longer on purpose to put that warning there.

“If I had the wisdom of Solomon and the learning of all the colleges and seminaries in the world, I should not dare to leave out one word. No! not so much as the dotting of an *i* or the crossing of a *t*. It would be like laying your hand upon the Ark of the Lord.”

“My precious child!” As the sense of exasperation grew he studied to make his address affectionate, as his mother used to wrap his pill in scraped apple and bury his powders in jam. “Do you know that all that is rank superstition? that you are a Bibliolater—a blind worshiper of the Bible? Instead of looking upon this”—tapping the cover—“as a mere book—paper, print and binding, and nothing more in and of itself—



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you throw a sort of halo about it, and handle it as a Roman Catholic handles her crucifix or her scapula. That is sheer folly, a Protestant phase of idolatry that I am sorry to say is encouraged, instead of rebuked, by many preachers and Sunday School teachers, especially in our branch of the Church.”

Ruth was motionless. Her downcast eyes were upon the book in her lap. Her heart beat hurriedly against her lover's enfolding arm. Her features were cut out of sallow marble. The effect was not becoming. He had never surmised until now what the obstinacy of an amiable woman might be like. He must not lose his temper in the warmth of the one-sided argument. He threw another parallel forward, in judicial cheerfulness.

“Here, for example is this story of Jonah,” —with a little laugh. “Poor Jonah! Everybody has a shy at him, and really the tale is undignified enough to justify a joke. Scholars have long been divided in opinion as to

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whether it is a history, or a parable. It seems most natural to regard the book as an allegory, the materials for the narrative being derived from the symbolical language employed by earlier prophets, chiefly that of Jeremiah."

Involuntarily he made this a sustained recitative, and Ruth gained the impression that he quoted verbatim, doubtless from one of the learned men aforesaid.

"If Jonah were a real personage and the people of Nineveh were converted by his preaching, that conversion can only have been temporary, as may be clearly perceived from what we read in the prophets concerning the inhabitants of that city. In short"—relapsing into a colloquial vein—"they fell speedily and permanently from grace. The best authorities now agree that the book is a fiction and so absurd throughout that the lovers of the winnowed Scriptures may rejoice together that it is thrown out of the canon. I, for one, prefer to class it with

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Jack-and-the-bean-stalk rather than insult the intelligence of educated Christians by insisting upon a whale capable of swallowing a prophet whole, and a prophet capable of remaining alive for three days between the monster's ribs, and level-headed enough to compose a psalm in such confined quarters, (which psalm, by the way, is mainly made up of other psalms, many of a late, and even post-exilic date)—finally of tickling the whale's diaphragm to make him cast the prophet out upon the land."

He stopped to laugh. Ruth's gravity did not relax. A crease showed between her eyebrows. Her voice was harder, and the sub-tone of prim severity more evident.

"But Robert, that was a miracle. Nobody pretends that it was anything else."

The lover held himself in by main force and by a palpable exercise of Christian forbearance. His recitative was hortatory.

"My darling girl, the miracles of the Bible were the work of GOD, either by direct

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divine energy, or mediately through holy men, energized to perform them. There is no reason why we should claim that they in any way violate the laws of nature, or disturb its harmonies. We ought not to be disturbed by the efforts of scholars to explain them under the forms of divine law, in accordance with the order of Nature."

Letting himself down again to the auditor's intellectual level, he pursued ;—"The whale episode was an outrage upon natural laws  
——"

He dropped his arm from her waist and pushed his chair a few inches away from hers at the sound of footsteps in the hall. Ruth slipped out through the front parlor, as her father entered the back parlor door.

The *tête-à-tête* was over for the evening.

## II

### “WOOD, HAY, STUBBLE.”

ROBERT CRAIG was in dutiful waiting for his betrothed next day at the church-door when the congregation streamed out into the open air.

The day was a poem of tender color and subtle perfume, and sunlight strained through the atmosphere of fifteen perfect May noons. The hum of multitudinous bees in the two gigantic lindens flanking the church-porch, planted by the second Cornelius Bergen's own hands, was audible to the worshipers in the pauses of the services. Old residents liked the accompaniment to prayer and sermon, and told stranger-visitors how three generations had listened to the same. The gardens on both sides of the crooked street blazed with tulips and narcissus and gave up royally the breath of warmed hyacinth and

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violet-beds. Pale-purple swaths of wistaria hid the front of the parsonage next door to the church. Every feathered creature that knew a note of music exploited it in the elms and maples bordering the highways.

Our young theologian had made himself smarter than his well-set up wont, in a Prince Albert coat with indications of coming dignities in the lines of lappels and collar, and closed over the chest as far as buttons and buttonholes went. His trousers were gray, the creases sharp from the tailor's iron. Upon the left lappel of the Prince Albert were two sprays of lilies-of-the-valley, minus the green leaves. Our hero was up in the minutest details of fashionable costume. His tall silk hat sat squarely upon his classic head. In mood and tense he was as well set-up as in figure, and in temper as mellow as the weather. His was a sweet nature, and the trifling irritation excited by Ruth's backwardness in receiving into a good and honest mind the advanced views he had embraced

## “ Wood, Hay, Stubble ”

with enthusiasm, seemed petty and ungenerous when he thought it over. The blessèd child could not help being narrow. Briardale was a cold frame, in which orthodoxy was cultivated after the manner of the forefathers. It was rooted and grounded in Dutch soil, which is notoriously intractable to critical extractives and imported fertilizers. What but slowness of intellectual understanding could be expected of Elder Bergen's daughter and Dominie Van Saun's pet parishioner? Dominie Van Saun, who believed in the literal resurrection of the human body, and who had sturdily asserted, two Sundays ago, that, while he did not declare that the world was created in six days of twenty-four hours each, he was prepared to say that GOD could have done this if He had pleased so to do !

The amused smile still lighted his eyes as he lifted his hat and fell into step with Ruth on the church-steps. She met it with a pretty blush and responsive smile. The

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slight shadow that had overhung her during the latter part of last evening had departed. He had not known that he was depressed by it until his heart bounded anew at missing it.

“How charming you are to-day!” He uttered it in sincere warmth when they had freed themselves from the crowd by taking the first turning. The side-street did not lead directly toward Ruth's home, but that counted for nothing.

The glance of proprietorial approval covered the costume that helped to render his betrothed charming. Her tailor-made gown and jacket were of some magical material that was a cool gray in the shade and a yet cooler blue in the sunshine; her white sailor hat was banded with ribbon of the same shades; she carried in a gray-gloved hand a great bunch of white lilaes. To dispel the trifling confusion caused by the compliment, she held them up for Robert to see and to smell.



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“ If you want to see something *really* charming, there it is! Jenny Hulst gave them to me just now. She is one of my girls, you know, and about the brightest I have. And that reminds me, Robert, of something I thought of in the middle of the night.”

She looked away from him, feigning interest in a close-clipped privet hedge on her side of the walk. She even plucked a cluster of the white blooms, making commas of dainty sniffs at them, while she talked.

“ You see, after you went away, I got to thinking of what we had been talking about, and I couldn't get to sleep for ever so long. The ideas you had given me were so new and strange, you know—and the more I thought the more—*dreadful*—they were. I have been trained to believe every single word in the Bible. One of the first texts I learned by heart was “ All Scripture is given by inspiration of GOD.” I recollected that, and “ Search the Scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and these are they that

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testify of me"—oh, and ever so many more of the same kind. Wasn't it odd that I couldn't think of one of them while you were talking to me, although I tried hard? I think, maybe," averting her face still more and getting over the words in a nervous flutter—"that saying my prayers had something to do with bringing them to my mind. Anyway, while I was lying awake and trying to make it all plain to myself, a thought came to me all at once, as distinctly as if I had read it on the wall where the moonlight was shining. It was that the story of Jonah couldn't be a fiction, or Our Saviour would not have referred to it. And the people of Nineveh must have repented at the preaching of Jonah, for He says so in so many words. He never made a mistake. It sounds very conceited in me to set up my opinion against yours and the discoveries of all those learned scholars,—but I don't think that answer was of my making. I really believe that it was *sent* to me."

## “ Wood, Hay, Stubble ”

The tears arose so near to the fluttering voice that she checked it for an instant, then went on bravely ;—

“It was like a message from heaven. I thanked GOD for it and—I couldn’t help crying a little—I was so happy. Then another text came to me; ‘Great peace have they that love Thy law.’ I never understood what it meant, and *all* it meant until that minute. I fell asleep repeating it to myself. And I haven’t been unhappy, or worried, since.”

The corners of her auditor’s mouth had twitched several times during the artless tale. Her perturbation was bewitching in itself, and the color suffusing the cheek which was all she let him see, was the precise shade of an oleander blossom with a sun-ray shimmering through it. What appealed to his sense of humor was her conviction that she had introduced the topic adroitly, when he saw, from the instant she said—“ And that reminds me—” the train she had laid for his

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discomfiture. And how mercifully and modestly she had dealt with him and other higher critics! Transparent, little, *bungling* angel!

When she ventured to glance around to see how he was bearing her broadside, she met a pair of fine eyes brimming with loving amusement. The same was in his accents, mixed up with a something else which she was too unversed in the workings of the theological mind to recognize as the mildly supercilious patronage the man of GOD feels for the amateur who trenches upon sacerdotal preserves.

“My beloved—*infant!*” He tried to summon another epithet, but this was importunate. “You are angelically sweet to drop me so gently when your knock-downer might have stunned me and made an end of my poor attempts at higher criticism. I don't like to detract from the comfort you got out of your meditations upon your bed in the night-watches. I am sorry that you had a

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hard time getting to sleep. Jonah, with Nineveh to boot, wasn't worth it. And I am glad that something quieted you at last. If an angel brought the sleeping draught, I bless him for it. But, my darling, I'm afraid we poor students and critics of Holy Writ can hardly accept your conclusion of the whole matter. Christ alluded to Jonah and the whale as a fable with which the common people were familiar. He also said—‘Ye cannot serve GOD and Mammon.’ Now, Mammon, Milton tells us, was

“ ‘—The least erected spirit that fell  
From Heaven; for even in Heaven his looks and  
thoughts  
Were always downward bent, admiring more  
The riches of Heaven's pavement—trodden gold—  
Than aught divine or holy.’ ”

“In point of fact, Mammon was a Syriac myth—the god of covetousness. As such he was spoken of by Christ, and the people understood what He meant when He warned them against the unrighteous Mammon. Dr. Van Saun used, this morning, the expression,

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'The labors of Hercules.' Does he—or do we, believe that such a hero as Hercules ever lived? much less that he performed the labors ascribed to him?"

Another capital hit! an impromptu at that, as was the story of the Sibyl's Leaves. This was good practice in polemic theology, and really Ruth must not be allowed to talk nonsense. The idea of the dear girl's forming theories of her own upon a subject that was taxing the astutest intellects of the Church and the age, while diverting enough to him, might prove a serious mortification when they were man and wife. He must gradually and gently break away the limitations of education and tradition. Meanwhile, he caught himself harking back, relishfully, to the humorous aspects of the controversy. His merriment broke bounds in a kindly "Ha! ha!" with the effort to contemplate the mistress of his heart as the impersonation of the Dogma of the Inerrancy of Scripture.

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The hot blood scalded Ruth's cheeks, hot tears hurt her eyes.

“ Please don't make fun of me ! ” she begged humbly, the crass presumption of her argument with a man who read the Bible in a dozen or so languages and could quote five lines out of hand from *Paradise Lost*, bowing her spirit to the dust, “ I am very ignorant—just a silly girl who has not had your liberal education. I could never have made myself your equal if I had. But my religion is so much to me, Robert dear ! and I got it all from my Bible ! I get frightened to death when you talk so coolly about mistakes in God's Word. There seems to be nothing good, or true, or safe, left in time or in Eternity. I'd rather lie down here now and die—believing—than live a thousand years disbelieving what is my only hope of salvation.”

The glowing face and wet eyes were buried in the bouquet of lilaes ; her companion heard the sob she tried to smother. He

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had a tender heart, and all of it that was not centred in himself belonged to the piteous pleader. He ceased to smile and hastened to assure her in serious, affectionate words that he would not, for worlds, unsettle her faith, even if he were not in full sympathy with her in this matter. He reminded her that he had turned his back upon flattering worldly prospects—even a partnership in the Bergen & Craig Mills—and chosen a life of toil and self-denial in the Master's service.

“When I said to Him and to myself—‘Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel!’ I meant it, dear, through and through. That I may preach this Gospel intelligently and effectively, I seek wisdom by the light of Reason as well as in Revelation. And this I can say in deep sincerity;—I never knew how intensely interesting the study of the Bible could be; I never guessed what lively zeal and intellectual delight one could bring to the work, until I entered the Seminary. I pore over the sacred pages as one who seeks for



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hid treasure. Every word, every syllable, every letter, receives careful attention.”

“Isn’t that because you are on the lookout for mistakes?” queried Ruth innocently, and her lover was nearer to being angry with her than he had ever been before.

He wheeled sharply toward her, his lips parting in a retort, but her utter unconsciousness of having given offence, and the dispirited droop of eyes and lip corners, disarmed him. She did not know satire by name or by the hearing of the ear, and ill-nature was as alien to her disposition as logic to her mind.

Ruth pursued her idea dreamily and, as guilelessly as before, reversed his mood :

“It’s like looking over a barrel of apples for specked ones. Or, a basket of eggs that were laid at different times.”

“You couldn’t have hit upon a better illustration!” cried Robert, admiringly. “I shall make a Higher Critic of you yet. That figure of the basket of eggs just suits the

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case. The Bible was written by different men of different nations and at different periods of time. All were men, imperfect, and liable to err and to forget. There is an Eastern fable that tells how the philosopher's stone, which changed into gold whatever it touched, lay with a heap of other pebbles on the seashore. A gang of men was set to work to identify it. Each had a small bar of iron with which he was told to test every stone as he picked it up, and if, in touching it, did not turn to gold, he was to pitch it into the water. One man got so into the habit of touching the pebble and then tossing it away, that, when at last, the iron became gold, he threw the stone into the sea before he saw what had happened.

“The Higher Critic holds the philosopher's stone instead of the bit of iron, and with it he tests the materials that go to make up so-called Revelation. Luther applied this touchstone when he said :

““What does not teach Christ, that is *not*

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apostolic, even if St. Peter or St. Paul taught it. Again, what preaches Christ, *that* would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate and Herod did it.’ ”

He had the quotation pat, having written it out in full in his notebook yesterday from the mouth of his favorite professor in the class-room. Without knowing it, he delivered it with the professional intonations and gesture. He was fairly “in the stride” of disputation and held on his sway dogmatically:

“ Other great and good reformers bring to the study and revision of the Scriptures still other tests. One says, for example, ‘ Whatever I find in the Bible that agrees with the loftiest ideal my mind can frame of humanity and of divinity, I accept as truth.’ Another has this golden epigram: ‘ What inspires *me* is inspired.’ ”

“ I don’t understand how he can say that,” said commonplace Ruth, dubiously. “ Different people have different ideals. Even

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good men, like you and my father, don't always feel alike and wouldn't be satisfied with the same thing. I couldn't have any faith in a Bible that was sifted in that way. It's like the difference between a coal-screen and a flour-sifter."

"We don't use coal-screens in bread-making," returned Robert, testily. "In other words, the work of critical separation of true from spurious Scripture is not committed to uneducated men. The highest order of scholarship is required for the task."

"And do high scholars always agree as to what ought to be left in, and what thrown out, of the Bible?"

The tone was anxious; over the young face the worry that had rested there last night was creeping. She looked like a perplexed child. Yet, all unwittingly, she had struck a straight blow. The nascent critic winced for a second under it. A vague suspicion beset him that Ruth might not be as simple as she seemed. She read *The Chris-*

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*tian Intelligencer*, and the Higher Criticism met with scant favor in the columns of that musty organ of a most conservative denomination. The names of Hengstenberg, Shedd, Hodge and Greene might have meaning for, and weight with her.

“I should like to answer that question more fully than I have time for, now,” he rejoined, as they reached her father’s gate. “I shall walk home with you after church this afternoon and stay to tea as usual. The rest of our discussion must be postponed until then. Good-bye, sweet!”

He set off down the street at a swinging pace and Ruth went slowly into the house and laggingly up to her room. There she laid aside her jacket and hat with listless hands, locked the door and fell upon her knees beside the bed, hiding her face in the coverlet. Presently, she put out a blind hand for a Bible that lay on the stand at the bed-head, and drew it to her heart. The movement was sudden and impassioned, as a

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mother might catch a hurt child to her bosom.

She carried a headache to the early dinner, and a face so wan and sober that her mother refrained from chiding her want of punctuality. The dish before her father was fricasseed chicken, and Garrett, Jr., had had his second help before his sister made a fourth at the round table. Her father had saved half of the breast for her. Dumplings, and cream gravy, rich with beaten yolks of eggs, went with the white meat laid upon Ruth's plate. Mrs. Bergen's panacea for bodily and mental discomfort was tea. She had sent the teapot to the kitchen to keep it hot for her daughter. As Ruth's cup was filled, the olive-colored liquid hissed and spat in the heated spout.

"That had ought to brace you up," said the mother, cheerily. "We all feel good-for-nothing this first warm spell. Give me my tea strong and hot as it can be made, says I, and let them that like it weaker, ease it

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down with plenty of cream. It's worth all the medicine going.”

Eating was a difficult undertaking to Ruth, and since drinking was easier, she swallowed the tea. She had found the sun rather hot, coming home, she confessed, and had not thought to take her parasol. When the leaves on the trees were fully grown, she remarked incidentally, the sidewalks would be better shaded.

As soon as the meal was finished, the family began to get ready for Sunday School. Mr. Bergen, as an active Superintendent, had the habit of going fifteen minutes earlier than the others—“to get things started.” He was putting on his hat in the hall when Ruth tripped soundlessly down the stairs :

“Father!” she said, avoiding his eyes and talking fast—“Would you mind taking my class this afternoon? I meant to go until this minute, but I just *can't!*”

Her dimpled chin was trembling, her voice fainted abruptly.

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Mr. Bergen was reckoned a stern man, the sternness of an upright Christian who had not learned charity by his own stumblings. His convictions were iron, and the chalybeate property permeated his moral courage. Haziness and debility of belief were inexcusable in his judgment. "Know what you believe; then live up to it," would have epitomized his everyday creed. The core of an ironclad heart was warm and soft, and his girl was enwrapped, as in silken down, in that heart-centre. He put his arm about her and kissed her forehead.

"Poor little head!" he said, pityingly. "Is it behaving so badly? It's a pretty nice head generally, and we must humor it now and then."

A dry sob that seemed to tear her throat in passing, answered him. Ruth clung noiselessly to his neck for a moment, then pushed herself from him with a laugh as dry as the sob.

"It's good in you to think so, father.



## “ Wood, Hay, Stubble ”

But it is a weak, empty, worthless head, that any sensible woman might be ashamed to carry upon her shoulders. There! I won't be a baby! Thank you for taking the class. The girls won't be troublesome, I know. Tell them that there isn't much the matter with me, and give them my love.”

Seated at her chamber-window, she watched with dull eyes, that yet, without her will, saw everything, her mother take her way up the shady street, little Garrett at her side. Mrs. Bergen wore a black silk dress, thick, and not lustrous. Over her shoulders was a short black cloth circular, trimmed with triangular slashes. The slashes were filled with jet passementerie, and a solid tassel dangled at the apex of each. Her black bonnet was adorned with a bunch of heliotropes hedged about with a *chevaux de frise* of black lace. She never “ went quite into colors, don't you know? Mr. Bergen's family connections, as well as hers, being large, and life *that* uncertain.” She held her-

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self ready to drop into mourning at an hour's notice. For that reason she never bought shiny silks. Black silk was a half-way house between colors and crêpe. Heliotrope, or any shade of purple, was a flag station.

Garrett, Jr., had on his first pair of long trousers that Sunday. To his obstreperous delight he had been emancipated from the ignominy of knickerbockers on Saturday night, his mother acknowledging, reluctantly, for he was her last baby, that he was "getting leggy."

When they were out of sight, Ruth leaned back in her chair and asked herself seriously and coolly, as if she had been somebody else, why she was so wretched. What had happened to cloud the world that was yesterday so fair, and the life for which she had thanked her Heavenly Father this very morning? She recalled how a sweet, warm mist had blurred her reading of the text for the day in her "*Daily Strength for Daily Needs.*"

*"Fear none of those things which thou shalt*

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*suffer. Ye shall have tribulation ten days. Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”*

The talk on the way home had done the harm. But why? What had Robert said except that good and wise men were examining the Bible critically, and leaving out some parts as less likely to be the very words of GOD than others?

“That was all! all!” she said, aloud, in confidence that was defiance. “I will stop thinking about it!”

She sat up to look out of the window again. A row of locust-trees shaded the front piazza. The branches of one swept her blinds when she opened and closed them, and she usually left them open. The trees were laden with rosy-and-white flowers. But for the cool wind the perfume would have been too powerful under the westering sun. It was especially delicious in the dewy dawns when she would have known, without opening her eyes, that she was no-

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where but in her own dear room, associated with the flowery Mays of twenty-two years. Wherever she might live as Robert Craig's wife, the smell of locust-blooms would always remind her of Briardale and home.

With the thought of Robert and their united lives the odd ache compressed heart and throat. He was so strong and clever; his brain was so steady that he could weigh evidence without getting excited when such a thing as the truth of the Bible was involved. He could read manuscripts in the originals, and throw aside this and keep that, yet hold fast to the faith once delivered to the saints. The only Bible she knew was the dear old Book upon which were founded the Westminster Catechism and the Dort Confession of Faith. Her father was fond of saying that the Dort Confession contained five thousand words, and that for each word a martyr had died. When a mere baby she had learned to lisp,—

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“ Holy Bible! Book divine,  
Precious Gospel! thou art mine,”

and known that Christian men and women had laid down their lives sooner than give it up.

Her mother had been brought up a Presbyterian and her children had learned the Westminster Catechism when young, later, the Heidelberg. She repeated, musingly, the second question and answer of the Shorter Catechism :

“ What rule hath GOD given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him ?

“ The Word of GOD which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only rule given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him.”

In the strength of the recollection she got her Bible and Concordance and looked up and wrote down twenty texts in defence of this “ only rule.” At the top of the list stood,—

“ *The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the word of our God shall stand forever.*”

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At the bottom were the words to which she had referred in last night's talk,—

*“And if any man shall take away from the words of the Book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the Book of Life, and out of the Holy City, and from the things which are written in this Book.”*

The blood slackened in her veins as she penned the awful sentence. When it was written she sat looking at it a long time without moving.

“I should think they would be *afraid* to do it!” she whispered to herself. “And St. John, the beloved disciple, said it. He could not have had the heart to put it there, if the Spirit had not said unto him—‘Write!’ I should be afraid of the judgment of heaven if I were in their places.”

The swift thought that followed drove her again to her knees. Prayer was the only resort of the simple, narrow-minded creature in the horror that wrapped her in as with a pall. Talk of the inerrancy of

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Scripture conveyed to her intellect as little as the accusation of Bibliolatry. That GOD'S Word should be fallible periled her hope of immortality for her own soul and souls dearer to her than her own. To tamper with the Holy Oracle was sacrilege. This, Robert averred, was an exquisite pleasure to him.

If she prayed that her own faith might be established, it was as a means to an end.

“ O, my Father ! ” she broke forth with strong crying and tears—“ Help me, even me, to keep back Thy servant from presumptuous sins ! Let them not have dominion over him ! ”

Soul and mind were so saturated with Scripture that heart-break found no other language.

### III

#### LOCUST-BLOOMS AND HIGHER CRITICISM

MRS. DE BAUN, the Bergens' eldest daughter, lived in Briardale, and with her husband took tea at "Father's" every Sunday night, the year around. She was a buxom, chatty matron beside whom Ruth always appeared small and quiet. If the younger sister talked less than usual on this particular evening, nobody noticed it. Robert Craig was in fine feather colloquially, and there were no gaps in the seams of talk with him on one side of the table, the de Bauns on the other and Mr. Bergen ready to take his part from the foot of the well-furnished board.

"That boy grows nicer every day of his life," declared the prospective sister-in-law when, the young people having gone out to-



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gether upon the piazza upon no pretext whatever, she settled herself down for a comfortable gossip with her mother.

Her father and husband had their pipes, and each an open window to himself. The shaded lamp burned without smoke or smell upon a stand in a corner, letting the moonbeams stray far enough into the room to show the smoke-rings like silver boats as they sailed through the windows. Mrs. Bergen was in her own easy-chair. Her mother had "taken her comfort" in it on Sunday evenings fifty-odd years ago, and recounted as peacefully to herself and to others the blessings she had not time on week-days to set in order before them. The chair was to go to Ruth in the course of time and nature. The newest of its many re-coverings was tacked on by Ruth's own hands the Saturday before Easter. It was cretonne,—a gray ground with bunches of trailing arbutus dropped upon it at regular intervals. Mrs. Bergen considered it "tasty,

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but quiet. That was like Ruth, you know. She was never one for show."

Mrs. de Baun (she had ideas of style and was pertinacious of the small *d*.) swung gently in a Boston rocker. The cushions of seat and back were covered with the same gray cretonne, and the legs were hidden by a full valance that sucked in and swelled out with the motion of the chair. The leisurely undulations added to the sedative influences of the hour. The group was a fair specimen of our best middle class church-going folk, —the backbone and sinew of every law-abiding American community.

"Yes!" assented the mother, in the throaty cluck that belongs to matrons of her years and caste. "I feel to be very thankful that Ruth has made such a wise choice. Robert is a good boy, through and through. His mother was saying only yesterday that he had never given his parents one minute's uneasiness. And I hear that he is considered real talented by the Seminary profess-

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ors and other people who are judges of such things.”

The young people passed the window upon the end piazza, Robert walking next to the house, Ruth's white gown ghostly in the moonlight. The four spectators turned their heads to look after them. The men made no comment; the women exchanged moved smiles.

“He'll get a good wife, and a pretty one,” said the sister. “She never had anything more becoming than that dress. And to think of her making it out-and-out! It's easy to see that he's prouder of it than she is. He couldn't keep his eyes off of her all supper time.”

Mr. Bergen refilled his pipe and rammed down the charge with his little finger.

“I put Robert up to conduct the closing exercises this afternoon,” he observed, casually, to his son-in-law. “I had to teach Ruth's class, and I thought he might's well lend me a hand and get *his* hand in a bit. He gave the school a first-class talk, too,

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short and right to the point. He took for his text—" *The men of Nineveh shall rise up in judgment,*" and so forth. Some of us older folks might profit by what he said about the responsibilities and advantages of those who are born and brought up in a Christian land."

Robert was telling Ruth of his address while they strolled up and down the porch that ran along the front and one end of the house. The rhythm of their footsteps and the murmur of the young voices underran the sitting-room chat like a *piano* accompaniment, throbbing more and more faintly as they turned the farther corner on each round.

The girl's fingers closed tightly upon her lover's arm when he mentioned her father's request and his compliance.

"Oh-h! I *hope* you didn't say anything about——"

"Jack-and-the-bean-stalk!" Robert finished the exclamation, as she broke it short. "Not a bit of it, dear! Setting aside the

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circumstance that your father is a pillar of orthodoxy, and would be ready to burn me at the stake for heresy if I were to ventilate my views of the historical accuracy and verbal inspiration of the Scriptures—I do not consider that the rank and file of church members are prepared for the truths brought to light by Higher Criticism. The elders of this generation are joined to their Bibliolatry and have to be let alone. Light must be admitted cautiously into superstitious souls.”

“What *could* you say about the lesson if you didn’t believe that Jonah ever preached in Nineveh?”

“I was not obliged to say that he did *not*. I let the parable, or fiction, speak for itself and turned my hearers’ attention to what would be expected of church-goers and Sunday School children in this day and country.”

He proceeded to treat her to an abstract of his remarks, citing a couple of felicitous illustrations, warmed to the work by her apparent attention. His complacency was

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dashed by an interruption of his best passage ;

“ But, Robert, you can't always do that. You can't go on dodging the truth forever. There must come a time when you will have to be sincere.”

She felt him bridle and stiffen ; his tone was two-edged.

“ Dodging the subject ! Will have to be sincere ! Really Ruth, your terms are, to say the least, extraordinary.”

He had not hurt her. She was not even apologetic, although breathlessly earnest.

“ When you are a preacher you must preach what you really think. You must not shun to declare the whole counsel of GOD, don't you know ? You cannot keep your people always in the dark. They will find out some time what your real sentiments are.”

The frost of his silence penetrated her pre-occupied mood. She tried to decipher the expression of his face through the shadows.

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“You aren’t offended with me, are you dear? You can’t think how all this shocks me. I couldn’t help feeling when you spoke of keeping the rank and file in ignorance of what you believe are the true Scriptures, how much it sounded like the Roman Catholic priests’ talk of the danger of private interpretation and the open Bible.

“Don’t make fun of me!” at his ejaculation of mingled amusement and impatience. “Let me say my poor little say in my poor, feeble way—please! I don’t know any other. I was very, very unhappy when I got home to-day. Just as I was, last night. I can’t make even you understand *how* unhappy. And because I have so often found grace and help in other times of need in my Bible, I searched the Scriptures for myself to know if these things were true. What I found there did bring me light and comfort—some-what. And then I prayed”—hesitatingly, curbed by the reserve common to her class where “spiritual exercises” are the theme of

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everyday conversation. "That helped me more. I made up my mind to ask you to talk to me freely about these doubts and difficulties. I hope I am strong enough now, after—this afternoon—to listen and to judge for myself. Make it all as plain as you can for me. I am not learned, you know, but wisdom and strength will be given to me. I have asked for them, for myself—" a timid pause,—“and for you, dear.”

He drew her to him and kissed her fondly, not without a touch of reverence for the purity of her faith and the earnestness of her love.

“GOD bless you for the truest, sweetest, dearest woman who ever gave her whole heart to a fellow not half-worthy of her! I have no terrible revelations to make, darling, as you will see, presently. And you are right in thinking that our views on this and all other important matters should harmonize. A man's wife should be one lobe of his brain as well as his second soul. Let me think where to begin with you.”



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While he adjusted his theological considering-cap, Mr. Bergen's tones, like the drone of a Brobdingnagian hawk's-head moth, boomed through his window:

"No, *sir!* I've no charity for a Mugwump! I'd rather be an honest Democrat and be done with it. This hunting with the hounds and running with the hare is contrary to honor and to honesty. You can't ride two horses at once. The servant of two masters is always a sneak and a failure. If I ever leave the Republican party I'll go clean over the fence, not sit, balancing myself on the top-rail."

Ruth heard him with the outer ears. Her mind made no application of the energetic sentences. She was busy training her battery of proof-texts upon the advancing foe. Every verse was committed to memory. She would keep a steady head and call each up at need, going down upon the knees of her heart to pray for light and courage.

*"It shall be given you in that hour what you*

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*shall speak,*" was in her thought as Robert began a discourse that lasted forty-five minutes.

Mrs. de Baun laughingly timed him by the sitting-room clock, having caught a few words of the introduction.

"I guess Robert is trying his first sermon upon Ruthie," she opined. "I heard him say—'All Scripture is given by inspiration of GOD.'"

"That's a safe beginning," quoth her father. "Sound as a nut. There's no discount on that theology."

What Robert really said was :

"The assertion that 'all Scripture is given by inspiration of GOD' may be the narrowest of dogmas, or broad enough to suit the most liberal Higher Critic."

"What is a Higher Critic?" interposed Ruth. "And how did they get that name?"

As I have said, it took Robert three-quarters of an hour to answer the question. At the end of the first fifteen minutes they sat

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down upon the upper step of the front piazza. A bland little wind was shaking the locust-blooms, and sent smiling ripples of moonlight between the clusters, over the lovers. Ruth's hands were folded upon her lap, and if Robert laid one of his, occasionally, upon them, or touched her knee, it was in rhetorical fervor, not in such dalliance as would have befitted the summer night.

The speaker bore in mind from the outset the pathetic request that he would "make it all as plain as he could." He simplified his language to the best of his ability in relating the various methods by which the Higher Criticism works upon the alleged sacred writings and the conclusions to which it had been forced or led. Ruth, albeit listening as for her life, did not grasp more than one-half of his meaning. Theological technique was as so much Greek to her understanding and he could not quite avoid the phraseology of the class-room. She did gather and was in no danger of forgetting, that what she had been

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taught to call, "The Mosaic account of the Creation," is decided unanimously by scholarly critics to be an allegory, or a religious myth, and was not written by Moses, or in his times. That it is more than likely that Moses was not the author of any of the books generally attributed to him. That "the legislation ritual is of post exilian origin," and set about with spurious "historical" incidents to give it weight and interest. That the books of Ruth and Esther are pretty romances, or at the best, historical novels. That the solitary authentic scrap of David's composition which has come down to us is the lament over Saul and Jonathan, and that experts find in this fragment conclusive proof that he wrote none of the Psalms. These, it is thought by some, were composed, for the most part, for the service of the Second Temple, long after David slept with his fathers. Others affirm that the oldest of them was written less than two hundred years before Christ, and by many different hands—"pious

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peasants scattered up and down throughout Galilee who waited for the Consolation of Israel—the class from which Joseph and Mary were to spring.”

She learned that the handiwork of at least eleven authors is distinctly evident in the alleged Prophecy of Isaiah, and that Daniel never saw or heard of the book which bears his name. That Ezra did not write the Chronicles, or Nehemiah, or even the Book of Ezra. That, while Solomon may have compiled some of the Proverbs set down under his name, he assuredly had no part or lot in The Song of Songs, or in Ecclesiastes.

Skipping the minor prophets as scarcely worthy of costly ammunition, our callow censor fell valiantly upon the Gospels. Matthew he patronized as a well-meaning but credulous tax-gatherer who is identified with Levi, and who collated from a variety of sources a mass of material, all interesting and some of it valuable. It is especially valuable as preserving the Jewish atmos-

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phere without the Jewish narrowness. Mark, according to Robert, is more nearly authentic and is regarded by the best critics as the safest of apostolic authorities. Luke's evidence he discounted emphatically as second-hand and traditional. He does not pretend to have been an eyewitness of Our Lord's works or even to have been His contemporary. The Roman Catholic story that he got his information from Mary the Mother of Christ is as trustworthy as any other, and this is legendary.

Our half-baked Higher Critic cast what he called "the Fourth Gospel" into the outer darkness of apocrypha. As airily he relegated The Acts to the hazy debatable ground occupied by "the former treatise" addressed to "the most excellent Theophilus." According to the youthful enthusiast in latter-day discoveries, the Christian world should move more easily and draw deeper spiritual breath now that apostolic testimony is sifted and sorted, the little heap of golden grain

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garnered and the chaff consigned to its own place.

“The Gospels and The Acts are full of contradictions and palpable blunders that have caused the enemies of Revelation to blaspheme with much show of reason. Robinson and other pious moles and mules may ‘harmonize’ violently to the end of time. They deceive nobody who studies without prejudice and uses common sense in judging of what he has read.”

The Epistles were handled with a shade more of respect. The budding divine had a profound regard—the regard of one true man for another—for Paul. Him, he pronounced in a tone of hearty good-fellowship to be “a gentleman and a scholar,” the probable author of one of the Epistles to Timothy, and possibly two more of those to which the Church has appended his name. Of course, no intelligent nineteenth-century reader believes that he had any hand in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

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“The Apocalypse reads like a hasheesh-eater’s dream”—said Deacon Craig’s son, pulling at his strait breasted waistcoat, and filliping a fallen locust-petal from the knee of his gray trousers. “It is an hysterical *olla podrida* of green rainbows and vari-colored horses, and men with tongues like drawn swords protruding from their mouths, and gates of pearl, and fiery seas of molten glass, and scarlet women—that has driven scores of would-be interpreters crazy. Those who have any regard for the dignity of Holy Writ are thankful not to be obliged to admit it to the Canon.”

The side-issue of Inspiration now received our fledgeling’s attention. He tore the dogma of Verbal Inspiration from top to bottom, and then across, with two spasms of indignant erudition. As to General Inspiration—the informing of the body of the Bible (or so much of it as remains when screening and sifting and fanning are over) with the breath of Deity, he owned to a generous be-



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lief in it. He believed, also, that the same sort of inspiration is going on in the world to-day. The twenty-third Psalm was inspired. So was Longfellow's Psalm of Life. John the Baptist—whose neophyte and assistant, the Galilean Carpenter, became greater than His master—was inspired to preach, and to make straight the path for the Messiah. John Bunyan was moved by the self-same Spirit to write *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

“All that man requires in order to receive this Divine breath is a pure heart and a reverent, receptive mind ;” thus flowed the discourse. “Now, as in the days of Jesus of Nazareth, the commandment with promise is—‘*He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.*’” —

“Can you hold up long enough to let Ruth say, ‘Good night’ to us?” cried Mrs. de Baun jocosely through the sitting-room window.

Robert laughed and jumped up.

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"This is too bad! I don't mean to preach such tedious sermons after I am licensed," he called back. "It isn't often that a man has such a patient and appreciative audience. It is an inspiration in itself."

Ruth did not offer to rise as he took her hand to lift her to her feet.

"We'll be in directly, Anneke," she answered her sister. "By the time you can get your bonnet on. Robert!" in a queer, choked voice as if her throat and tongue were dusty,—“I want to ask one question. The scholars of this day are ever and ever so much wiser than those who made King James's Bible. Have they found *all* the mistakes in it? Suppose, in another hundred years, or maybe in fifty years, another set of men should decide that the little of the Bible you have left us, is no more inspired than Jonah and St. John's Gospel and Revelation? When they have taken away all of the only rule GOD has given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him—what

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will become of people's souls? Where is this to stop?"

Robert's laugh was easy and affectionate:

"In the first place, my dear girl, you suppose an impossibility. In the second place, if we were compelled to confess that the main body of the so-called Canon is the work of man and not of GOD, the truth of what these good men have told us in these Books would remain unmoved. Furthermore, we have always the light of reason—meaning conscience and the religious feeling,"——

"Where is the religious feeling to come from when you take away the Bible?"

"Where did Enoch, who lived before a word of the Scriptures was written, get the testimony that he pleased GOD? You are the caviller now, my pet, not I. We will talk this out some other time. Now we must go in. Why, darling! your hands are like snowflakes!"

He pressed them to his warm lips and put

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his arm about her. She was shivering violently.

“What a careless, stupid brute I am to keep you out all this time in the dew!” he was berating himself when they appeared in the sitting-room where the lamp revealed a bloodless face and lips that were blue. Ruth tried to smile and speak, and her teeth chattered uncontrollably. Her limbs were numb and strangely weak. Mrs. Bergen, seriously uneasy, hurried the visitors away and Ruth up to her bed. There she put a rubber bag of hot water to the girl's feet, and administered a cup of scalding tea. She was a mild-natured and mild-mannered woman, and forebore to blame the young man, or to scold Ruth, although, as she reported to her husband, “you might have swept the dew off of Ruth's skirt by the handful, and it would have been soaked through if it had been cotton goods.” If the child had caught a chill the mother was as much to be “faulted” as anybody else.

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Ruth faintly laid all her discomfort at the door of "one of her bad headaches," thanked her mother, gratefully, but still faintly, for her kindness and promised to try to sleep. In her heart she was yet more grateful to the good woman for asking no questions and going quietly downstairs after extinguishing the lamp.

The moonbeams flowed in, white and solemn, with the going out of the grosser light, and the smell of the locust-blooms kept it company. The girl lay as one dead, her hands clasped upon her heart, and wished miserably that she had perished in the moment of her birth. Beaten down in nerve, sick in body and in spirit, she could not control imagination. It ran riot in fancies the like of which had never tormented her before. Her pitiful barrier of proof-texts had been swept out to sea like so many splinters before the tide of facts that were arguments; faith and hope were in the grasp of the undertow. Every blow at the Book which was

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the bulwark of her forefathers' Religion and hers, had seemed to hack away a bit of her heart.

Says one whose compassion for the sufferers she describes has in it no admixture of sympathy in their beliefs—"They, too, had their Calvary—these determined souls who doggedly died by the cross of the Old Faith in whose shelter their fathers and their fathers' fathers had lived and prayed, had battled and triumphed."

I despair of winning an intelligent pity for my little Ruth from such as have, from infancy, heard the "Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments" spoken of as fallible classics. The dogma—for the dogmas of Doubt are as numerous and as imperious as those of "the old Faith"—that "the great patriarchal tales of the Old Testament are no more literally true than the tales of Achilles, of Æneas and of King Arthur—ancient Sagas about national heroes—partly mythical, partly legendary, with a few his-

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torical kernels embedded in them,"—had never been so much as whispered in Ruth Bergen's world,—much less doubts of the authenticity of any portion of the New Testament. She had received the kingdom of Heaven and all pertaining thereunto as a little child. Had her erudite lover brought to her on that fragrant May evening the news that she was not the child of her reputed parents, but base-born, having no claims upon their hearts and no place in their home, her sense of bereavement could not have been keener.

One text was tossed up to her lips again and again by the salt waves :

*"If the foundations be destroyed what can the righteous do?"*

"I am not righteous, O Lord, Thou knowest—but the foundations are taken from under me. What can I do? what can I build upon?" she sobbed to the brooding night in ever-growing desolation.

The thought that the sibyl of Higher

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Criticism had left so many precious leaves, and that, as Robert proudly asserted, the very cream of Revelation was now served in faultless vessels to the Church and to Humanity, was no consolation to her. A formidable feminine limitation is the unconquerable propensity to force a conclusion. She was sure that what had been begun would be completed. Pick and crowbar were busy with the walls of the goodly edifice. Utter demolition was merely a question of time. She was possessed by the stubborn assurance that, as certainly as a generation more learned than those which had preceded it, was screening and panning and assaying Biblical ore, there would arise in days to come, yet others who would improve upon their work until nothing was left of the Scriptures.

“Not so much as the title!” she said, bitterly. “‘HOLY BIBLE’ has no business there.” She was crying like a broken-spirited child. In her simplicity and her pain,



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she burst forth into wild and inapt apostrophe :

*“ O, God! the heathen have come into Thine inheritance. They have cast fire into Thy sanctuary: they have defiled by casting down the dwelling-place of Thy name to the ground.”*

And again, as the ache in head and heart were insupportable :

*“ They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth. Therefore, His people return thither, and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them.”*

Startled to find that she was speaking aloud, she sat upright and took her racked head between her hands, pressing it with all her might to still the agonizing throbs.

“I believe I am losing my senses,” she thought. “Try as I will, I can't lay hold of the Promises. They used always to be within reach. What good could they do me if I could recollect every one of them? How do I know which to depend upon, and what

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are nothing but sinful men's words? A great many—ever and ever so many and such strong comforting texts!—are in the Psalms and in St. John. Robert says that GOD never told David and John to write them. He doesn't care whether they are GOD's words or man's, so long as they are true and do him good. I *do!*” flinging it out vehemently. “I want to be sure that ‘GOD spake all these words.’ Nothing makes my soul safe short of ‘*Thus saith the Lord!*’ I suppose it's because I am so weak and silly and sinful that nothing else satisfies me. Yet Robert is so positive, and he ought to know. I do want to agree with him in everything. O Lord! be merciful unto me! for my soul is sore vexed.”

The eastern branches of the locust trees were flushed by the morning when the hot eyes closed in unrestful sleep. She awoke at eight o'clock to see her mother standing by the bed. She had on a lilac print gown and a white apron. Her eyes were liquid with

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tender anxiety and in her lips the law of kindness was honey-sweet.

“My pretty!” she cooed, stroking back the tumbled hair with a plump hand wondrous light for its size. “How is the poor head by now? I wouldn’t disturb you before, for I wanted that you should sleep it off.”

“It doesn’t ache,—I think, mother!” She raised it and it dropped back on the pillow unexpectedly and heavily. “I’ll feel better when I have bathed and dressed,” she persisted. “I’m ashamed to be so lazy.”

“You’re never that, dearie. I was up here awhile ago, but I hadn’t the heart to wake you—you looked so white and tired. Robert stopped at the door on his way to the seven-twenty train, to ask after you. He said not to call you if you weren’t up. He hadn’t a minute to spare. Here’s a book he left with his love. There’s a note with it. He was anxious about your head and was real pleased to hear you were sleeping it off.

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Now, I'll fetch up a cup of green tea. There's nothing better for nervous headache than green tea without so much as a grain of black. As for the stuff people swig because 'English breakfast' is fashionable, I wouldn't give a cent a pound for it."

"You and Robert would spoil me to death if I'd let you," Ruth said, with a tremulous smile and an abortive feint at a pout. "There's nothing really the matter with me. I'll take a quinine capsule before I eat my breakfast. I may have a touch of malaria."

The maternal brow cleared. "Malaria" covers a multitude of bodily sins in the sight of Briardalers. The fiend is an enemy they have almost ceased to dread because familiar with his tricks and his manners. To bombard him with quinine and to scare him with calisaya, to fortify the citadel of health with sarsaparilla and to build bomb-proofs of maltine and chalybeate bitters,—are all that the average system requires to secure it.

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from serious injury. To neglect these precautions in the spring and fall is to fly into the face of a forbearing Providence.

Mrs. Bergen adopted the malarial hypothesis with alacrity, and saw to it that her daughter swallowed a two-grain capsule (broken doses are always more effectual than heroic) three times daily on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. She saw to it the more rigidly because of her increasing dissatisfaction with Ruth's looks and behavior. She spent much time in her own room; there were bistre semicircles under her eyes; her complexion was dull, with gray shadows about the mouth and lurking in the temples. A vein that was scarcely visible when she was well showed as if curved by a blue pencil, where the nose met the brows.

"She doesn't eat enough to keep a sparrow alive," Mrs. Bergen told her daughter during a visit she paid to Mrs. de Baun on Thursday afternoon. "The child works her brain too hard in my opinion. Her light

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wasn't out at twelve o'clock last night. I saw it a-shining on the locust trees from my window when I happened to wake and look out. So, upstairs I walked myself, and there she sat with a book Robert left for her a-Monday open before her, and writing in a sort of copy book. She shut it up in a hurry and shoved it under the big book when I spoke, and looked as scared as if she had been caught stealing. I didn't say a cross word to her. It never pays to scold her, you know. She takes it too humbly. But I did tell her that she was breaking herself down studying so constant—and after all was said and done, where was the use of trying to know everything? She clipped in as quick as a flash there, and says she, in a decided kind of way,—‘You're right, mother! there is no use in it. It's worse than useless. I'll go right to bed.’

“I saw she was down-hearted, and I petted her a little and saw her into bed and that she'd a pitcher of fresh water by her

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bed. She tells me she wakes up thirsty these warmish nights, and drinks and drinks. Father, he was wondering this morning if she has an inward fever. If she ain't better in a day or two, I'll ask the doctor to look at her. I 'most wish, sometimes, that she wasn't so ambitious. She's that anxious to keep up with Robert that she'll overdo if she ain't careful. And what's education without health?"

Having had her grumble out, Mrs. Bergen's mind was pleasantly receptive of environing influences while she walked homeward. She was not really uneasy about Ruth's health and was, in fact, disposed to be proud of the intellectual toil she affected to deprecate. At the corner nearest her home she stopped to chat with Mina Romeyn and Annie Bogardus, nice enough girls, both of them, but all agog about beaux and clothes and frolics. They had attended the same New York school with Ruth, but Mrs. Bergen doubted if either of them read

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three books a year. As to poring over and enjoying, much less taking notes out of a book like that *Search-lights of Scripture* Robert had sent to Ruth, and which the mother had opened once only to be confounded by the ponderous paragraphs and serried footnotes—the worthy woman smiled to herself, charitably derisive of the suggestion. Strolling on in the middle of the asphalt sidewalk bounded on both sides with velvet sward, she felt her already bountiful soul expand and glow with the season and the sunsetting. There was not a prettier place up and down the river than Briardale, if it *was* on a Branch road and had only two trains each way a day, and not a nicer house in Briardale than the square, porticoed colonial homestead in which her husband and all his children were born. Pausing at the gate she looked it all over with a full heart. The clump of cinnamon roses in the corner of the yard, planted by her husband's mother, had as many flowers as leaves upon



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it. The modern "monthlies" were affluent in buds; the lilac hedge, dividing the lawn on the north side from the garden, still made a goodly show of mauve and white blossoms. And the honeysuckles!—she had had *bushels* of suckers and wandering runners pruned away ten days ago, and now, look at them! Almost as rank as ever, and hardly room for a pin's point between the blooms! There was a litter of locust-flowers upon the turf and gravel walk. She was sorry they had begun to fall. She *would* say there weren't many sweeter smells than locust-flowers and they were a'most as handsome as roses and lilies. She was always proud of that row of locusts.

"*The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places. Yea, I have a goodly heritage,*" murmured the pious soul, as the mistress of the heritage entered the pleasant places of the roomy hall. The double Dutch doors front and back gave to her glistening eyes the symphony in pink-and-white of locust

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flowers, repeated and chorused by apple and cherry-blooms in garden and orchard.

Halfway on the staircase leading to her chamber she was arrested by an odd, moaning noise.

## IV

“DYING, SIR! DYING!”

A NOTE from Robert to his betrothed had accompanied *Search-lights of Scripture*.

Ruth's gratifying interest in a subject that engrossed much of his own thought just now assured him that she would read with profound attention a volume that had opened to him a new world of study and speculation. No fiction had ever given him such lively intellectual pleasure as he had found in these fascinating pages. No scientific discovery was fraught with more important results to the human race than the conclusions the author had drawn from his biological and theological researches.

“Acting upon the principle of which I spoke last night, I would not trust the average woman to read this book,” he went on to say. “The limitations of custom and

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superstition, mistaken by many for pious fervor, are peculiarly strong with women, and unfit them for impartial consideration where the element of emotion is allowed to enter. Your cool head and excellent common sense are a guarantee that you may be trusted to get all the good out of this treatise and take no harm from the perusal. The author is an eminent clergyman whose advanced views have brought him into especial prominence as a pioneer in the New Movement.

“I anticipate with unusual eagerness next Saturday evening's talk with you. I cannot express in this hurried note how much I enjoyed our discussion of last night. It was like ‘iron sharpening iron.’ But when do I not revel in your society?” etc., etc.

Ruth's brain was still giddy and her scalp sore to the touch after the cruel headache, when she began on Monday forenoon the perusal of the fascinating book. The first two chapters were preliminary and tentative,

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and she had to summon will-power to coerce her mind into a sickly show of attentiveness. Robert's talk had made her tolerably familiar with such phrases as Verbal and Plenary Inspiration, the Authenticity of Revelation, Theophany and Christophanies. She had even a shadowy conception of what was meant by Eschatology, and did not faint and fall, albeit bruised and shaken, when she ran up against the jutting crag of Biblical Anthropology. Her father had given her *Webster's Unabridged* when she left school, and a fairly good Encyclopædia bowed the back of a shelf in the family bookcase. She was not, therefore, altogether left to her own devices when she put out to sea.

After an hour of conscientious rowing in waters which she could see were dark, and which she took it for granted were deep, she was ashamed to find that her jaws ached for an honest, wide, expressive yawn and that her head was thicker than when she sat down to be fascinated. She was disap-

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pointed and Robert would be chagrined, when he learned that he had overrated her intellectual scope. Drowsiness, engendered by the warmth of the day and the loss of last night's rightful amount of sleep, was tempting her to relinquish the task and indulge herself in a plain, trite noon nap, when, fluttering the leaves negligently, her roving glance rested upon four lines of poetry in the middle of a page.

“Far hence He lies  
In the lorn, Syrian town,  
And on His grave, with shining eyes,  
The Syrian stars look down.”

Still uninterested, she went back to the context:

“To borrow the eloquent words of another,—‘The ashes of Jesus of Nazareth mingled with the dust of Palestine.’”

“*What!*”

Alive and alert, she sat up and attacked the chapter embodying the monstrous lie—fell upon it as upon a living, audacious foe.

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Until that instant the knowledge that the Resurrection—the pivotal truth of the Christian Religion, without which Paul declares Faith to be vain and the Apostles false witnesses of GOD—was questioned by those who lay claim to the name of “believers,” had never come to the old-fashioned church-woman. Nor did the eminent author of *Search-lights of Scripture* put forward the theory as of his own having and holding. While bringing the search-light to bear upon all articles of the Christian Creed, this could not be overlooked. He cited the doubt as the conviction of others the latchet of whose shoes he was not worthy to unloose; the arguments against the theory that Christ arose from the dead, as the reasoning of advanced thinkers who would fain shatter the fetters of Bibliolatry and Christolatry and bring the world to the feet of the All-Father and into the glorious light of liberated thought. “These,” he said, “are the life-warriors who exalt ethics above creeds, who

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love Good for Good's sake, and claim eternal life as the heritage, not the reward, of the soul that came from GOD and will return to, and be resolved into GOD."

The eloquent quotation was continued in these words:

“‘And in the days and weeks that followed, the devout and passionate fancy of a few mourning Galileans begat the exquisite fable of the Resurrection. How natural—and amid all its falseness—how true is that naïve and contradictory story! The rapidity with which it spread is a measure of many things. It is, above all, a measure of the greatness of Jesus, of the force with which He had drawn to Himself the hearts and imaginations of men.’”

The chapter immediately preceding that upon The Resurrection was entitled “*The Love of Christ.*” Another was upon “*The Hypothesis that Miracles are of Human Origin.*” Still another was headed—“*The Man Jesus a Martyr, not a Sacrifice.*”



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It was while reading the last-named that Ruth's horrified imagination caught at the idea of refuting the testimony of the *Searchlights* to her own satisfaction, if not to Robert's conviction, by arguments drawn from Scripture and framed by the common sense her betrothed had commended. She had taken notes of school-lectures, and written abstracts of sermons, histories and essays. Providing herself with blank-book and fountain-pen, she laid open before her, *Searchlights of Scripture*, on one side *Cruden's Concordance*, on the other the Bible, and near at hand a venerable copy of Adam Clarke's *Commentaries* that had belonged to her grandfather. Thus equipped, she began the campaign against principalities and powers that are blockading the Church of GOD on earth.

A comic element would interfuse the situation were the piteousness of it less apparent. Her tactics were so puerile, her armament and her command of it so incomplete, and, above all, her trust in the Promise to which

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was her appeal—" *It shall be given you in that hour what you shall speak*"—was so childlike in its entirety, that laughter is smothered by a sob.

For this was all she knew how to do:— Upon one page of the blank-book she wrote out objectionable (from her standpoint) extracts from *Search-lights*, and others of like nature quoted from her recollections of Robert's harangues. She transcribed conscientiously such sentiments as had shocked her most cruelly, the sophistries which were most plausible and hardest to answer. That each was a thorn pressed into the quick of her soul, did not turn her aside by so much as a hair's breadth. This done, she wrote upon the opposite pages texts of Scripture adverse to the author's assertions and deductions, and prim little didacticisms of her own composition, drawn from early education and backed up by Adam Clarke and the burning desire to overthrow what must be false.

It was a battle for her Religion at the first

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—as a Religion, a system of belief, a vital, but comparatively abstract, principle. Robert had praised her cool head. She would keep it cool and “level.” Women, according to him, were swayed by partialities and by emotion in their judgment of evidence. She would remain upon the outside of her subject and give due weight, with a leaning toward mercy, to her opponent’s argument. Had her knowledge of her own sex been larger, she would have comprehended that with women an assailed Cause speedily passes from the abstract into the concrete, although not one in ten knows the meaning of the technical terms. The persecuted thing is taken to heart, adopted by the affections, interwoven with conscience, identified with the advocate’s personality, until she does not know herself apart from it. To the woman’s intellect, Truth (or what she assumes to be truth) is as purely bright as that side of Venus which, astronomers tell us, forever faces the sun. Error is the planet’s other

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and, to us, invisible hemisphere, upon which the sun never rises—a realm of black ice and hopeless frosts. With her, doubt and disbelief are synonyms, and gradations of faith are unknown quantities. “Almost a Christian” belongs to the category of “Almost an honest man” and “Almost a virtuous woman.” Almost saved is to be wholly lost.

This idiosyncrasy of her sex was by no means the weakest of Ruth Bergen's limitations. It closed in and tightened upon her with each hour of the unequal contest. By Wednesday night she knew that she was playing a losing game. She had not slept two hours at a time since Sunday. The weight of what felt like a hot palm lay more and more heavily upon the top of her head as hour was superadded to hour of mental toil and spiritual anguish. She had spasms of almost murderous resentment against those who had discerned and exposed the tatters and thin spots in the royal raiment of

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the Scriptures. As judged by her, they had done no good to any living creature. They would make thousands most miserable, who, but for their officious display of learning, would have ordered their lives according to the Bible in which they believed, died happily, trusting to Bible promises, and gone to the heaven of which they would have remained ignorant but for that inspired Word.

If all that the Higher Critics as expounded by her betrothed, claimed were true,—if Christ's death were not a sacrifice for the sins of the world, but a martyr's fate that had no atoning efficacy; if the Father had not sent His Only-begotten Son to suffer and to die as a Propitiation for our sins; if Christ had never arisen from the dead and become the first-fruits of them that sleep; if Old Testament stories were myths, and Biblical prophecies were not predictions and were never to be fulfilled; if John the Evangelist were no more inspired than John Greenleaf Whittier,—yet, so long as the world is the

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better and the people in it the happier for believing the old, old Story—it is cruel—it is *fiendish* to empty the soul of faith and give it nothing—nothing—in exchange for what it valued as a pearl of great price.

This was the weak and womanish conclusion of a three days' study which had been, for two of the three, a desperate battle for her soul's salvation. She could not answer logically one of the arguments she had disputed; it had *not* been given to her in that supreme hour what she should say, or even think. She had passed through the waters, and they had overflowed her, and the fires had kindled upon her soul.

“I may be weak. They are wicked!” she said deliberately. “It is like knocking the crutches from under a cripple's arms, and leaving him to get along without so much as a stick. I wish the man who wrote this book had been paralyzed before he ever put pen to paper. If there is a Hereafter, and if any of the things he denies are true, he will have

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to account for what he has done—sometime and somewhere.”

This was on Thursday afternoon, and just after she had read a scholarly exposition of the passage in the alleged prediction of the putative Isaiah:

*“He was wounded for our transgression; He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed.”*

According to this exposition, the words are not a Messianic prophecy. They have nothing to do with the crucified Messiah, and refer solely to persecuted Israel under the Captivity.

Ruth brought the two sides of the book together with a sharp concussion, raised her arm high and flung *Search-lights* across the room with force that drove it fast into a corner.

“I won’t read another word!” she cried, passionately. “They have undermined my faith. They have taken away my only hope

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in life and in death. GOD may forgive them —if there is any GOD left after they have done with Him. I never will!”

She reviewed the closely-written pages of her notebook, and sneered forlornly. Most of the proof-texts were gleaned from disputed portions of the Book whose authenticity she had tried to substantiate; her arguments were as weak as water. She was like a defeated army that sees its own guns turned upon it. Ripping page after page from the covers, she crammed them into a waste-basket before she obeyed the call to dinner.

Her mother had a tablespoonful of Beef-Iron-and-Wine poured out for her; her father shaved a slice of corned beef so thin that it writhed after the knife-blade like a pine-shaving, and laid it silently upon her plate. Mrs. Bergen pressed some homemade pickled white onions upon her daughter. They were first-rate for bringing up the appetite, and if Ruth would chew a few grains



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of roasted coffee after dinner, it would make her breath all right again. Not that it mattered much anyway. “Robert”—slyly—“wouldn’t be home until Saturday.”

The girl made a languid feint at dining, as much to avert inquiry as to please those whose darling she was. She made talk, too, in the pauses between Mrs. Bergen’s kindly cooings. An extra spoonful of green tea—“real hyson,”—had gone into the pot on purpose to tone Ruth’s nerves. It was strong enough to bear up an egg, and bitter as soot, even after it had been “eased down” with cream so thick that it had to be ladled out of the cream-jug. Plenty of the same deluged Ruth’s share of rice-pudding. Mrs. Bergen “held to cream” as an up-builder of the human system. If her churn were the poorer for her daughter’s invalidism, she did not “begrudge” the waste. While the girl toyed with her spoon, dabbling it in the contents of her saucer, and now and then, raising it to her lips, her seniors seemed not to

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notice how little she ate and how little she said. They were very kind and tactful. She had much to be thankful for, and a part of the much was that the cause of her distress was not suspected. Her father would have no patience with Robert's "crochetty notions," and her mother would think hard of the boy for worrying her child. In a day or two she would pull herself straight. As soon as she could think of something besides Plenary Inspiration, Scriptural Sagas, the Authenticity of the Fourth Gospel and the Moral Influence Theory, she would prove that she was neither unobservant nor ungrateful. She hoped her father and mother would never hear of the Higher Criticism, and that Garrett, Jr., would live, grow up into an old man and die without ever reading *Search-lights of Scripture*.

If only the ringing in her ears, which must be caused by quinine, and the singing over and over in her brain of those four dreadful lines would stop!

“Dying, Sir! Dying!”

‘Far hence He lies  
In the lorn, Syrian town—’

That must be Jerusalem, where they laid  
Him to rest in Joseph’s new tomb——

“And on His grave with shining eyes,  
The Syrian stars look down.”

The hateful rhyme haunted her, stuck to her memory like thistle-down that, when blown away, floats up a little way and settles back again. She caught herself brushing it away as she would a gnat.

She was moaning it as fast as she could articulate the syllables, rolling her head from side to side to get rid of the floating particles, when her mother heard her on the stairs and came to see what had gone wrong.

Ruth lay upon her side across the bed as if she had fallen there. There was no pillow under her head, which had dropped back in an attitude no reasonable creature would have kept for a moment. Her face was almost purple.

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“And no wonder, with all the blood determining to your head, child!” ejaculated Mrs. Bergen, rushing forward to raise it.

Her color was not lowered, and she talked all the time her mother was loosening her clothes and getting her to bed in such decorous sort as became a Christian sickening for typhoid.

That was the doctor's diagnosis. Here was the key to headache, nausea, insomnia—every symptom that had baffled and troubled her friends. Mrs. de Baun was sent for and arrived before bedtime, prepared to stay while the fever ran its course. It ran fast and furiously, and Ruth's talk kept up with it. Not once was it still all that night while the two women sat up with her, their eyes, brimful of awe and grief, meeting in mute questioning over the pillow creased by the tossing head, and while the father, as wretched and sleepless as they, roamed from floor to floor of the house and paced the piazza by the hour until the day broke.



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head, Ruth jerked away from him and kept up the terrible roll back and forth, back and forth. It was enough of itself to exhaust her vitality. Her tongue was swollen, her baked lips moved incessantly in rapid, incoherent whisperings.

“It beats all where she got the stuff she talks,” said the mother. “It’s all about the subject of religion. Sometimes she prays, most times she’s repeating texts and asking Robert what they mean. Maybe, when he comes, he may be able to quiet her a bit. She’s lost her voice and no wonder!”

She offered another conjecture by-and-bye. Could the young folks have quarreled? Ruth was always too sensitive and that bound up in Robert that a sharp word from him would go near to breaking her heart. Opposed to this were Robert’s call on the way to the train Monday morning, the letter and parcel left for his betrothed, and Ruth’s remark—“You and he would spoil me to death if you could.” It was a hopeless puz-

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zle. Mrs. de Baun connected her sister's ravings with the sermon on the piazza Sunday night. Ruth's mind ran continually upon Inspiration and the like, and Robert had discoursed at length upon the subject. But there! what was the use of guessing? Most likely the things she talked most of, now that she was out of her head, never entered her brain while she was well. That was generally the way with delirious people. And crazy ones as well.

Mr. Bergen listened to them with one ear. The other ear and all of his thoughts were bent upon his girl. Leaning low to the fever-dried mouth, he distinguished her lover's name, followed by a medley of theological terms and allusions to certain books in the Bible, jumbled together inextricably and without a show of sequence. As he straightened himself with a sigh of utter bafflement, he espied the fallen volume, overlooked in its dark corner in the disorder and anxiety of the last few days. His wife's

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mention of Ruth's studies during the earlier part of the week had quickened the detective instinct within him. On his way across the room to pick up the book, he saw the torn MSS. in the wastebasket. Book and basket went with him downstairs.

Twilight, murky with rain, was shortening the vista of the village street as Robert Craig leaped from the six o'clock train and took his hurried way by the nearest cross-cuts to the Bergen homestead. The "long season in May," otherwise known as "the blossom-storm," had closed in upon the valley that morning, continuing, with intermittent gusts of wind like hysterical weeping, all day. The asphalt sidewalks showed black and glossy between fallen petals from trees and hedges. Before the Bergen house it was carpeted, as with discolored snow, by the bereft locust-trees. In the gravel-walk leading from the gate to the porch the drenched blossoms were drifted between the low box-rows. The young man's hasty feet



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crushed them with a mournful, soaked sound. In the corners of the steps they were huddled by the wind and packed by showers. Robert took in every detail of the scene with the strained intensity of consciousness that is born under powerful excitement, like a sixth sense with which the other senses and volition have nothing to do.

The front-door was closed, but not locked. He entered without ringing, passing on at once to the family “living-room” to the left. The light of a lamp streamed out into the silent hall. It stood upon the centre-table by which Mr. Bergen was sitting. His forehead was between his palms; his elbows rested on the table, and he seemed to be reading intently. About and beyond the book between his elbows were scattered sheets of written paper. Robert took it all in on the threshold, without the pause of a second. Passing swiftly to the old man’s side, he laid his hand upon his shoulder.

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“How is she?” he asked in husky breathlessness.

He recoiled, throwing up his arm in involuntary self-defence, before the gesture with which the master of the house sprang to his feet. His face blackened and wrinkled with grief and rage; his eyelids were swollen with sleeplessness and tears; he glared redly at the intruder as at a rattlesnake. When he spoke his lips rolled back from teeth that gnashed upon and bit at the words.

“So-o-o!” drawing out the monosyllable until it hissed. “You’ve come to see your work—have you? ‘How is she?’ Dying, sir! dying! I thank GOD that she is, when I think what would have become of her soul if this thing had gone on!” He struck the open book with a fist doubled hard. “This is the sort of devil’s dish you have been feeding her upon and poisoning her with through and through. This is your property. Your name is in it. I’ll show you what I mean to do with it, as I would do

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with any other deadly poison—rat’s bane, or arsenic, or strychnine—left within reach of an innocent child like that upstairs.”

Seizing the book with one hand, he clutched the young man’s shoulder with the other and dragged him through the dining-room to the kitchen.

“Take that lid off!” he commanded the amazed cook. “Don’t stand gaping there! Take it off, I say!”

Into the glowing crater thus bared, he thrust the condemned volume, rammed it into the reddest hollow of the coals with the poker, and as it caught fire, clashed the lid back into place.

“Now come!” he uttered to the thunder-stricken visitor, stalking back to the living-room.

“I cannot think”—stammered Robert, finding voice as he followed him.

Had grief driven the old man mad? The suspicion softened the heart of the younger.

“I cannot divine,”—he said, more dis-

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tinctly—"what you mean to accuse me of, Mr. Bergen."

The retort was a tigerish snarl.

"I wish you had never tried to think! What brains you once had were eaten out by self-conceit of your own cleverness. That is the trick of your tribe. The first use you make of the knowledge that you have minds is to try to prove that you have not immortal souls. As soon as you begin to know anything, you set to work to show that you and everybody else knows nothing. O, I have heard of agnosticism—the most diabolical of all your "isms"—and that is what it amounts to—just that and nothing else. No, young man! I have not lost my senses. I mean every word I say and ten thousand times more. I have read what that suffering angel has written here"—gathering up the scattered leaves while speaking. "Poor, ignorant lamb! It was like fighting a razor with a rye-straw. You'll see what I am talking about when you read these. Read

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them you shall, if I have to stand over you while you do it. These are the first-fruits of your ministry of reconciliation”—with withering sarcasm. “You have stripped her of everything she held dear—and given her worse than nothing in return. When I think of it!”——

He clenched his jaws; opened the table-drawer, put the papers into it and locked it. Then he faced his companion without looking at him—an action that had cutting significance.

“Now—we will go upstairs!”

As Robert trod the carpeted stairs cautiously, in mechanical imitation of the father’s guarded footfalls, one thought formed itself in the seething chaldron of his tortured wits.

“This man’s limitations are simply incredible in this age and country!”

In the overwhelming bewilderment wrought by Mr. Bergen’s attack, the young fellow had not begun to apprehend what he

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was to meet in that hushed upper chamber. The mental criticism passed upon his host was an automatic act of reason prompted by the habit of looking back of effect for cause.

Logic and self-conceit fled together with the opening of the bedroom door. Ruth lay high upon her pillows, gasping for breath. Her eyes were shut and sunken, her features pinched into the sharp outlines of death; her mouth still worked with the fast outflow of words which she was too weak to make audible. This whispering, hardly louder than the failing breath, was the only sound in the room except for the weak sighs of wind made by the fan with which Mrs. de Baun drew the air from the windows to the laboring lungs. Mrs. Bergen was on the other side of the bed. The physician leaned on the footboard. His inert attitude and sorrowfully impassive visage shot the awful truth straight to the lover's heart. With a stifled cry of exquisite agony, he fell upon his knees

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beside the low bed and laid hold of one of the quivering hands.

“My darling! my darling! O GOD! I never thought of this!”——

“Hush!” said Mrs. De Baun. “She seems to know nobody, but you may disturb her. She called you, about an hour ago, quite distinctly. She has not spoken aloud since.”

“She will not suffer much longer,” the doctor said, presently, as the restless lips were still for several minutes at a time. He moved to her side and felt her pulse.

“Please GOD, she will pass quietly.”

Lengthening distances of silence divided the fluttering whispers. The outer world was stilling into the hush that reigned in the upper chamber. The rain was a muffled pattering that did not awaken the wet leaves. The damp air had in it suggestions of the fallen locust-flowers, and the fan brought it in measured breaths over the bed.

The bed where Ruth lay a-dying! While Robert's eyes never left her altered face, re-

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lentless memory conjured up a hundred visions of what she had been, and what she could never be again.

Just one week ago to-night! He groaned aloud. The tricky sprite who had waltzed away from him, balancing herself on tiptoe to look over her shoulder at the swirling skirt of the gown she was so innocently vain of making all by herself; the fond and frank pupil who had gazed up at him from her low stool and feared that she loved him better than her own soul—flitted between him and the graying mask on the pillow. She had always done what he would have her do. Surely she would not leave him now if he could but make her hear and comprehend his need of her.

He raised himself to her ear so abruptly that no one could hinder the mad movement, and called her aloud, imperatively, in a passion of entreaty.

“Ruth! my love! my love! Come back to me!”



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Her body shook and thrilled as flame wavers in the wind. Her fingers contracted upon his, then broke from his hold. Her arms were tossed free of the coverings, her eyes opened wide. A thin, shrilling cry that was not her voice, quavered forth from lips that could not move:

“O Robert! *They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him!*”

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Dear Christ! wounded in the house of Thy friends in this, our day, as in Herod's! into Thy hands we commit this blinded soul!

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*Thou who takest away the sins of the world,  
Have mercy upon us!*







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