

The Storyteller.

THE MIST OF DESPAIR.

CHAPTER I.

'WHAT? Vernaker, the atheist? Impossible!'

'It's true, man. I had it from Welman, who is his closest friend.'

'Well, I'm hanged. You might have told me that England had declared war against the world and I'd have believed it, but that Vernaker, the very bitterest, cleverest, and most violent atheist, should have been received into any Church on earth, much less the Catholic Church, does seem a bit strong.'

The other shrugged his shoulders.

'It is so, none the less; by to-morrow all the papers will be placarding it in large type. Bye-bye, I have to meet Demingham at White's,' and with a friendly wave of the hand he was gone.

Left to himself, Mr. Gilbert Weston, of the famous publishing firm of Waldron, Weston and Co., sauntered into the Athenæum and flung himself on a comfortable lounge in the smoke-room. He lit a cigar reflectively.

'Wonder if it's true,' he muttered; 'hope to goodness he won't withdraw his book.'

Then with a sigh suggestive of the uselessness of considering evils before they presented themselves he got hold of the *Westminster Gazette* and was soon deep in its pages.

Next morning found him betimes in Caxton House Square. He had scarcely taken his seat before the huge pile of letters when a caller was announced and Thibault Vernaker entered.

The new-comer was a man in a thousand. Distinction and genius were written in every line of his powerful face. A broad forehead overshadowing two deep-set searching eyes, a strangely determined mouth, and a nose and chin moulded like those of a Greek statue, surmounting all a large mass of deep black hair, giving to the earnest face a touch of gloom and sombre melancholy.

Many people disliked Thibault Vernaker. They said he was abrupt and overbearing in argument, but no one had ever so much as hinted that in any of his actions sincerity was ever wanting.

The man confronting him, Gilbert Weston, was perhaps as contrary a nature to his own as could possibly be found. If anything deficient in intellect, a species of cunning, which in him was the predominant trait, more than made up for any shortcoming in this direction, and enabled him more often than not to over-reach men far cleverer than himself. He affected as an attractive cloak a genial good-fellow manner which often deceived people into thinking him the most good-natured man in the world, which, however, was not generally their final impression of his qualities.

Mr. Weston was conscious of an uneasy misgiving as he rose to greet his visitor.

'My dear Mr. Vernaker I'm delighted to see you,' he exclaimed effusively. 'You have no need to name your errand, you wish to know about your book; the soon-to-be-famous "Uncreated Universe" is making good progress and is now well in the hands of the printers. Three more editions have already been ordered, so that it should prove a huge success in every way.'

A kind of quick shudder passed over Vernaker's frame.

'It would seem I am only just in time then,' he said quickly.

'How—in what way?' queried the other, pretending not to understand what his heart told him was the meaning.

'I thought you might probably have heard,' rejoined Vernaker slowly, 'I have changed my views since I wrote that book, and therefore my manifestly proper course of duty is to withdraw it.'

So the murder was out.

Gilbert Weston was silent for a moment, whilst before his eyes passed an unpleasant vista of financial ruin. No one but himself knew that at the core the firm of Waldron, Weston and Co. was hopelessly rotten, and he had been relying on the expected success of this famous book, which had been heralded and announced in every country under the sun, to retrieve its lost position. At last he spoke.

'Surely, my dear sir, you cannot be in earnest?' he said, trying to gain time.

Vernaker smiled almost grimly.

'I think you must be aware I am not in the habit of jesting,' he said.

'But think of the loss it will be to yourself, both in the way of fame and financially, and to the world in general,' protested Weston, thinking that perhaps a little judicious flattery might have a good effect. 'Why, sir,' he continued, appearing to get enthusiastic on the subject, 'it is a book which will live with the glorious works of the immortal thinkers of the past. Such a book has not been seen for ages. All the world is waiting for its advent.'

'In that case,' replied Vernaker, 'it is all the more dangerous, and I shudder to think of the evil effects it might have produced had I not awakened in time from my dark dream.'

'But it is unfair to me,' exclaimed Weston. 'Although there is no legal agreement between us there is an understanding, which to a man of honor should be as binding as stamped parchment.'

'Yes,' rejoined the other sternly. 'Remember also I have other obligations of honor—to my Creator and to my fellow-men.'

'Bah!' broke in Weston, angrily, 'you to talk of your Creator—you who have spent your existence in trying to prove there is no God.'

A look of pain passed over Vernaker's face, and for a moment he did not answer. When he at last spoke there was a set determined look in his eyes which boded ill for any attempt to turn him from his object.

'Look you, Weston,' he said, 'I will place the case before you clearly, and may God judge between you and me. I who had been

brought up an atheist, and who had sincere, firm belief in the convictions of my parents, wrote a book in support of those theories, and you took it up for publication. In the meantime I have, through a strange chain of circumstances, been led to see my error, and have joined the Catholic Church. Therefore it is my obvious duty to withdraw that book, which would sow seeds of unbelief broadcast in the world. There was no sin in my writing it, because I did so in all sincerity, but if I now allowed it to be launched upon the people I should be committing the most frightful crime imaginable. That is my case. Now listen to yours. You, who pose as a religious man who can be seen every Sunday in the front row of pews at your church, you are willing to publish a book which will undermine the very foundations of the religion you profess, and for the sake of money would sacrifice the spiritual lives of thousands of your fellow-beings. Now, sir, talk about honorable obligations if you dare.'

Weston sat cowed, as the fiery eloquence of the man before him poured upon his head.

'Well,' he whimpered, 'I am not particularly religious, but it is the fashion to go to church on Sundays.'

'In other words, you are a hypocrite,' rejoined the other contemptuously.

'And as to publishing the book, I must live,' continued Weston.

'I fail to see the necessity,' replied Vernaker, with that cool, dry sarcasm which had made him numberless enemies.

'Confound it, sir! I tell you what it is,' shouted Weston, stung to anger by this last retort, 'I will publish the book whether you wish it or no!'

'I think not,' said Vernaker calmly. 'I either take the manuscript with me now, or else leave here to go to my solicitors.'

Weston was silent for some moments, and sat glowering at his *vis-à-vis*, his small eyes, with all their veneer of amiability gone, sparkling with vindictive cunning. At last he opened one of the small drawers of his desk and drew out a bulky roll of manuscript. Vernaker smiled calmly to himself as Weston handed him the papers.

'So it was also a lie about the book being in the hands of the printers,' Vernaker said, eyeing the other with contemptuous scorn.

'It was,' as coolly replied the publisher, 'but let me tell you this, Mr. Vernaker, he laughs best who laughs last. Good day.' And touched a small bell at his side, the commissionaire appeared, and the visitor was shown out.

When Thibault Vernaker reached his home and stood before the fire in his study, he paused. In his hands he held the manuscript—his 'Uncreated Universe'—which was to have made his fame ring from Continent to Continent. It was almost the work of his life, for in it were concentrated the fruits, Dead Sea fruits, alas! of years upon years of patient study and toil. A strange moist feeling came to his eyes, and something seemed to catch in his throat as he stood gazing at his work. Who shall say that an author does not feel for the creation of his brain, almost the intense passion of a mother for her child? He has, through his creative genius, produced it from nothing, save the wild disjointed ideas coursing through his mind. So Vernaker thought as he looked down fondly on the manuscript.

'Why should I not keep it?' he mused. 'Unpublished it can do no harm.'

But his conscience told him otherwise, and his clear, well-defined sense of duty again stood him in good stead. One last look and his beloved work was in the heart of the fierce, devouring flames. He stamped it in furiously with his foot, and thrust it deeper with the fire iron, and then stood watching while the cruel flames licked it up joyously, danced round it mockingly, and soon reduced it to a charred mass of ashes. Then, and not till then, he threw himself down into a chair, and buried his face in his hands. When his wife entered some minutes later she found him so, and in a moment was by his side.

'My poor darling,' she cried anxiously, 'what are you grieving about?'

He raised his face, almost haggard with anguish, and smiled at her in a strange, pained manner.

'Nothing, Connie dear, only my "Uncreated Universe" is gone for ever, and I am, perhaps wrongly, cut up about it,' he said as he kissed her tenderly; 'but there, I must think no more about what is best forgotten.'

His wife rested her head on his shoulder and looked lovingly into his face.

'And do you regret, darling, that you have found it necessary to destroy the book?' she asked.

He gazed down at her beautiful face, with the snow-white, intellectual forehead and clear, honest eyes, and he felt that with her as his guiding star, he could never falter from the narrow path of right.

'Not for an instant, my dearest, and I thank God sincerely from my heart that He gave me you to lead me, blind as I was, to His Holy Church,' and he kissed her again.

CHAPTER II.

Winter in London with all its gloomy accompaniments. Dark, foggy weather; cold, damp, drizzling rain; sodden, washed-out looking trees. Seton street could certainly never have been a cheerful thoroughfare. Once upon a time, so long ago that nothing but a memory was left, it was in the centre of London Society life; but now, alas! left high and dry by the receding waters of fashion. In a small sitting-room in one of the tumble-down houses, whose carved porticos showed their lordly origin, two persons were seated—Thibault Vernaker and his wife. But how came they here?

Like many another, Vernaker had found that on entering the Catholic Church he had cast off, not only all ties of kin and friend-