OUTSIDE THE WORLD

BY THE AUTHOR OF "BITTER SWEETS," "THE TALLANTS OF BARTON," ETC

At first I did not like it. The silence which almost made itself heard, the dead calm which the senses could feel, was dreadfully oppressive. The three bells of the old church that chimed on Sundays were funereal. The quaint moss-grown village was like a grave. The half-dozen sleepy people who sat and nodded over my morning sermon provoked my melancholy and did not excite my zeal. The bigoted squire in his house on the hill was a bore and a nuisance. This was in the early days of my fall, when I turned my back upon the world, because I had no choice but to run. I had fought with it and struggled and was defeated, and I am now the perpetual curate of Carlingford-by-the-Water.

Those first hot days of my disappointment are over long since, and I sit by the brook and thank God that I came here to be at rest. The chimes are now tender gentle music to my soul, and the moss is not softer than the quiet peaceful path of my life. Some of the select few who heard my first sermon have dropped away quietly to their rest, and the squire is gray and gentle, and sits in the porch of his house on the hill and talks to me of his early days. Carlingford is just outside the world, on the borders of life, where I can sometimes hear faintly the din of the great battle that is going on.

Now and then friends who have been wounded in the conflict find their way to Carlingford. They come back to me at long intervals—come back with changed faces and changed manners—come back after their dreams are over, defeated, broken, resigned. But only the unsuccessful men find me out. The rich, the victorious, the famous, they have lived out of the old ways; they have gone beyond the old associations; they have fought upwards and onwards, and reached the goal in triumph. These are not for Carlingford; these forget the perpetual curate who had big hopes once. When my friends have a fall, then they come back to me, then they "hunt me up," as they say. When finance has hit them, or the world has gone wrong—when the bishop has died without promoting them—when they have failed as painters and *littérateurs*—then they think of old times and old friends, and schoolboy companions and college chums, of early dreams and early hopes, and the perpetual curate is remembered once more. "They hunt me up," to shake hands again and talk of the past. They sit by my fire and smoke, and tell me of their troubles.

What stories they have to tell! How oddly it sounds, their news of the world and its conflicts! I have seen this and that in the *Times*, which I get on the second day after publication; it is like a romance now,

the newspaper, like something I have read before, and I turn and look down the long winding river and think of the land that lies beyond. But these waifs and strays of the fight, they have been in the conflict, they know all about it, have struggled single-handed with the giants, know them by name, can describe them, and their tales are like stories from Bagdad. I fancy some of them exaggerate a little, that they multiply their foes as Falstaff did; but it is so long since I fought and was bruised, and ten years at Carlingford is no more than a week in the world. How they talk, these bruised friends of my youth! Some of Scylla and Charybdis, some of Circe, some of Mammon, some of Fate and taking the tide at the flood.

Lately there came to me two men who had been maimed and lamed in the financial storm which raged in the great world. I knew it had been; for I saw accounts of social wrecks and disasters in the *Times*. I had seen notices of the panic, and had been called upon to describe to the best of my knowledge what a panic was. My little handful of parishioners had heard that there was a panic in London, and there had been a serious discussion amongst them as to the nature of the beast. Arthur Masters knew what the panic was; for he was the first of my two friends who hunted me up after the storm. He had been educated for the Church; but he was always fond of figures; he was great in arithmetical calculations; had notions about the currency; and finally, instead of digging and delving into the mysteries of theology, he plunged into finance. Two years ago he was worth a hundred thousand pounds; a week ago, when he sat by my side at Carlingford, he was not worth as many pence. Had he been content with a hundred thousand pounds, he might have possessed it now; but he wanted two hundred thousand, and he is ruined. He confessed it all to me; he had fought for too much, and now he is gray and broken and short of breath, and seeks for the rest that will not come.

He never sought me when he was victorious; but I do not tell him this, poor fellow. I know that he has been forced aside into the by-way of life, and that this is how he finds me out. I remember him when he was a bright curly-headed fellow, the pride of a fond mother, and the admiration of a host of pretty girls. When I fell in the fight and was pushed aside, I saw his brougham driving down to the House of Commons. At least, I think I saw it; but the time wears out so, and Carlingford is fruitful in imaginings and fancies. Masters thought he would like the old village. The crumbling stocks underneath the elms opposite my window had a special attraction for him, and the daws up in the church tower. But he was only resting awhile. The air was grateful to his dazed brain, and the homely food restored the tone of both mind and body. In a week he stood erect, and then he longed, as I did years ago, to be once more in the fight; and to-day he writes to me and encloses what he calls the draft of a prospectus for a new Limited Company. I hardly know what he means; but I suppose it

is a new invention for some deadly engine to operate in the City. If he retrieves his position, I shall hear from him again, and then see him no more; if he falls, I shall encounter him outside the world, hunting me up.

Some of my old friends drop in upon me out of gratitude. They have been saved at a critical moment. A "mutual friend" has stepped in with his shield at the proper moment. The hard-pressed soldier has regained his footing; and then all at once the old times, the old faces, the familiar names, come back to the memory. Desprey is this man. He hunted me up a short time ago; he came in a hired conveyance from the Barwood Junction, six miles away. The villagers flocked to their doors to look at him alight, and treated the driver to a mug of beer to learn the news. I hardly remembered Desprey at first; his voice sounded like a half-forgotten memory; and then all at once I knew him well. His explanation was brief. He was in the neighbourhood, and could not resist the temptation to call and see me; heard quite by accident that I was perpetual curate of Carlingford, and felt ashamed of himself that he had never looked me up before. The fact was, he had been so much engaged one way and another, had had so many irons in the fire, and all that sort of thing, that he had not had a day to call his own for years.

I could see at once that Desprey had not been hurt much. There was music in his voice, his head was erect, and he smiled without effort. "Surely," I thought in my shambling way, "surely this is a victorious man, come to see me in the day of his triumph." I began mentally to chide myself for being cynical about successful men. "Here is Wealth and Success," I thought, "come at last to shake hands with Failure and Poverty for the sake of past days, on the pure score of friendship," and I thanked heaven that it was so. I hope it may be so still, though I feel assured Desprey came out of gratitude. He had been down on his side; the foe was pressing heavily upon him; in another moment he would have been smitten unto death; and then the friendly shield had come, the friendly shield had shadowed him, the friendly life had been risked to save him. This had roused his better nature, this had excited his old love, and memories of the past had come rushing upon him like a rebuke; and so he had come to see his old friend, and talk of the spring-time of life in the parson's autumn days. And it was so; for when the evening sun had set, the mists had risen upon the bosom of the river, and I had lighted my lamp only to see it obscured in the smoke of Desprey's cigar, he told me of his escape.

"It was at the height of the panic," he said; "I had fifty thousand pounds worth of certain shares lying with a margin, as we call it, at a great discount house. I had been hit in other ways, and had been compelled to deposit these. Suddenly they fell; and I had notice that, unless I could cover them with ten thousand pounds by ten o'clock the

next day, they would be sent into the market and sold. This simply meant next door to ruin. I could not at so short a notice find even a thousand pounds. I had money, but it was not available. What could I do? I was a candidate for Barford, you know, at the time; put up to succeed old Peters when he died. That night I was to address the electors. I did not know what in the world to do. I felt that I was a ruined man, almost bankrupt in purse and in reputation, for the one would have gone with the other. I was paralysed, thought of my wife and children, of the girls at school, the pleasant country seat. I nearly went mad. Going down to the club I met Frank Somers; you know Frank—"

Here Desprey's face lighted up quite joyously, and I remembered Frank as the stroke-oar to our boat at Oxford.

"Yes, I remember Frank," I said; "just remember him."

"Ah, he's a fine fellow," said Desprey, continuing his story. "I met him on the Carlton steps just going in. He shook hands, and said how pale I looked; asked me if I was ill, and hoped nothing had happened. In my despair I told him, as men will tell each other at such times, how I had been hit, and what a fix I was in. 'Ten thousand!' he repeated to himself; 'it is rather a heavy sum, but I think I can manage it for you.' I hardly knew what to think of his remark. *He* thought *he* could manage it for me! Why should he manage it for me? I had never had a business transaction with him in my life. Whilst I was wondering at his friendly words, he said he would go and see a friend in Pall Mall, and join me again in half an hour with an answer upon the subject. I went into the Club; I looked vacantly at the papers; I looked at the list of bankrupts, half-expecting, with my panic-stricken ideas, to see my own name there. I read a case of suicide, and regretted I was a married man. In half an hour Frank Somers came back. 'You can have the money at ten o'clock to-morrow morning,' he said; 'and now be off to Barford, or else you will lose the train.' I could make no reply. I leaned my head against the wall and cried like a child."

And he wept, ay and sobbed, as he told me the story. Little as I can sympathise now with the outside battle (because I have nearly ceased to understand it), I wept too. Thank God, there is some good left in the world still, and there are grateful hearts. Not that I long to be in the world again; it is no place for me; I am content to hear of it, and to give drink to the wayfarers, who have fallen out of the lists for a time, or who have left them, like myself, for ever and ever.

I have a companion whilst I write—a newspaper man. Strange people, these men who write and publish; these men who undertake to instruct mankind! His stories are full of romance and of wonder to me: stories with princes, and lords, and dukes, and actors, and artists, and beggars in them; stories of failure and success strangely commingled. I can hardly believe that I, the perpetual

curate of Carlingford-by-the-Water, ever lived in this world of which the journalist speaks. How strange it sounds, this history of personal encounters, of political strife, of literary rivalry, of theological chaos, of High-Church and Low-Church, and Broad-Church and No-Church! Is my friend rehearsing his notes for a new work to rival *Gulliver's Travels?* Is he airing his imagination for an appendix to the *Arabian Nights?* Surely he has been reading *Bidpai*, and is amusing himself at my expense. I am convinced he is treating me now and then to an extract from *Gil Blas;* and then there is such devilry in his accounts of pit-falls and snares in life's highway, satanic engines hidden in the battle-fields, that I think of Quarles and his Emblems, then turn to Job, and finally think of the Man of many sorrows, and challenge any soldier in the great world to match Him in his troubles and persecutions.

And when the stars are twinkling in the river, and the waters are going on and on, gently down to the sea, I look out into the quiet night, and am content to leave others to bear the cross in show and glitter, in pomp of deanery and bishopric; content to let them have their chariots and their horsemen and their fat servitors; content to be outside the world in this moss-grown old Carlingford; content to be the pastor, and master, and doctor, and friend, and instructor of these poor people, living on the borders of life, journeying with the fathers of the village to the "silent land," where

> "The wicked cease from troubling,
> And the weary are at rest."