

SALEM CHAPEL

VOLUME II

**BY
MRS. OLIPHANT.**

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CHAPTER I.

MRS. VINCENT rose from the uneasy bed, where she had not slept, upon that dreadful Sunday morning, with feelings which it would be vain to attempt any description of. Snatches of momentary sleep more dreadful than wakefulness had fallen upon her during the awful night—moments of unconsciousness which plunged her into a deeper horror still, and from which she started thinking she heard Susan call. Had Susan called, had Susan come, in any dreadful plight of misery, her mother thought she could have borne it; but she could not, yet did, bear this, with the mingled passion and patience of a woman; one moment rising up against the intolerable, the next sitting down dumb and steadfast before that terrible necessity which could not be resisted. She got up in the dim wintry morning with all that restless anguish in her heart, and took out her best black silk dress, and a clean cap to go under her bonnet. She offered a sacrifice and burnt-offering as she dressed herself in her snow-white cuffs, and composed her trim little figure into its Sunday neatness; for the minister's mother must go to chapel this dreadful day. No whisper of the torture she was enduring must breathe among the flock—nothing could excuse her from attending Salem, seeing her son's people, and hearing Mr. Beecher preach, and holding up Arthur's standard at this dangerous crisis of the battle. She felt she was pale when she came into the sitting-room, but comforted herself with thinking that nobody in Salem knew that by nature she had a little tender winter bloom upon her face, and was not usually so downcast and heavy-eyed. Instinctively, she rearranged the breakfast-table as she waited for the young minister from Homerton, who was not an early riser. Mr.

Beecher thought it rather cheerful than otherwise when he came in somewhat late and hurried, and found her waiting by the white covered table, with the fire bright and the tea made. He was in high spirits, as was natural. He thought Vincent was in very comfortable quarters, and had uncommonly pleasant rooms.

“Don’t you think so? And one has just as great a chance of being uncomfortable as not in one’s first charge,” said the young preacher; “but we were all delighted to hear that Vincent had made an ’it. Liberal-minded people, I should say, if I may judge by Mr. Tozer, who was uncommonly friendly last night. These sort of people are the strength of our connection—not great people, you know, but the flower of the middle classes. I am surprised you did not bring Miss Vincent with you for a little cheerful society at this time of the year.”

“My daughter may perhaps come yet, before—before I leave,” said Mrs. Vincent, drawing herself up, with a little hauteur, as Mr. Beecher thought, though in reality it was only a physical expression of that sob of agony to which she dared not give vent in audible sound.

“Oh, I thought it might be more cheerful for her in the winter,” said the preacher, a little affronted that his interest in Vincent’s pretty sister should be received so coldly. He was interrupted by the arrival of the post, for Carlingford was a profane country town, and had its letters on Sunday morning. The widow set herself desperately down in an arm-chair to read Arthur’s letter. It made her heart beat loud with throbs so violent that a blindness came over her eyes, and her very life failed for an instant. It was very short, very assured and certain—he was going to Northumberland, where the fugitives had gone—he was going to bring Susan back.

Mr. Beecher over his egg watched her reading this, and saw that she grew ashy, deathly pale. It was not possible for him to keep silent, or to refrain from wondering what it was.

“Dear me, I am afraid you are ill—can I get you anything?” he said, rising from the table.

Mrs. Vincent folded up her letter. “Thank you; my tea will refresh me,” she said, coming back to her seat. “I did not sleep very much last night, and my head aches: when people come to my time of life,” said the little woman, with a faint heroical smile, “they seldom sleep well the first few nights in a new place. I hope you rested comfortably, Mr. Beecher. Mr. Vincent, Arthur’s dear papa, used to say that he never preached well if he did not sleep well; and I have heard other ministers say it was a very true rule.”

“If that is all, I hope you will be pleased to-day,” said the preacher, with a little complaisance. “I always sleep well; nothing puts me much out in that respect. Perhaps it is about time to start now? I like to have a few minutes in the vestry before going into the pulpit. You know the way perhaps? or we can call at Mr. Tozer’s and get one of them to guide us.”

“I think I know the way,” said Mrs. Vincent, faintly. It was a slight comfort, in the midst of her martyrdom, to leave the room and have a moment to herself. She sank down by her bedside in an inarticulate agony of prayer, which doubtless God deciphered, though it never came to words, and rose up again to put on her bonnet, her neat shawl, her best pair of gloves. The smile that might have come on the face of a martyr at the stake dawned upon the little woman’s lips as she caught sight of her own pale face in the glass, when she was tying her bonnet-strings. She was not

thrusting her hand into the scorching flames, she was only pulling out the bows of black ribbon, and giving the last touch to that perfection of gentle neatness in which Arthur's mother, for his sake, must present herself to his people. She took Mr. Beecher's arm afterwards, and walked with him, through the wintry sunshine and streams of churchgoers, to Salem. Perhaps she was just a little sententious in her talk to the young preacher, who would have stared had anybody told him what active and feverish wretchedness was in her heart. She quoted Arthur's dear father more than usual; she felt a little irritated in spite of herself by the complaisance of the young man from 'Omerton. Notwithstanding the dreadful pressure of her trouble, she felt that his excitement in the prospect of preaching to Arthur's people was quite ill-timed. What did it matter to him whether the Salem flock liked him or not? Were they not Arthur's people, pre-engaged to their own pastor? The gentle widow did what she could to bring Mr. Beecher down as they walked through Grove Street. She remarked, gently, that where a minister was very popular, a stranger had but little chance of appreciation. "You must not be mortified if you see the congregation look disappointed when you come into the pulpit," said Mrs. Vincent; "for my son, if he had not been called away so suddenly, was to commence a course of lectures to-day, and I believe a good deal of expectation was raised about them." The new preacher was perhaps a shade less buoyant when he resigned his friend's mother to Tozer at the door of the chapel, to be conducted to her pew. Salem was already about half filled; and the entering flock looked at Mrs. Vincent, as she stood with the deacon in the porch, asking, with the courtesy of a royal personage, humble yet affable, after his wife and daughter. Tozer was a little overawed by the politeness of the minister's mother. He concluded that she was "quite the lady" in his private heart.

“If you tell me where the minister’s seat is, I need not trouble you to go in,” said Mrs. Vincent. “Mrs. Tufton’s uncommon punctual, and it’s close upon her time,” said Tozer; “being a single man, we’ve not set apart a seat for the minister—not till he’s got some one as can sit in it; it’s the old minister’s seat, as is the only one we’ve set aside; for we’ve been a-letting of the pews uncommon this past month, and it don’t answer to waste nothing in a chapel as is as expensive to keep up as Salem. It’s our pride to give our minister a good salary, as you know, ma’am, and we’ve all got to pay up according, so there ain’t no pew set apart for Mr. Vincent—not till he’s got a wife.”

“Then I am to sit in Mr. Tufton’s pew?” said the minister’s mother, not without a little sharpness.

“There ain’t no more of them never at Salem, but Mrs. Tufton,” said Tozer. “Mr. Tufton has had a shock, and the only one of a family they’ve at home is a great invalid, and never was within the chapel door in my time. Mr. Tufton he do come now and again. He would have been here to-day, I make bold to say, but for the minister being called away. I hope you’ve ’eard from Mr. Vincent, ma’am, and as he’ll soon be back. It ain’t a good thing for a congregation when the pastor takes to going off sudden. Here she is a-coming. Mrs. Tufton, ma’am, this is Mrs. Vincent, the minister’s mother; she’s been waiting for you to go into your pew.”

“I hope I shall not be in your way,” said Mrs. Vincent, with her dignified air. “I have always been accustomed to see a seat for the minister, but as I am a stranger, I hope for once I shall not be in your way.”

“Don’t say a word!” cried Mrs. Tufton. “I am as glad as possible to see Mr. Vincent’s mother. He is a precious young man. It’s not a right principle, you know, but it’s hard not to envy people that are so happy in their families; nothing would make my Tom take to the ministry, though his papa and I had set our hearts upon it; and he’s in Australia, poor dear fellow! and my poor girl is such an invalid. I hope your daughter is pretty well? Come this way. I hope I shall see a great deal of you. Mr. Tufton takes such an interest in his young brother; all that he wants is a little good advice—that is what the minister always tells me. All that Mr. Vincent wants, he says, is a little good advice.”

The latter part of this was communicated in a whisper, as the two ladies seated themselves in the minister’s pew. After a momentary pause of private devotion, Mrs. Tufton again took up the strain where she had left it off.

“I assure you, we take the greatest interest in him at the cottage. He doesn’t come to see us so often as Mr. Tufton would wish, but I daresay he has other things to do. The minister often says to me that he is a precious young man, is Mr. Vincent, and that a little good advice and attention to those that know better is all he wants to make him a shining light; and I am sure he will want no good advice Mr. Tufton can give him. So you may keep your mind easy—you may keep your mind quite easy. In any difficulty that could occur, I am sure the minister would act as if he were his own son.”

“You are very kind; but I hope no difficulty will occur,” said Mrs. Vincent, with a little quiver in her lip.

“I hope not, indeed; but there are so many people to please in a flock,” said the late minister’s wife, with a sigh. “We always got on very well, for Mr. Tufton is not one to take a deal of notice of any unpleasantness; but you know as well as I do that it takes a deal of attention to keep all matters straight. If you’ll excuse me, it’s a great pity Mr. Vincent has gone away to-day. Nothing would have made my husband leave his post just as he was intimated to begin a course of lectures. It’s very excusable in Mr. Vincent, because he hasn’t that experience that’s necessary. I always say he’s very excusable, being such a young man; and we have no doubt he’ll get on very well if he does but take advice.”

“My son was very unwilling to go; but it was quite necessary. His sister,” said Mrs. Vincent, clasping her hands tight under her shawl to balance the pang in her heart, “was with some friends—whom we heard something unpleasant about—and he went to bring her home. I expect them—to-morrow.”

The poor mother shut her lips close when she had said the words, to keep in the cry or sob that seemed bursting from them. Yes, God help her, she expected them; perhaps to-morrow—perhaps that same dreadful night; but even in the height of her anguish there occurred to Mrs. Vincent a forlorn prayer that they might not come back that Sunday. Rather another agonising night than that all the “Chapel folks” should be aware that their pastor was rushing wildly along distant railways on the day of rest. The fact that he was doing so added a pang to her own trouble. Total disarrangement, chaos, all the old habitudes of life gone to wreck, and only desperation and misery left, was the sensation produced by that interruption of all religious use and wont. It came upon her with an acute sting, to think that her poor young minister was travelling that Sunday; just as in Arthur’s own experience at that

same moment, the utter incoherence, chaos, and wretchedness into which his life had suddenly fallen, breathed upon him in the sound of the church-bells.

“Dear me, I am very sorry!” said Mrs. Tufton; “some fever or something, I suppose—something that’s catching? Dear, dear me, I am so sorry! but there are some people that never take infection; a little camphor is such a nice thing to carry about—it can’t do any harm, you know. Mrs. Tozer tells me he is a very nice young man, Mr. Vincent’s friend from ’Omerton. I don’t like to say such a thing of a girl, but I do believe your son could have that Phoebe any day for asking, Mrs. Vincent. I can’t bear forward girls, for my part—that is her just going into the pew, with the pink bonnet; oh, you know her!—to be sure, Mrs. Pigeon remarked you were sure to go there; though I should have hoped we would have seen you as soon as any one in Carlingford.”

“Indeed, I have been much disappointed not to call. I—I hope I shall—tomorrow,” said the widow, to whom tomorrow loomed dark like another world, and who could not help repeating over and over the dreaded name.

“That is Maria Pigeon all in white—to be only tradespeople they do dress more than I approve of,” said Mrs. Tufton. “My Adelaide, I am sure, never went like that. Many people think Maria a deal nicer-looking than Phœbe Tozer, but her mother is so particular—more than particular—what I call troublesome, you know. You can’t turn round without giving her offence. Dear me, how my tongue is going! the minister would say I was just at my old imprudent tricks—but you, that were a minister’s wife, can understand. She is such a difficult woman to deal with. I am sure Mr. Tufton is always telling them to wait, and that Mr. Vincent is a

young man yet, and experience is all he wants. I wish he had a good wife to keep him straight; but I don't know that that would be advisable either, because of Phœbe and the rest. Dear, dear, it is a difficult thing to know what to do!—but Mr. Tufton always says, If he had a little more experience—— Bless me, the young man is in the pulpit!” said Mrs. Tufton, coming to a sudden standstill, growing very red, and picking up her hymn-book. Very seldom had the good woman such a chance of talk. She ran herself so out of breath that she could not join in that first hymn.

But Mrs. Vincent, who had a sensation that the pew, and indeed the whole chapel, trembled with the trembling that was in her own frame, but who felt at the same time that everybody was looking at her, and that Arthur's credit was involved, stood up steadfastly, holding her book firm in both her hands, and with an effort almost too much for her, the heroism of a martyr, added her soft voice, touched with age, yet still melodious and true, to the song of praise. The words choked her as she uttered them, yet with a kind of desperate courage she kept on. Praise!—it happened to be a very effusive hymn that day, an utterance of unmitigated thanksgiving; fortunately she had not sufficient command of her mind or wits to see clearly what she was singing, or to enter into the wonderful bitter difference between the thanks she was uttering and the position in which she stood. Could she give God thanks for Susan's ruin, or rejoice in the light He had given, when it revealed only misery? She was not called upon to answer that hard question. She stood up mechanically with her white face set in pale steadfastness, and was only aware that she was singing, keeping the tune, and making herself noways remarked among the crowd of strange people, many of whom turned curious eyes towards her. She stood with both her feet set firm on the floor, both her hands

holding fast to the book, and over the ache of frightful suspense in her heart came the soft voice of her singing, which for once in her life meant nothing except a forlorn determination to keep up and hold herself erect and vigilant, sentinel over Arthur's fortunes and his people's thoughts.

Mr. Beecher's sermon was undeniably clever; the Salem folks pricked up their ears at the sound of it, recalling as it did that period of delightful excitation when they were hearing candidates, and felt themselves the dispensers of patronage. That was over now, and they were wedded to one; but the bond of union between themselves and their pastor was far from being indissoluble, and they contemplated this new aspirant to their favour with feelings stimulated and piquant, as a not inconsolable husband, likely to become a widower, might contemplate the general female public, out of which candidates for the problematically vacant place might arise. Mrs. Pigeon, who was the leader of the opposition, and whose daughter Mr. Vincent had not distinguished, whose house he had not specially frequented, and whom, most of all, he had passed in the street without recognition, made a note of this man from 'Omerton. If the painful necessity of dismissing the present pastor should occur—as such things did occur, deplorable though they were—it might be worth while sending for Mr. Beecher. She made a note of him privately in her mind, as she sat listening with ostentatious attention, nodding her head now and then by way of assent to his statements. Mrs. Vincent remarked her as she watched the congregation from the minister's pew, with her jealous mother's eyes. The Tozers were not so devoted in their listening. Mrs. Tozer's brilliant cherry-coloured bonnet visibly drooped once or twice with a blessed irregularity of motion; all these signs Mrs. Vincent perceived as she sat in preternatural acute consciousness

of everything round her, by Mrs. Tufton's side. She was even aware that the sermon was clever; she remembered expressions in it long after, which somehow got burned in, without any will of hers, upon her breaking heart. The subdued anguish that was in her collected fuel for its own silent consuming fire, even in the congregation of Salem, where, very upright, very watchful, afraid to relax her strained nerves even by leaning back or forward, she lived through the long service as if through a year of suffering.

The congregation dispersed in a buzz of talk and curiosity. Everybody wanted to know where the minister had gone, and what had taken him away. "I can't say as I think he's using of us well," said somebody, whom Mrs. Vincent could hear as she made her way to the door. "Business of his own! a minister ain't got no right to have business of his own, leastways on Sundays. Preaching's his business. I don't hold with that notion. He's in our employ, and we pays him well——"

Here a whisper from some charitable bystander directed the speaker's eyes to Mrs. Vincent, who was close behind.

"Well! it ain't nothing to me who hears me," said this rebellious member, not without a certain vulgar pleasure in his power of insult. "We pays him well, as I say; I have to stick to my business well or ill, and I don't see no reason why the minister should be different. If he don't mind us as pays him, why, another will."

"Oh, I've been waiting to catch your eye," said Mrs. Pigeon, darting forward at this crisis to Mrs. Tufton; "wasn't that a sweet sermon? that's refreshing, that is! I haven't listened to anything as has roused me up like that—no, not since dear Mr. Tufton came

first to Carlingford; as for what we've been hearing of late, I don't say it's not clever, but, oh, it's cold! and for them as like good gospel preaching and rousing up, I must confess as Mr. Vincent—
—”

“Hush! Mrs. Pigeon—Mrs. Vincent,” said Mrs. Tufton, hurriedly; “you two ladies should have been introduced at the first. Mr. Pigeon is one of our deacons and leading men, Mrs. Vincent, and I don't doubt you've often and often heard your son talking of him. We are always discussing Mr. Vincent, because he is our own pastor now, you know; and a precious young man he is—and all that he wants is a little experience, as Mr. Tufton always says.”

“Oh, I am sorry!— I beg your pardon, I'm sure,” cried Mrs. Pigeon; “but I am one as always speaks my mind, and don't go back of my word. Folks as sees a deal of the minister,” continued the poulterer's wife, not without a glance at that cherry-coloured bonnet which had nodded during the sermon, and to which poor Mrs. Vincent felt a certain gratitude, “may know different; but me as don't have much chance, except in chapel, I will say as I think he wants speaking to: most folks do—specially young folks, when they're making a start in the world. He's too high, he is, for us plain Salem folks; what we want is a man as preaches gospel sermons—real rousing-up discourses—and sits down pleasant to his tea, and makes hisself friendly. I never was one as thought a minister couldn't do wrong. I always said as they were just like other men, liking grand dinners and grand folks, and the vanities of this world; not meaning no offence, Mrs. Vincent, neither to you nor the minister—but I must say as I think, he's a deal too high.”

“My son has had very good training,” said the widow, not without dignity. “His dear father had many good friends who have

taken an interest in him. He has always been accustomed to good society, and I must say, at the same time,” added Mrs. Vincent, “that I never knew Arthur to fail in courtesy to the poorer brethren. If he has done so, I am sure it has been unintentionally. It is quite against my principles and his dear father’s to show any respect to persons. If he has shown any neglect of Mrs. Pigeon’s family,” continued the mild diplomatist, “it must have been because he thought them less, and not more in need of him than the rest of the flock.”

Mrs. Pigeon listened with open mouth, but total discomfiture: whether this was a compliment or a reprimand was totally beyond her power to make out. She cried, “Oh, I’m sure!” in a tone which was half defensive and half deprecating. Mrs. Pigeon, however, intended nothing less than to terminate the conversation at this interesting point, and it was with utter dismay that she perceived Mrs. Vincent sweep past before she had recovered herself—sweep past—though that black silk gown was of very moderate dimensions, and the trim little figure was noways majestic. The minister’s mother made a curtsy to the astonished wife of the poultryer; she said “good morning” with a gracious bow, and went upon her way before Mrs. Pigeon had recovered her breath. Perfect victory attended the gentle widow in this little passage of arms. Her assailant fell back, repeating in a subdued tone, “Well, I’m sure!” Mrs. Pigeon, like Tozer, granted that the minister’s mother was “quite the lady,” henceforward, in her heart.

And Mrs. Vincent passed on victorious; yes, victorious, and conscious of her victory, though giddy with secret anguish, and feeling as if every obstacle that hindered her return was a conscious cruelty. They could not have arrived this morning—it was impossible; yet she burned to get back to see whether

impossibility might not be accomplished for once, and Susan be there awaiting her. The first to detain her was Mrs. Tufton, who hurried, with added respect, after her, triumphing secretly in Mrs. Pigeon's defeat.

"I am so glad you gave her her answer," said Mrs. Tufton; "bless me! how pleased Adelaide will be when I tell her! I always said it would be well for a minister's wife to have a spirit. Won't you come and take a bit of dinner with us, as Mr. Vincent is not at home? Oh, I daresay somebody will ask Mr. Beecher. It does not do to pay too much attention to the young men that come to preach—though I think he was clever. You won't come?—a headache?—poor dear! You're worrying about your daughter, I am sure; but I wouldn't, if I were you. Young girls in health don't take infection. She'll come back all right, you'll see. Well—good-bye. Don't come in the evening if you have a headache. I shouldn't, if I were you. Good-bye—and to-morrow, if all is well, we'll look for you. Siloam Cottage—just a little way past Salem—you can't miss the way."

"Yes, thank you—to-morrow," said Mrs. Vincent. If only anybody could have known what dreadful work it was keeping up that smile, holding upright as she did! Then she went on a little way in peace, half-crazed with the misery that consumed her, yet unnaturally vigilant and on the alert, always holding up Arthur's standard at that critical hour when he had no representative but herself in his field of battle. But the poor mother was not long allowed this interval of peace. After a few minutes, the Tozers, who were going the same way, came up to her, and surrounded her like a bodyguard.

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