

**THE CASE OF JOHN
SMITH: HIS HEAVEN
AND HIS HELL**

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The Case of John Smith: His Heaven and His Hell by Elizabeth Bisland

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ELIZABETH BISLAND

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The Case of John Smith

His Heaven and His Hell

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By

Elizabeth Bisland *Wednesdays*

Author of "The Life and Letters of Lafayette Hoare," "At
the Sign of the Hobby Horse," etc.

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"THE King of Northumberland feasted with his Court. Without was winter and a night of snow, but the Hall was right merry with wine and laughter, and warm with great fires and many torches.

"Of a sudden a small bird flew in from the darkness, fluttering above the wassail about the tables and fleeing again in a moment into the black wildness of the storm.

"The knights laughed a little, watching its frightened flight, but the King smiled not and fell to silence and deep musing. So at last the feasters too fell mute and went away quietly one by one, leaving the old Chieftain with his head sunk upon his breast.

"'What ails my Lord?' asked the Seneschal who stood by the King's chair.

"'Marked you yon bird?' said the King. 'He came from darkness and vanished into darkness. Even so is man's life. We come, and the wise men cannot tell us whence. We go, and they cannot tell us whither. If any there be can read us this riddle aright, in God's name let him speak!'"

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The Case of John Smith

“One who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time.
The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.”
Paradise Lost.

I

“HE is his own worst enemy.” . . .
So we describe in a phrase the
unhappy creature who in wild wilful- **The Voice**
ness of soul tatters and defaces the **of the God**
lovely gift of life.

We look on in distressed amazement as the miscreant dissipates his fortune, wrecks his health, alienates friends, repels love, wears out patience. It is as if some madness were upon him, blinding him to the value of what he annihilated; as if some dreadful delirium to his diseased perceptions transformed all his real treasures into hateful burdens which he yearned to destroy and cast from him.

When at last—bare of honour, wealth, love, and reverence—we lay the stark wretch in his last bed and over him draw the decent concealing coverlid of earth, his strange delusion draws from us the sorrowfulest, most pitying sigh ever breathed above the dead.

The stony-hearted older faiths consigned this madman to unending punishment, as the logical penalty due his wicked short-sightedness. Only the unquenchable fires of hell, it was thought, might reveal a vision of the truth to so dark a soul.

Because of some curious moral astigmatism—some odd inequality of seeing between the right and left eyes of the mind—those who cast away all the benefits of life here in the hope of securing greater benefits in a life hereafter have, on the other hand, been esteemed as saints, deserving of an immortal reward. Judgment was bemused, perhaps, by the saint's fixed emotional purpose as contrasted with the unreasoning destructiveness of the sinner. To sacrifice present indulgence to the hope of a future good was so often a wise decision in the experience of the normal man it inclined him to respect the ascetic and the anchorite fleeing to the desert, abandoning every element of life save mere existence in order to earn a fuller, wider life after death. Such a course seemed to the temperate nature only a raising of temperance to its extremest conclusion, and he did not doubt the unusual continence would earn unusual recompense. . . .

The whereabouts of these places of rewards and punishments was however a matter for much difference of opinion.

The stars, the moon, the sun, the overarching ether, the interior of the earth itself, were alternately guessed at as possible locations for the eternal bliss or bale. Depictions of the horrors and joys of these vaguely oriented regions were equally questions of individual taste and imagination. Wherever hell or heaven might be they strangely resembled the best and worst we knew of life in its more material forms. Extreme heat, extreme cold, "the horror of thick darkness," unremitting toil, continuous mental and physical pain, were the worst of earthly inflictions, and all hells were simply exaggerations of our most excessive mortal sufferings. Leisure, sunshine, music, perfume, unstinted and delicious food and drink, beautiful and tender companions, the joyous sense of deserved approbation and responsive love were the most obvious pleasures of this life, and every heaven became a harmony created upon these seven strings. According to the fineness or grossness of the imagination the grosser or the more spiritual of these griefs and delights were especially stressed, and to attain these joys, or escape these pains, mankind almost from its infancy unduly ignored and neglected the immediate conditions by which it was environed.

Toward such an end how many in all lands, in all the ages, have renounced the love of human