VIA CRUCIS: RECORD OF A DIVINE LIFE AND PICTURE OF A DIVINE DEATH

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BY

WILLIAM MACCALL.

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Via Crucis.

EARLY in the summer of 1875 my dear wife, Alice Haselden, who had long been ailing, grew very pale and thin and weak. She had a worn, a weary, an anxious look; but above all my daughter and I were struck by the ghastly pallor. Alice did not complain, for she was not in the habit of complaining. It was manifest, however, that she deeply grieved she had not strength for her accustomed tasks, some of which were terribly trying for her fragile frame. Month after month the feebleness, the emaciation and the paleness, became more and more notable. Heroically after her wont, Alice struggled against a mysterious malady, the characteristics of which were exhaustion and feverish disquietude rather than pain. Rest she obviously needed, and rest from her active nature she was unwilling to take. She would only so far yield as to go to bed sooner than usual; but she persisted in rising early to take her part in household occupations, though it was often too plain that she was unfit to rise at all.

At the beginning of December she was attacked by strange shiverings as soon as she got up in the

morning. They could not be ascribed to the coldness of the weather, and they did not seem the result of fever. We sent for a doctor, who told us that my dear wife was suffering from anæmia, and that it would be scarcely an exaggeration to say that she had not a drop of blood in her body.

All the winter my dear wife hovered between life and death, and we did not expect her to recover. The doctor, who was extremely attentive and kind, and who displayed much skill, gave her large doses of iron, the chief remedy for anæmia, and as Alice was able to take nourishing food, she gradually, as summer came on, gained a little vigor, though she continued to be an invalid.

At the approach of winter the disease returned with all its most alarming symptoms. The doctor treated it as he had previously treated it. We despaired of Alice's recovery as we had despaired before. But summer brought, as it had before brought, amendment and hope, and it seemed as if the ailment had been completely vanquished though much debility still remained.

In the autumn of 1877, as in the two previous autumns, I went to the South West of England to visit some old friends. On the 14th October my amiable and estimable host at Exeter, Frederick Burrington, with whom I had been intimate for more than thirty-six years, was struck by apoplexy in my presence, and died after some hours of unconsciousness. Filled with gloomy feelings and gloomier forebodings, I returned to Bexley Heath

at the end of October, and was shocked to find that my dear wife was falling into her former deplorable state. It was no longer also simple debility from which she suffered. The malady, whatever its character or its cause, was evidently growing more complicated, consequently more alarming and more fitted to baffle medical sagacity. For a few weeks after I came back from the South West, Alice spent some hours with us every day downstairs. After a while, she found the fatigue of ascending and descending too great. Thenceforth she was a prisoner, first in one bedroom of our small abode, and then in another which was more cheerful. But she was not confined wholly to bed till about two months before her death; rose to take tea and sat up as long as she could in order to sleep the better, for sleeplessness now began to be one of her chief afflictions.

Neither she nor we had ceased to hope, believing that the same means which had been victorious before, might be victorious again. Yet as if haunted by a presentiment of coming woe, Alice seemed to have a melancholy pleasure in recalling the past, and especially the days of her childhood, when at the farm of her Uncle and Aunt Unsworth, near Chorley, and at Brook House, the abode of her grandmother Tickle, near Tottington, she had been very very happy. To the last her tastes were those of an innocent child, and it was the rural sights and sounds which had gladdened her early years that her heart was fondest of bringing back. The

beautiful scenes round Crediton, which had for a season been our home, and where our daughter had been born, were not forgotten. Across those sweet and holy memories the forms of beloved ones no longer with the living darted. The song of the birds, the murmur of the streams, the rustle of the leaves were hushed, the flowers were withered, and those were gone, for ever gone, who had made Nature so enchanting.

A maid servant of Uncle and Aunt Unsworth told Alice's youngest sister, Sarah Haselden, that when staying at the farmhouse, Alice used at the gloaming to walk up and down in the large kitchen and sing softly to herself. Here there was more than contentment, than cheerfulness; there was the piety of a grateful soul that asked little from God, that found delight in commune with itself, and transfigured the smallest exultation into worship.

There had not been much sunshine in Alice Haselden's life; it had been a life of toil and trial, and tribulation. But such sunshine as there had been she revived to make joyous with a kind of pathetic joy the last winter evenings we were fated to spend together.

One Christmas day as she lay in bed, I rushed up to her room with a bunch of holly. The moment she saw the rich green leaves and the red clustering berries she burst into tears. She sat up, took the bunch into her hand, gazed at it tenderly, and wept uncontrollably. What could I say or do to console her? The holly had evoked in her

soul a half-beautiful, half-prophetic vision. Chorley, Tottington, Crediton, and all she had loved and lost, were brightly arrayed before her; then the shadow of a tomb darkened everything. She might be sleeping in the grave the next time the holly bushes put forth their berries.

Her birthday on the 27th January, brought to her a kindred vision, as beatific on the one hand, as sadly prophetic on the other. My daughter's tears and mine gushed as we clasped the emaciated form and kissed the pallid cheeks and the almost equally pallid lips.

The disease grew more and more complicated, more and more terrible. A crucifixion of three years was accumulating, intensifying, its final pangs. The more sublimely patient, the more divinely resigned Alice was, the more miserable were my daughter and I made by the spectacle of Alice's anguish, and by the knowledge that we could do nothing to relieve. It was not of herself, but of us that Alice seemed to think. From anxiety, sleeplessness and other causes I was looking very ill, and Alice often expressed to my daughter her pity for me. Toiling, watching, nursing, night and day, my daughter got little rest. It was not respecting her own torments that Alice made lamentations, but respecting her daughter Bessie's careworn and exhausted look. Moreover, though Alice knew that we were devoted to her, that we were ready to make all sacrifices for her, she not merely abstained as much as she could from giving us trouble, but