CHAPTER II - THE JESUITS.

FATHER BENWELL rose, and welcomed the visitor with his paternal smile. "I am heartily glad to see you," he said--and held out his hand with a becoming mixture of dignity and cordiality. Penrose lifted the offered hand respectfully to his lips. As one of the "Provincials" of the Order, Father Benwell occupied a high place among the English Jesuits. He was accustomed to acts of homage offered by his younger brethren to their spiritual chief. "I fear you are not well," he proceeded gently. "Your hand is feverish, Arthur."

"Thank you, Father--I am as well as usual."

"Depression of spirits, perhaps?" Father Benwell persisted.

Penrose admitted it with a passing smile. "My spirits are never very lively," he said.

Father Benwell shook his head in gentle disapproval of a depressed state of spirits in a young man. "This must be corrected," he remarked. "Cultivate cheerfulness, Arthur. I am myself, thank God, a naturally cheerful man. My mind reflects, in some degree (and reflects gratefully), the brightness and beauty which are part of the great scheme of creation. A similar disposition is to be cultivated--I know instances of it in my own experience. Add one more instance, and you will really gratify me. In its seasons of rejoicing, our Church is eminently cheerful. Shall I add another encouragement? A great trust is about to be placed in you. Be socially agreeable, or you will fail to justify the trust. This is Father Benwell's little sermon. I think it has a merit, Arthur--it is a sermon soon over."

Penrose looked up at his superior, eager to hear more.

He was a very young man. His large, thoughtful, well-opened gray eyes, and his habitual refinement and modesty of manner, gave a certain attraction to his personal appearance, of which it stood in some need. In stature he was little and lean; his hair had become prematurely thin over his broad forehead; there were hollows already in his cheeks, and marks on either side of his thin, delicate lips. He looked like a person who had passed many miserable hours in needlessly despairing of himself and his prospects. With all this, there was something in him so irresistibly truthful and sincere--so suggestive, even where he might be wrong, of a purely conscientious belief in his own errors--that he attached people to him without an effort, and often without being aware of it himself. What would his friends have said if they had been told that the religious enthusiasm of this gentle, self-distrustful, melancholy man, might, in its very innocence of suspicion and self-seeking, be perverted to dangerous uses in unscrupulous hands? His friends would, one and all, have received the scandalous assertion with contempt; and Penrose himself, if he had heard of it, might have failed to control his temper for the first time in his life.

"May I ask a question, without giving offense?" he said, timidly.

Father Benwell took his hand. "My dear Arthur, let us open our minds to each other without reserve. What is your question?"

"You have spoken, Father, of a great trust that is about to be placed in me."

"Yes. You are anxious, no doubt, to hear what it is?"

"I am anxious to know, in the first place, if it requires me to go back to Oxford."

Father Benwell dropped his young friend's hand. "Do you dislike Oxford?" he asked, observing Penrose attentively.

"Bear with me, Father, if I speak too confidently. I dislike the deception which has obliged me to conceal that I am a Catholic and a priest."

Father Benwell set this little difficulty right, with the air of a man who could make benevolent allowance for unreasonable scruples. "I think, Arthur, you forget two important considerations," he said. "In the first place, you have a dispensation from your superiors, which absolves you of all responsibility in respect of the concealment that you have practiced. In the second place, we could only obtain information of the progress which our Church is silently making at the University by employing you in the capacity of--let me say, an independent observer. However, if it will contribute to your ease of mind, I see no objection to informing you that you will not be instructed to return to Oxford. Do I relieve you?"

There could be no question of it. Penrose breathed more freely, in every sense of the word.

"At the same time," Father Benwell continued, "let us not misunderstand each other. In the new sphere of action which we design for you, you will not only be at liberty to acknowledge that you are a Catholic, it will be absolutely necessary that you should do so. But you will continue to wear the ordinary dress of an English gentleman, and to preserve the strictest secrecy on the subject of your admission to the priesthood, until you are further advised by myself. Now, dear Arthur, read that paper. It is the necessary preface to all that I have yet to say to you."

The "paper" contained a few pages of manuscript relating the early history of Vange Abbey, in the days of the monks, and the circumstances under which the property was confiscated to lay uses in the time of Henry the Eighth. Penrose handed back the little narrative, vehemently expressing his sympathy with the monks, and his detestation of the King.

"Compose yourself, Arthur," said Father Benwell, smiling pleasantly. "We don't mean to allow Henry the Eighth to have it all his own way forever."

Penrose looked at his superior in blank bewilderment. His superior withheld any further information for the present.

"Everything in its turn," the discreet Father resumed; "the turn of explanation has not come yet. I have something else to show you first. One of the most interesting relics in England. Look here."

He unlocked a flat mahogany box, and displayed to view some writings on vellum, evidently of great age.

"You have had a little sermon already," he said. "You shall have a little story now. No doubt you have heard of Newstead Abbey--famous among the readers of poetry as the residence of Byron? King Henry treated Newstead exactly as he treated Vange Abbey! Many years since, the lake at Newstead was dragged, and the brass eagle which had served as the lectern in the old church was rescued from the waters in which it had lain for centuries. A secret receptacle was discovered in the body of the eagle, and the ancient title-deeds of the Abbey were found in it. The monks had taken that method of concealing the legal proof of their rights and privileges, in the hope--a vain hope, I need hardly say--that a time might come when Justice would restore to them the property of which they had been robbed. Only last summer, one of our bishops, administering a northern diocese, spoke of these circumstances to a

devout Catholic friend, and said he thought it possible that the precaution taken by the monks at Newstead might also have been taken by the monks at Vange. The friend, I should tell you, was an enthusiast. Saying nothing to the bishop (whose position and responsibilities he was bound to respect), he took into his confidence persons whom he could trust. One night--in the absence of the present proprietor, or, I should rather say, the present usurper, of the estate--the lake at Vange was privately dragged, with a result that proved the bishop's conjecture to be right. Read those valuable documents. Knowing your strict sense of honor, my son, and your admirable tenderness of conscience, I wish you to be satisfied of the title of the Church to the lands of Vange, by evidence which is beyond dispute."

With this little preface, he waited while Penrose read the title-deeds. "Any doubt on your mind?" he asked, when the reading had come to an end.

"Not the shadow of a doubt."

"Is the Church's right to the property clear?"

"As clear, Father, as words can make it."

"Very good. We will lock up the documents. Arbitrary confiscation, Arthur, even on the part of a king, cannot override the law. What the Church once lawfully possessed, the Church has a right to recover. Any doubt about that in your mind?"

"Only the doubt of how the Church can recover. Is there anything in this particular case to be hoped from the law?"

"Nothing whatever."

"And yet, Father, you speak as if you saw some prospect of the restitution of the property. By what means can the restitution be made?"

"By peaceful and worthy means," Father Benwell answered. "By honorable restoration of the confiscated property to the Church, on the part of the person who is now in possession of it."

Penrose was surprised and interested. "Is the person a Catholic?" he asked, eagerly.

"Not yet." Father Benwell laid a strong emphasis on those two little words. His fat fingers drummed restlessly on the table; his vigilant eyes rested expectantly on Penrose. "Surely you understand me, Arthur?" he added, after an interval.

The color rose slowly in the worn face of Penrose. "I am afraid to understand you," he said.

"Why?"

"I am not sure that it is my better sense which understands. I am afraid, Father, it may be my vanity and presumption."

Father Benwell leaned back luxuriously in his chair. "I like that modesty," he said, with a relishing smack of his lips as if modesty was as good as a meal to him. "There is power of the right sort, Arthur, hidden under the diffidence that does you honor. I am more than ever satisfied that I have been right in reporting you as worthy of this most serious

trust. I believe the conversion of the owner of Vange Abbey is--in your hands--no more than a matter of time."

"May I ask what his name is?"

"Certainly. His name is Lewis Romayne."

"When do you introduce me to him?"

"Impossible to say. I have not yet been introduced myself."

"You don't know Mr. Romayne?"

"I have never even seen him."

These discouraging replies were made with the perfect composure of a man who saw his way clearly before him. Sinking from one depth of perplexity to another, Penrose ventured on putting one last question. "How am I to approach Mr. Romayne?" he asked.

"I can only answer that, Arthur, by admitting you still further into my confidence. It is disagreeable to me," said the reverend gentleman, with the most becoming humility, "to speak of myself. But it must be done. Shall we have a little coffee to help us through the coming extract from Father Benwell's autobiography? Don't look so serious, my son! When the occasion justifies it, let us take life lightly." He rang the bell and ordered the coffee, as if he was the master of the house. The servant treated him with the most scrupulous respect. He hummed a little tune, and talked at intervals of the weather, while they were waiting. "Plenty of sugar, Arthur?" he inquired, when the coffee was brought in. "No! Even

in trifles, I should have been glad to feel that there was perfect sympathy between us. I like plenty of sugar myself."

Having sweetened his coffee with the closest attention to the process, he was at liberty to enlighten his young friend. He did it so easily and so cheerfully that a far less patient man than Penrose would have listened to him with interest.