

CHAPTER II - THE SEED IS SOWN.

SITUATED in a distant quarter of the vast western suburb of London, the house called The Retreat stood in the midst of a well-kept garden, protected on all sides by a high brick wall. Excepting the grand gilt cross on the roof of the chapel, nothing revealed externally the devotional purpose to which the Roman Catholic priesthood (assisted by the liberality of "the Faithful") had dedicated the building.

But the convert privileged to pass the gates left Protestant England outside, and found himself, as it were, in a new country. Inside The Retreat, the paternal care of the Church took possession of him; surrounded him with monastic simplicity in his neat little bedroom; and dazzled him with devotional splendor when his religious duties called him into the chapel. The perfect taste--so seldom found in the modern arrangement and decoration of convents and churches in southern countries--showed itself here, pressed into the service of religion, in every part of the house. The severest discipline had no sordid and hideous side to it in The Retreat. The inmates fasted on spotless tablecloths, and handled knives and forks (the humble servants of half-filled stomachs) without a speck on their decent brightness. Penitents who kissed the steps of the altar (to use the expressive Oriental phrase), "eat no dirt." Friends, liberal friends, permitted to visit the inmates on stated days, saw copies of famous Holy Families in the reception-room which were really works of Art; and trod on a carpet of studiously modest pretensions, exhibiting pious emblems beyond reproach in color and design. The Retreat had its own artesian well; not a person in the house drank impurity in his water. A faint perfume of incense was perceptible in the corridors. The soothing and mysterious silence of the place was intensified rather than disturbed by soft footsteps, and gentle opening and closing of doors. Animal life was not even represented by a cat in the kitchen. And yet, pervaded by some inscrutable influence, the house was not dull. Heretics, with lively imaginations, might have not inappropriately likened it to an enchanted castle. In one word, the Catholic system here showed to perfection its masterly knowledge of the

weakness of human nature, and its inexhaustible dexterity in adapting the means to the end.

On the morning when Mrs. Eyrecourt and her daughter held their memorable interview by the fireside at Ten Acres, Father Benwell entered one of the private rooms at The Retreat, devoted to the use of the priesthood. The demure attendant, waiting humbly for instructions, was sent to request the presence of one of the inmates of the house, named Mortleman.

Father Benwell's customary serenity was a little ruffled, on this occasion, by an appearance of anxiety. More than once he looked impatiently toward the door, and he never even noticed the last new devotional publications laid invitingly on the table.

Mr. Mortleman made his appearance--a young man and a promising convert. The wild brightness of his eyes revealed that incipient form of brain disease which begins in fanaticism, and ends not infrequently in religious madness. His manner of greeting the priest was absolutely servile. He cringed before the illustrious Jesuit.

Father Benwell took no notice of these demonstrations of humility. "Be seated, my son," he said. Mr. Mortleman looked as if he would have preferred going down on his knees, but he yielded, and took a chair.

"I think you have been Mr. Romaine's companion for a few days, in the hours of recreation?" the priest began.

"Yes, Father."

"Does he appear to be at all weary of his residence in this house?"

"Oh, far from it! He feels the benign influence of The Retreat; we have had some delightful hours together."

"Have you anything to report?"

Mr. Mortleman crossed his hands on his breast and bowed profoundly. "I have to report of myself, Father, that I have committed the sin of presumption. I presumed that Mr. Romaine was, like myself, not married."

"Have I spoken to you on that subject?"

"No, Father."

"Then you have committed no sin. You have only made an excusable mistake. How were you led into error?"

"In this way, Father. Mr. Romaine had been speaking to me of a book which you had been so good as to send to him. He had been especially interested by the memoir therein contained of the illustrious Englishman, Cardinal Acton. The degrees by which his Eminence rose to the rank of a Prince of the Church seemed, as I thought, to have aroused in my friend a new sense of vocation. He asked me if I myself aspired to belong to the holy priesthood. I answered that this was indeed my aspiration, if I might hope to be found worthy. He appeared to be deeply affected. I ventured to ask if he too had the same prospect before him. He grieved me indescribably. He sighed and said, 'I have no such hope; I am married.' Tell me Father, I entreat you, have I done wrong?"

Father Benwell considered for a moment. "Did Mr. Romaine say anything more?" he asked.

"No, Father."

"Did you attempt to return to the subject?"

"I thought it best to be silent."

Father Benwell held out his hand. "My young friend, you have not only done no wrong--you have shown the most commendable discretion. I will detain you no longer from your duties. Go to Mr. Romaine, and say that I wish to speak with him."

Mr. Mortleman dropped on one knee, and begged for a blessing. Father Benwell lifted the traditional two fingers, and gave the blessing. The conditions of human happiness are easily fulfilled if we rightly understand them. Mr. Mortleman retired perfectly happy.

Left by himself again, Father Benwell paced the room rapidly from end to end. The disturbing influence visible in his face had now changed from anxiety to excitement. "I'll try it to-day!" he said to himself--and stopped, and looked round him doubtfully. "No, not here," he decided; "it may get talked about too soon. It will be safer in every way at my lodgings." He recovered his composure, and returned to his chair.

Romaine opened the door.

The double influence of the conversion, and of the life in The Retreat, had already changed him. His customary keenness and excitability of look

had subsided, and had left nothing in their place but an expression of suave and meditative repose. All his troubles were now in the hands of his priest. There was a passive regularity in his bodily movements and a beatific serenity in his smile.

"My dear friend," said Father Benwell, cordially shaking hands, "you were good enough to be guided by my advice in entering this house. Be guided by me again, when I say that you have been here long enough. You can return, after an interval, if you wish it. But I have something to say to you first--and I beg to offer the hospitality of my lodgings."

The time had been when Romaine would have asked for some explanation of this abrupt notice of removal. Now, he passively accepted the advice of his spiritual director. Father Benwell made the necessary communication to the authorities, and Romaine took leave of his friends in The Retreat. The great Jesuit and the great landowner left the place, with becoming humility, in a cab.

"I hope I have not disappointed you?" said Father Benwell.

"I am only anxious," Romaine answered, "to hear what you have to say."