THE · SCARLET WOMAN

JOSEPH · HOCKING

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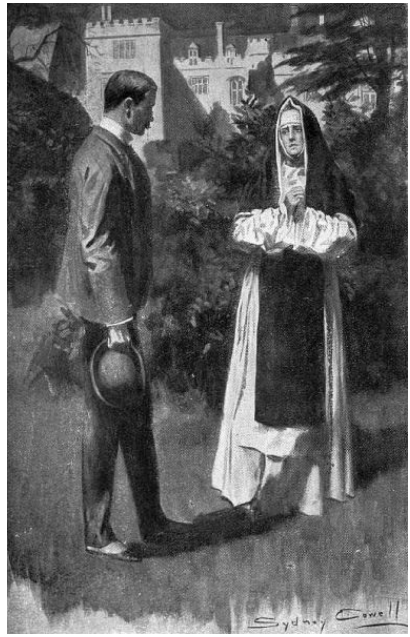
BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

GREATER LOVE.
LEST WE FORGET.
THE PURPLE ROBE.
FIELDS OF FAIR RENOWN.
ISHMAEL PENGELLY.
THE STORY OF ANDREW FAIRFAX.
JABEZ EASTERBROOK.
THE MONK OF MAR SABA.
ZILLAH.
MISTRESS NANCY MOLESWORTH.
THE BIRTHRIGHT.
AND SHALL TRELAWNY DIE?
ESAU.
ALL MEN ARE LIARS.
THE COMING OF THE KING.
ROGER TREWINION.
WEAPONS OF MYSTERY.



" 'Better break his heart than that we should both be untrue to our faith?' " (Page 131.)

THE

SCARLET WOMAN

A Novel

BY

JOSEPH HOCKING

Author of "Mistress Nancy Molesworth," "The Birthright," "All Men are Liars," "The Story of Andrew Fairfax," &c., &c.

ILLUSTRATED BY SYDNEY COWELL

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LONDON AND MELBOURNE

THE SCARLET WOMAN

CHAPTER I

THE three great working forces of life are ambition, necessity, and love. Lacking any one of these, man is wanting in motive power; lacking all of them, he generally becomes drift, swept hither and thither by the waves of life. Norman Lancaster possessed none of them. Certainly he was not ambitious, as the word is usually understood. He desired neither fame nor position. He had no need to put forth effort in order to obtain life's necessities. Fortunately, or unfortunately for him, he possessed more money than he needed. As for love, his friends declared that he was a stranger to this the greatest passion of which the human heart is capable, and which makes or mars the life of the world. This may explain why, when he returned to London, after some months' absence, he seemed so bored.

"I think I have tried everything now," he said, as, with a sigh, he threw himself into an armchair and cut the end of a cigar. He smoked silently a few minutes, then went on thinking.

"The world's a pretty weary business," he continued presently, "and that old cynic was right when he said that life was 'short and dirty.' All places are alike, and people are uniformly dull. I did think that African trip would have interested me, but it proved as tame as everything else. I wish I could hit upon something that would really interest me—something new—something that would yield freshness and sweetness. But Solomon was right: 'There is nothing new under the sun.' "

There was nothing in Lancaster's appearance suggestive of pessimism. He was rather a good-looking fellow, who had barely reached the prime of life. True, there was a lack of earnestness in his eyes, but otherwise he appeared healthy and vigorous. His surroundings, moreover, were not those of a man unable to command the world's good things. The room was replete with all the comforts, not only of a man of wealth, but of culture and taste. For a bachelor's snuggery it was more than usually elegant. Pictures, statuary, books, all revealed the educated, refined man.

The truth was, Lancaster was suffering from surfeit. At twenty-one he had become possessed of an ample fortune, and almost ever since his main object had been to obtain happiness, which, as a consequence, had fled from him. Unlike many others in his position, his tastes led him away from the ordinary pursuits of a gay young man about town. Coarseness and vulgarity he detested; society, as it is usually understood, was to him poor and tame, and work for work's sake he did not enjoy.

He had tried most things, but had extracted very little pleasure from them. He had painted pictures, written a book, gone into Parliament, travelled, and dabbled both in science and philosophy, but at the age of thirty-three he had come to the conclusion that life was a weary business, and he earnestly longed for a new sensation. Presently he heard a knock at the door, and a servant entered bringing a card.

"Tom Carelton," he said aloud, as he read it. "All right; show him in. Tom is a good fellow," he continued, when the girl had gone, "and he may have some news worth communicating."

"Ah, Lancaster!" cried the young man who entered, "I'm glad to see you. I heard you had come home, and took my chance of finding you in."

"I am glad you have come," replied Lancaster. "I think I have a fit of the blues, and cheerful fellows like you are always welcome. Say, old chap, how do you manage to keep such a smiling face?"

"Haven't time to get low-spirited," replied the other. "There's nothing like work to make the world bright. Providence seems to have a grudge against those who have nothing to do."

"I think you are right," replied Lancaster grimly.

"You see," went on Carelton gaily, although a close observer might have seen an anxious look in his eyes, "I am obliged to keep my nose to the grindstone. I have a wife and youngsters."

"How many youngsters have you?"

"Three."

"And still keep happy?"

"Yes; that is——"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing! I pay my way, and find life a jolly business."

"I wonder," said Lancaster, "had I been obliged to grind hard for a bit of bread and cheese, and had a wife and children to keep, if I should find the world a bit more cheerful?"

"Still on those lines, Lancaster? Why, you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I know I ought; in fact, I think I am. There is something wrong in my make-up, I expect."

"And yet when we were students together you were as gay as a lark."

"Yes, I was; we all were, in fact. But now I come to look at you more closely, you don't appear quite so gay as usual."

"No?"

"Are you bothered, old man?" And there was a look of kindness in Lancaster's eyes.

"Yes; a bit."

"But you said just now that nothing was wrong at home."

"Oh, no! nothing of that nature."

"Then I suppose you are troubling about the welfare of other people, as usual."

Carelton did not reply for some seconds; then he burst out suddenly—

"Do you remember Jack Gray, Lancaster?"

"Yes; a little. I knew his eldest brother Horace well, but Jack belonged to a younger generation. Still, I used to know him; a bookish, sensitive fellow, rather given to brooding."

"That is so; but as good a fellow as ever breathed."

"He's all right, I hope?"

"No; he's all wrong."

"Not gone to the dogs, surely? Why, I thought him of a religious turn of mind."

"He's not gone to the bad in the usual way; as you say, he's of a different nature."

"Who's the woman?"

"How do you know there's a woman?"

"Oh, there always is," replied Lancaster. "Do I know her?"

"Only a little, but you have seen her—Gertrude Winthrop. You met her at Brighton once."

"Oh, yes; I remember. A poetical creature. Awfully religious, too. I used to think she was in love with a Roman Catholic priest. She tried very hard one night to prove to me that all who remained outside the Roman fold would provide fuel for the bottomless pit."

"Yes; there's the crux of the whole mischief."

"How?"

"Well, Jack Gray fell in love with her, and they were engaged."

"The girl has turned out a jilt, I suppose?"

"No—at least, not in the orthodox way. They quarrelled about something, and Jack believed that she had thrown him over for some other fellow. Well, he was awfully cut up. You know what an intense nature he has. He can never do anything by halves. As you may be aware, he is a Roman Catholic, and in his despair he determined to enter the Roman priesthood."

"A good idea," laughed Lancaster. "Do you know, I've often thought of trying to find out the secret of Romanism. After all, there is something fascinating in the thought of submitting yourself to an infallible authority. Once that is done, there is no more doubt, no more fear or worry. Confess, do penance, say prayers, receive absolution, and then take your ease."

"The thing is to find the infallible authority," replied Carelton.

"Yes; of course, I should kick over the traces in a week, but at the first blush it's fascinating. I almost envy Jack Gray. He must be experiencing a new sensation."

"He entered a monastery because he believed Gertrude Winthrop had jilted him. Well, she has done nothing of the sort. She's as fond of him as he is of her. Indeed, she has taken a similar course, and will shortly take vows."

"Well, let them."

"They will both destroy their lives if they do. Jack is a brilliant fellow; he would make his mark anywhere. He has money, too, and is well connected. If he is allowed to take vows, he will lose his money, and his career will be ruined."

"Well, what can be done?"

"It has just come to my knowledge that Gertrude is in reality breaking her heart for Jack, while I am sure that if Jack knew of it, he would immediately give up all idea of the priesthood, and come back to life."

"You are sure the girl is really in love with him?" asked Lancaster drily.

"I am sure she is."

"Then why does she not let him know?"

"For several reasons. First, she is in a Roman Catholic institution as a novice—whatever that may mean—and she believes that Jack has ceased to care for her. Moreover, she is closely guarded by her superiors, and, consequently, even if she desired to convey any news to her lover, it would be extremely difficult."

"But why does not some one write to Jack and tell him the truth?" asked Lancaster quickly.

"The same objections are in force in his case," was Carelton's reply. "His father is dead, and his mother has been persuaded by the priests that it is Jack's duty to take orders. As a consequence, she takes care not to tell him anything that might have a tendency to alter his purpose."

"But you could write?"

"Useless, my boy; all the letters would be intercepted, read, and destroyed. The institution into which he has gone has very strict rules. I do not know much about these places myself, but I have discovered that no communication can reach him without his superior's consent."

"But Horace could visit his brother, surely?"

"Horace is a strict Catholic, and also believes it Jack's duty to become a successor of the Apostles. Oh, I've pleaded with Horace, but I can make no headway with him—not a bit. As you know, the Romanists are desirous of converting England, and they believe that Jack would greatly help them. Most of the Catholic priests come from the people, and hosts of them have but little education. Jack is well connected; he has a number of influential friends among the Protestants; he is a scholarly fellow, too; and they believe he would have considerable influence in circles which at present the ordinary priest cannot enter. Indeed, I am told that Jack is intended as a missionary to the cultured classes in England. He has a good old name, has hosts of friends, besides being handsome and agreeable. There is no doubt about it, he would have tremendous influence, especially among women. As a consequence, every effort is being made to retain him."

"Well, my boy, I can suggest a solution of the business."

"What?" asked Carelton eagerly.

"Go to this monastery, wherever it is, get admission, and tell him."

"Impossible again. The truth is, I have appealed to a priest who, I believe, is Horace Gray's confessor. I have told him that Jack's life will be wrecked by becoming a priest. I showed him how he would be far happier married, and would also attain to a high position, either in politics or literature, if he got rid of these foolish ideas and came back to the world again."

"I see. Well, what success did you have?"

"Oh, I bungled the business. The fellow told me that no vocation was so high as that of the priest's; that all careers paled into insignificance when compared with that of a missioner of the one true faith of the world. He would not hear of the claims of love; it was the snare of the devil, he said. Jack was called of God to enter the priesthood, and any one who tried to hinder him, or did anything to shake his decision, would be an enemy to truth."

"And yet you say the fellow is breaking his heart for this girl?"

"Horace admitted it."

"While she—Gertrude Winthrop—still loves him?"

"I am sure of it. I tell you it maddens me when I think of it. Jack is such a good fellow. Up to the time of his becoming engaged to Gertrude, although always religiously inclined, he paid but little attention to any of the churches. During the first months of his engagement he was as gay as a lark. He had marked out his career, too; indeed, he was the accepted candidate for a constituency in Devonshire, and there was every probability of his entering Parliament at the next election. He is a brilliant speaker, has an intimate knowledge of current questions, and I am perfectly certain that in a few years he would have been a Cabinet minister. Gertrude, too, would have been a help to him, and he might have been happy and useful, while as a Romish priest—God help him!"

"Oh, I don't see that. Think of Newman, Manning, and others. Career!—from one standpoint the Catholic priesthood is unrivalled."

"I don't pretend to be a theologian, but a Catholic priest, if he be true to his vows, is a dead man. I know Jack, and love him—love him as a brother—and I tell you, while they may twist his conscience into believing that he will be doing the will of God by taking the course suggested, he will be wrecking his life, blotting out all happiness, and blighting not only his own existence, but that of Gertrude as well."

"Well, personally," yawned Lancaster, "I don't care much about these things. All the same, the affair savours of romance. I wish something would happen to me like this. As far as I can see, nothing is worth being interested in."

"Unless Jack is acquainted of Gertrude's feelings towards him in a fortnight, it will be too late."

"Too late! How?"

"He will have bound himself."

"And taken life-long vows to celibacy and all the rest of the paraphernalia?"

"Yes."

"It would be a pity, wouldn't it?" said Lancaster, like one musing. "And yet I don't know. After all, 'twill be a new sensation for him, and the life of the world offers precious little."

"You say that because you are cold-blooded," cried Carelton; "because you've never known what it is to love and be loved by a true woman. You don't know what it is to have children climb on your knee. If you did you would talk differently."

"Perhaps I should," replied Lancaster, speaking slowly. "No, I don't think I was ever in love. It's a curious confession, I know, but I don't think I ever was. I did have some flirtations once, but—no, I was never really in love. I wish I could feel what such fellows as you tell me a man ought to feel. I should find some pleasure in life, then. I daresay, too, that, like you, I should be maddened at the position of Jack Gray."

"No man knows what it is to live until he has been really in love," replied Carelton. "I tell you, Lancaster, that the greatest, purest joy in life, humanly speaking, is to feel a pure woman's lips against yours—the lips of the one woman in the world to you, and to hear her confess her love for you."

"Women tell that story to so many men," remarked Lancaster drily.

"Not all women," replied Carelton. "I know that love is abused, but it's the joy of life still. Take it away and life is one-sided, poor, almost worthless, to millions. That is why I am so grieved about poor Jack."

"Where is this monastery in which you say he is immured?" asked Lancaster presently.

"In Ireland."

"In Ireland, eh? What part?"

Carelton told him.

For some time both men were silent. Carelton smoked steadily, but he noticed that Lancaster's cigar had gone out.

"Would it really make you happy if Gray came back to life again?" asked Lancaster presently.

"It would indeed," replied the other, "but I almost give up hope. It is not an affair that one can talk about, and I know of no one who would undertake the mission."

"I'll go, if you like," said Lancaster.

"You?"

"Yes. Won't I do?"

"Do? of course. But do you really mean it?"

"Yes."

"But, mind you, it is a difficult business. I know that, because I've tried to find out the exact facts of the case."

"So much the better. I'll go, anyhow."

"I say, Norman, old chap, you *are* a good fellow!"

"Not a bit of it. I'm going because it interests me; it promises a new sensation. I've nothing to keep me here in London; I've no ties. My housekeeper is a distant relative and a most trustworthy old lady. Besides, the idea of outwitting those priests, and seeing the look on Jack Gray's face when I tell him that the girl loves him, will be worth going to Ireland for. I've never been to the Emerald Island, either—I never thought it worth while; but—yes, the affair is full of promise. I'll go."

"And—and you'll do your best?"

Carelton seemed so surprised at Lancaster's promise that he scarcely knew what he was saying.

"Of course I'll do my best. I'll carry the thing through, too, see if I don't!" He started up and walked to and fro in the room with an eager look in his eyes. "By Jove! Carelton, I'm glad you came; you've given me something to do."

"When can you start?"

"To-morrow morning. But I must not go blindfolded; I must ask you a few questions first."

"What do you wish to know?" asked Carelton.

CHAPTER II

THE two men lit fresh cigars, and Lancaster looked steadily into the fire for some time without speaking. Presently he put on more coals, for the time was early March and the weather was cold.

"Jack Gray is still a novice, you say?" he remarked at length.

"He has been a novice for two years," was Carelton's reply. "As I said, his novitiate expires in a fortnight."

"Then he must be entering some order."

"He is. Unless you are successful, he will have taken a Jesuit's vows in a fortnight."

"A Jesuit, eh? I suppose the Jesuits supply the brains of the Papacy. Of course, during these two years he will have become imbued with the sophisms of the order."

"I expect so," Carelton replied with a sigh.

"In that case he will require no little persuasion to give up the business, even if I am able to get hold of him?"

Carelton nodded.

"I see difficulties," Lancaster went on. "Assume I am successful in getting an interview with him. Admit, too, that he's breaking his heart for a girl who is doing ditto for him. I tell him this; I put my case in the strongest possible way. What happens? I have no doubt he'll be overjoyed for a second; but his joy will be followed by the influences of his order. He will think of all he has been taught these last two years, and he will be enmeshed like a fly in a spider's web."

"Possibly, but what are you driving after?"

"This. Two forces will be at work within him. First, there will be the love for the girl, partly destroyed by two years of living death, but fanned into something like life by what I shall tell him. Striving against this will be influences under which he has been living for two years. His mind will have been subjected to the authority of his superiors, his conscience will have become so twisted that he will regard disobedience to them as sin. I say these forces will struggle one against the other."

"And the first will be the stronger," cried Carelton eagerly. "Love is the strongest power on earth."

Lancaster shook his head. "I am not at all sure," he said. "But here is my difficulty—supposing he doubts Gertrude Winthrop's love? True, I have your statement that the girl is dying for him; but what proofs have I, if Gray does not believe?"

"Her mother told me."

"How does she know?"

"Her daughter told her."

"How? by letter?"

"No. She went to see her."

"Where?"

"In Ireland."

"Whew! Both in Ireland, eh?"

"Yes, I think the fact of Jack going there led the girl to go. Well, a few weeks ago, Mrs. Winthrop went to see her daughter. Of course Gertrude is also a novice, but I imagine she is not so closely immured as she will be if she takes vows. In the course of conversation the truth came out. She still loves Jack."

"But there is nothing to prove this."

"Prove! What do you mean?"

"This: suppose Jack says to me, 'I don't believe Gertrude loves me. Give me some tangible evidence that what you say is true,' what will my reply be?"

Carelton shook his head, then added quickly, "I believe the fellow will be so overjoyed at the news that he'll ask for no proofs."

"Evidently you know nothing of the influences of a Jesuit institution," replied Lancaster.

"No, I know but little," was the reply; "do you?"

"Yes, a little; not in detail, but I have read the life of Ignatius Loyola, and I know something of his teachings."

"But, surely, that is—I hope this will not keep you from going?" cried Carelton.

"Oh, no, I'll go; but I wish to know how I stand. By the way, where is this convent?"

Carelton told him.

"That's not far from the place where Jack is," was Lancaster's rejoinder.

"No, it's close by, but they might as well be a thousand miles apart. They will know nothing of the existence of each other. They are ignorant of the fact that each is dying for love of the other."

"Still, it's important. Well, now let me be sure that I understand this affair," and Lancaster laughed like a boy. "Let me set forth the whole business as it appears to me," and then he repeated point by point all that Carelton had told him.

"You might be a lawyer," laughed his friend when he had finished.

"I did study law for a while," replied Lancaster. "I thought I'd be a barrister. Still, I understand the case, don't I?"

"Perfectly."

"Then you must be off."

Carelton looked up questioningly.

"I mean it, my dear boy. Stay, though, I'll walk to King's Cross with you, and then I must come back and do a few hours' work."

"Work, Lancaster?"

"Yes, I must read up all I can about the Jesuits and their order. I must try and find something of the rules of convents, especially this order to which you say Gertrude Winthrop is attached."

"I see, yes. What time will you start in the morning?"

Lancaster studied *Bradshaw* for a few minutes before he replied.

"There is a train from Euston in the morning, which will land me at Holyhead just after four to-morrow afternoon. It catches a boat by which I ought to get to Dublin by about half-past eight."

"Good," replied Carelton. "You evidently believe in despatch. You have nothing to hinder you."

"One of the advantages of being a bachelor," laughed Lancaster. "If I were a married man like you, I should be detained several days before starting. Oh, those Romanists are wise people; there's a great deal to be said for the celibacy of the clergy."

"Be careful you don't get converted," was Carelton's rejoinder.

"Oh, nothing's impossible," was the reply; "and I don't know but I might do worse. Anyhow, I thank you, Carelton. I suppose I've no right to be on this business, but I've not been so excited for many a day. I am actually eager to start; my pulses are stirred, man, and I would not have missed this opportunity for a great deal. There, I am ready to go with you, and the walk will do me good."

The two men went away together, and in a few minutes left the square in which Lancaster lived, and found their way into Gower Street.

"How do your trains run, Carelton?" asked Lancaster presently.

"I've plenty of time to catch the next from the suburban platform," was the reply.

When they reached Euston Road they again talked of the mission Lancaster had undertaken.

"You say you are sure the superior of the monastery where Gray is has been warned against you?" asked Lancaster.

"Certain," was the reply. "This confessor of Horace's is a very clever fellow, and from hints which Mrs. Gray has let fall, I am sure I am a marked man."

"In that case it is lucky we have never been seen together."

"It is, indeed. All the same I am sure you would never be suspected of aiding me in such a seemingly Quixotic work."

"No; why?"

"Oh, you know you are regarded as cold-blooded and cynical. Mrs. Gray would never believe you capable of interesting yourself."

"I am surprised at myself," replied Lancaster—"by Jove! there is a priest of some sort walking ahead of us."

They turned in at King's Cross Station and made their way towards the suburban platform.

"Turn back!" cried Carelton presently. "That's Father Ritzoom on the platform."

"Father Ritzoom! who's he?"

"The priest we saw. The prime mover of the whole business, or I'm much mistaken. Don't let him see us together. His mind is like a corkscrew; he can thread his way into any scheme or plot."

"But I should like to see his face."

"Don't try, old fellow. There, he's turned round. Don't let him recognise you. He knows I am trying to get Jack Gray away from Ireland, and he will suspect any one he sees with me."

"Very well, I'll go; but I should like to have a closer look at him. These mysterious fellows always interest me. There, I'll respect your fears. Good-night."

"Good-night, old chap. God bless you for taking this matter up. I am sure you will be glad some day. Be sure you write to me regularly and let me know how matters are going on."

On leaving the station Lancaster turned to have another look at the priest, but he had disappeared. Either he had gone into a waiting-room, or had entered one of the trains.

"The affair is promising, very promising," cried the young man gaily. "I can see a fortnight's good fun."

Arrived at his house, he ransacked his shelves for certain books he wanted, and then read closely until the small hours of the morning.

Presently he rose with a yawn, "I must go to bed," he said, "I am never worth a straw when I don't get my sleep. Upon my word, I believe I am excited." Nevertheless, fifteen minutes later Norman Lancaster was fast asleep.

The next morning the wind blew cold and winterly. Although March had come, occasional showers of sleet and snow swept across the city. "It'll be a cheerless journey," thought the young man as he got into a hansom, and told the cabby to drive to Euston. "What a fool I am! I don't know what possessed me to promise Carelton to undertake such a hare-brained business. But there, a fellow is bound to make an ass of himself sometimes."

He saw no one that he knew at the station, and having provided himself with a generous stock of literature, he took his seat in the corner of an empty carriage, and wrapped himself up warmly.

"I wish this affair had come off in summer instead of now," thought Norman as he lit a cigar; "I should have extracted a little more fun from it."

By the time the train reached Holyhead the whole landscape was covered with snow, and the wind blew half a gale. This did not trouble Norman, who knew that the boats were good, and that a fire would be burning in the saloon. When he left the train, however, he found that many of the passengers were exceedingly anxious. They questioned the sailors concerning the sea outside, whether the passage would be rough, how long they would be on the way, and whether they would be in danger of being wrecked. The sailors' replies were by no means reassuring.

"There's a 'igh sea, ma'am," was the unvarying reply, for with true politeness they gave their answer to the ladies; "it'll be a dirty crossin', for we shall 'ave a 'ead wind. Most likely we sh'll be more'n an 'our late at North Wall."

Norman could not help laughing as he saw the disconsolate look on the questioners' faces. Evidently they dreaded a rough sea.

"Do you think it'll be better in the morning?" they asked.

"Very likely it will," replied the sailors encouragingly.

"Would you advise me to go across to-night?" asked a middle-aged lady, whose teeth rattled "like a loose casement in the wind."

"Well, mum, if you are not a good sailor you'll 'ave a baddish time to-night," was the comforting response, whereupon she told a porter to take her luggage to the nearest and best hotel.

Her example was quickly followed, for the little knot of people around the gangway speedily dispersed, and many made their way towards the refreshment room, evidently glad to find a leader brave enough to confess herself a coward.

Norman heard some one laugh close behind him.

"These people evidently believe in your excellent English proverb," said a voice.

Norman turned, and saw a somewhat uncommon looking man. He was tall and largely built, while his height and breadth were seemingly increased by the long, heavy ulster he wore. His hair was raven black, and his chin, which was closely shaven, presented a blue appearance far more common among Italians than Englishmen. His lips, which were also shaven, were rather thick and somewhat sensual. His eyes were deep set and as black as his hair; the protruding forehead and black eyebrows adding to the somewhat repellent expression of his face. His voice, however, was soft and musical, and was not at all suggestive of the man's stern strength.

"What is the proverb to which you refer?" asked Lancaster.

"Oh, a well worn one, as most of your proverbs are: 'Discretion is the better part of valour.' Doubtless, however, it is a very convenient maxim," and he laughed again as he saw how few intended boarding the boat.

"And you intend going across?" asked Norman.

"Oh, yes. And you?"

For answer the young man presented his ticket to the official and walked down the gangway. "I am influenced by another saying, whether English or no, I am not sure," he said, as the other again stood by his side.

"Let's hear it."

" 'Needs must, when the devil drives.' "

"I think you can claim that as English, too," replied the other; "but it strikes me that you are not troubled much by maxims."

Evidently the man desired to be friendly, and, as Lancaster felt glad of company, he took no notice of the freedom of the remark, except to ask why he had formed such an opinion of him.

"I judge you to be a good sailor," was the reply. "You are perfectly indifferent to a rough sea, and are not easily thwarted in your purposes."

"Who is this fellow?" thought Lancaster, as he went down to the saloon. "Anyhow he desires to be friendly, and as I shall probably never see him after to-night, I may as well talk with him as another."

"Dinner, sir?" asked the waiter.

"What do you say?" asked the stranger.

"Certainly," replied Norman. "I imagine we shall not reach Dublin much before midnight, and I feel hungry."

They accordingly sat down at the same table, the stranger divesting himself of his ulster and hat, thereby revealing more clearly the proportions of the man. Norman noticed that his head was large, and of that shape which is often designated as square. He wore a suit of blue-black cloth, rather rough in texture, the coat being short and double-breasted, thus accentuating his great breadth of chest and squareness of shoulder.

"He might be a naval captain but for his lack of moustache," thought Norman, "or he might be a political refugee, or a foreign spy. I don't think he's English, although he speaks our language perfectly. Upon my word, I feel curious about him."

"Apparently you do not feel troubled about a head wind nor a rough sea," he said aloud, as his companion attacked the dinner with evident relish.

"No, a rough sea does not trouble me. I don't know what illness of any sort means."

"You are young yet," ventured Norman.

"Yes; how old should you think?"

Lancaster looked at him closely and knew not what to answer. He might be only thirty-five, he might be fifty-five. Not a grey hair appeared among his black locks, and his face was free from wrinkles. The fact that he was clean-shaven, too, made him look younger than if he had allowed his beard to grow; nevertheless, his eyes, black and brilliant as they were, did not suggest youth, while the whole expression of the face spoke of years and experience.

"I'll not venture a guess," replied Lancaster.

The man laughed as though he were pleased.

"You English are cautious," he said; "indeed, discretion is a characteristic of your race. That fact was revealed just now when so many decided to wait until to-morrow morning rather than face a choppy sea. I think, as a nation, you owe much of your success to the fact; all the same, you are——"

He stopped suddenly and looked straight at Lancaster's eyes.

"What?" asked the young man, feeling that the other awaited the question.

"Cautious in the wrong place."

"Yes; why?"

"Oh, the reasons are too numerous to mention," and he went on with his dinner.

For a moment Lancaster felt like defending his nation, but he had an idea that his companion was trying to make him communicative, so he turned the conversation into a slightly different channel.

"And your race, your nation, what are their characteristics?" he asked.

"I have no race, no nation."

"No?"

"I am cosmopolitan. When I am in Spain I am a Spaniard, in Italy I am an Italian, in France a Frenchman."

"And in England?"

"Oh, in England I am nothing."

"Why?"

"The English are so narrow, so insular. They believe in nothing outside their little foggy island"; and again he fixed his searching eyes on Lancaster's face.

The young man laughed, but gave no other reply.

The man was evidently somewhat disappointed at the other's reticence. "Don't you think so?" he said presently.

"I have never paid much attention to the subject," replied Lancaster.

"Wherever your countrymen go," he went on, "they look at everything through their befogged glasses, and they think nothing any good which is not English."

"Such a feeling is necessary to enthusiasm," replied Norman, suppressing a yawn, "and enthusiasm seems an essential to progress."

"Therefore you are no patriot."

"No? why?"

"Because you have no enthusiasm."

"It is dangerous to judge hastily."

"Not a bit of it. Hasty judgments are in nine cases out of ten right. As I said, you English are cautious in the wrong place. Besides, your statement that the insular feeling is necessary to enthusiasm is wrong. It may be necessary to fanaticism, which is different from enthusiasm. Real enthusiasm is the outcome of being possessed by a great ideal."

"Which may be a fad," suggested Norman.

"A great ideal which is universal in its application, which is wider than nations or sects, which embraces all truth, moral as well as national," he went on, without noticing the interruption.

"That's as vague as a cloud," replied Norman.

"No," said the other; "not when the ideal becomes embodied in some system."

"For example?" suggested Norman.

Again the man rested his piercing eyes on Lancaster's face and hesitated. Evidently here was a man over whom he could exercise no great influence; one who knew when to be silent, and who did not easily lose his head.

"I do not think you quite understand me," he replied at length; "but in proof of what I said about your race, take yourself as an example. Here are you, evidently a man of wealth and leisure. You have the means and the opportunity of going all over the world, but, like the rest of the English, you stick to these little Islands. I daresay you know your own country almost inch by inch, while I expect you have been to Ireland dozens of times. Meanwhile you have paid only a flying visit to the other countries of the world?" and he waited as if expecting an answer.

"I suppose this is his way of asking me if I've been to Ireland before," thought Norman; "well, it will do no harm to tell him."

"Is that not so?" he asked presently.

"You are wrong," replied Norman, "I have never yet been to Ireland, and I've spent years in countries other than my own."

"For pleasure?"

"Yes," replied Norman, somewhat resenting his freedom in asking questions, although the pleasant smile and soft voice made anger almost impossible.

"But surely you are not going to Ireland for pleasure at this time of the year?" he suggested.

"Yes, I am, purely for pleasure. But the same question might be applicable to yourself. Do you go on the same errand?"

"I do nothing for pleasure," was the reply, "that is, it is never my motive; yet all I do brings me pleasure."

"I wish I knew your secret," laughed Lancaster.

"My secret is easily revealed," was the reply. "I have my ideal. It is universal, it embraces all truth, and it has become concrete."

"That seems an impossibility. Pray tell me what it is."

"You would not pretend to teach Euclid to the lad who had not mastered the elements of arithmetic," was the reply.

This was evidently said with a purpose. "I am sure he does not mean to be rude," mused Norman; "the fellow has some meaning in trying to draw me out. He wants to throw me off my guard. Why, I wonder?"

He looked into the stranger's face. A smile played around the thick, strong lips, a look of eager questioning was in his eyes.

"I think even a cosmopolitan can be cautious in the wrong place," said Lancaster quietly.

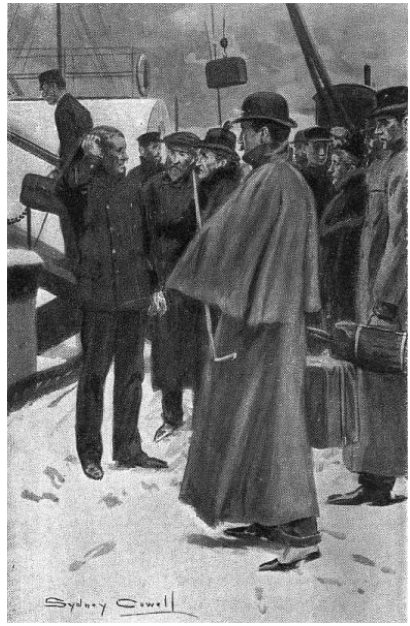
This reply evidently disappointed the other, while it heightened his feelings of respect for his companion. Before he could speak again, however, a young man came up to the table.

"Can I have a word with you, please, father?" he said in low tones. For the first time the stranger's face flushed, he appeared angry at the interruption, and gave the questioner a look which was not at all pleasant. Nevertheless, he spoke quietly.

"Certainly, I'll come with you."

Lancaster looked at the newcomer's face. It belonged to a young fellow apparently about eight-and-twenty. It was difficult to tell with any degree of certainty, however. He was much muffled, and the lower part of his face was hidden.

He called him "father," thought the young man, as they walked away together, but if those two are father and son, all Nature is a liar. By Jove! I'll find out before we get to Ireland; I feel more and more curious about my cosmopolitan friend.



"They questioned the sailors concerning the sea outside."

CHAPTER III

LANCASTER waited a few minutes longer in the saloon, but his companion did not return; he then went on deck, hoping to see him there. The boat was now out in the open sea, and was tossing like a cork upon the waves. The young man had a difficulty in standing. The day was not yet quite gone, but the dark clouds which hung in the sky increased the gloom of the evening. Presently he saw a sailor.

"You'd better go under, sir," was his advice.

"Why?"

"It's a dirty sea, and you might get drenched any minute."

And as if in fulfilment of his words a huge wave swept over a part of the boat, and a heavy shower of spray fell upon the young man.

"Is no one on deck?" he asked.

"None of the passengers, sir. There was a couple of young chaps who said they was afraid to go below, 'cos it made 'em so ill; but I 'ad to make 'em go, 'cos very likely they'd 'a' got washed overboard."

"I'll just take one turn around," said Lancaster, "and then I'll go down again."

He promenaded the saloon passengers' end of the boat, but not a soul was to be seen. Indeed, it was not the kind of weather to make people venture on deck. They were sailing in the teeth of the wind, which blew icily cold, and the waves constantly swept over parts of the boat.

"Evidently they are not up here, this father and son," thought Lancaster; "neither are they in the saloon. I expect they have a private cabin. Well, I'll go and lie down, and make myself comfortable."

It was late at night when they reached North Wall, and just as the boat was slowing up to the landing-stage the stranger appeared in the saloon alone.

"My son was not very well," he said to Lancaster, "so I stayed with him. To what hotel do you go?"

"I really don't know. Are you acquainted with Dublin?"

"I know nearly every town of importance on the globe," was the reply. "The most comfortable hotel in Dublin is the Cosmopolitan."

"Then I'll go there," said Norman. "Thank you for mentioning it. Are you staying there?"

"No; my son and I go among friends. I am glad to have met you. Perhaps we may see each other again some time—the world is small."

"I should be delighted," replied Lancaster, and he busied himself with his luggage.

Norman Lancaster might fairly be called clever. Not a great man by any means. No pessimist ever is, ever can be. He possessed the possibilities even of greatness, but before those possibilities could ever be realised it was necessary that he should be awakened out of sleep. There is more embryo greatness in the world than we think. The good God has given far more to us than we dream of; but many men do not give Him a chance to work His will. Norman Lancaster was capable of intense feeling, passion; he possessed a nature which, had it been fully aroused a few years before, might have made him a power in the life of England. He might have been an orator, statesman, journalist—almost anything; but for years he had been a cut between an incarnate yawn and a cynic. Had he been aroused to love, to hate, to sympathise; had he possessed faith—faith in the possibilities of mankind, of Providence—he would have thought great thoughts, spoken daring words, done noble deeds. But a part of his nature had been asleep, with the result that he had remained simply a clever man.

Still, he was clever, and, in spite of his seeming indifference, he went around the world with his eyes open. As he drove to his hotel he made several shrewd guesses concerning his travelling companion. In spite of himself, he had been impressed by this large-limbed, strong man. He had a feeling, too, that he should meet him again; but this was only an impression, and impressions did not count for much with him.

As he sat down to a light supper before going into the smoke-room, a man came into the coffee-room and gave an order to a waiter.

"I have just come from Limerick," he said, in tones loud enough for Lancaster to hear. "I am as cold as a starling and as hungry as a hunter. A good hot meal, if you please."

The polite waiter helped him as he took off a heavy grey ulster, and took it to a stand outside the door. The stranger took his seat opposite to Lancaster, and then looked carelessly around the room. He was clothed in a tweed suit, of the same colour

and material as his ulster, and might have been the son of a well-to-do yeoman, or even a member of the landed gentry of the country.

As Lancaster looked into his face he felt his heart beat faster than was its wont, but he made no motion of any sort.

"Cold for March."

"Very," replied Lancaster.

"The snow's a foot deep down Limerick way. I was fool enough to come on by a slow train, too. I have just arrived from there."

They remained together for a few minutes, the stranger chatting pleasantly, Norman listening quietly and taking mental notes concerning his companion. He was a good-natured looking fellow, light-haired, and somewhat freckled. He wore a fairly thick moustache, but otherwise was cleanly shaven. He appeared perfectly frank, and spoke with all the characteristic fervour of an Irishman; but he puzzled Lancaster greatly.

"You are going to the smoke-room?" he said, as Norman rose to his feet.

"It is rather late," was the reply; "but I'll have a whiff before I go to bed. Good-night."

"Oh, I'll see you there in ten minutes," said the young man, and he attacked the leg of a chicken with much energy.

Lancaster went straight to the smoke-room, and without waiting a second began studying a time-table. Five minutes later he sat back in his chair with a curious smile upon his face. There was no train from Limerick corresponding with the one by which the stranger said he had come. "Why did the fellow tell me that lie?" he thought, as he lit a cigar.

A second later he left the room, and went to the hall door. It was snowing heavily. "A wintry night for March," he said to the porter.

"Very, sir."

"I expect I'm your latest visitor to-night?"

"No, sir. A gentleman came a few minutes after you in a cab. He came from Holy Cross way."

"Oh, I think I saw him. He wore a grey ulster."

"Yes, sir, the same."

"Well, I think I'll go to bed. By the way, I shall possibly go Limerick way to-morrow. In which direction does the station lie?"

"You go over the bridge, sir, in the direction of Trinity College, then——"

"Oh, never mind to-night," said Lancaster sleepily; "I can find out to-morrow."

He went back to the club-room again, and began studying a map of Dublin. Holy Cross lay in the opposite direction from Trinity College.

Norman Lancaster smoked quietly for some time, looking steadily into the fire all the while.

"I had my suspicions from the first," he said presently.

In spite of the lateness of the hour there were several people in the smoke-room. Most of them were talking eagerly. Presently two burly Irishmen came to the fireplace by which Lancaster was sitting, and drew chairs close to the grate.

"It's jolly cold," one said, turning to Lancaster.

"Very."

"I feel like having something hot to drink. Hot punch, a strong whisky cocktail or something, and a quiet game of solo whist."

The man who spoke looked at Lancaster, but the young man made no response. At that moment his coffee-room acquaintance came up to him. He immediately made room for him beside the fire.

"I hope you feel warmer," said Lancaster.

"Yes, a bit, but the night grows colder. Won't you join me in something to drink?"

"I don't mind," said the young man; nevertheless, he made up his mind to take nothing.

"Join with us," said the burly Irishmen. The young fellow looked at Lancaster, who nodded assent.

For a few minutes they talked on various questions, Lancaster joining but seldom. The waiter soon appeared with spirits and other condiments necessary to make the especial drink ordered. Norman noticed that the young fellow looked around rather anxiously, but made no demur when a large quantity of drink was poured out for him.

"You are a stranger to Ireland, I expect?" he said.

"Why?"

"English people seldom come to Ireland," was the reply. "The general impression is that we are a nation of cut-throats, whereas we are quite the reverse. Personally I like English people."

"This is very clumsy," thought Lancaster, "but what next?"

"Does Ireland feel strange to you?"

"It does somewhat."

"I was never out of Ireland," said the other, "but I know my country well. If I can be of any service to you while you are

here I shall be very glad."

"That is very kind of you. I shall be glad to take advantage of your offer. I wish to visit several parts of the country. I also wish to get an *entrée* into some institutions; perhaps you can help me."

"Easily, easily. Where would you like to go?"

"I've got the names in my notebook," replied Lancaster aloud. To himself he said, "The fellow's a fool."

Half an hour later the smoke-room was empty save for the four men by the fire. Lancaster had not tasted the punch in his glass; the young man claiming to come from Limerick, however, had allowed his to be refilled more than once. The drink, moreover, was getting into his head.

The waiter stood by yawning, and occasionally looking at the clock.

"Is everybody gone to bed except ourselves, waiter?" said one of the Irishmen.

"Yes, sir," replied the fellow eagerly. Evidently he longed for sleep.

"And nobody else will come here to-night?"

"No, sir."

"What do you say to a game of cards, gentlemen?" he said, looking towards Lancaster; "we are four of us. We shall make a nice little party, and I don't feel a bit sleepy."

Lancaster nodded his head carelessly, and turned towards the man from Limerick.

"What do you say?" he asked of him.

"Oh, certainly—if you do," replied the young man, smoothing his moustache.

"If that moustache is not false, put me down for an ass," thought Lancaster. "The fellow has drunk more than is good for him, too. Well, I fancy I shall know a thing or two before the night is over."

They commenced playing. Lancaster was no gambler, but he had a purpose to serve, therefore he made no objection when the Irishmen suggested that the counters should represent a certain amount of money. The man from Limerick looked frightened, but made no objection.

An hour later Lancaster rose with a yawn.

"I've lost enough," he said.

"But not so much as I," giggled the young man from Limerick. "I—I am stone broke, but who cares? who cares? There'll be a jolly row, but who cares? Not I! not I! Let old Ritzoom say what he pleases. What do I care? Hip, hip hoor——" His voice died away in a drunken hiccup.

"But you had better pay up what you owe?" suggested one of the men who had seemed so eager to play.

"Certainly," said the other; "that's the proper thing to do."

"All right, certainly," he giggled; "but I—I don't possess so much—I—I——" and he sat down like one in a stupor.

The burly Irishmen began to bluster, whereupon the young fellow muttered incoherently.

"He scarcely understands now how matters stand," said Lancaster. "I suggest that he gives you an I.O.U. for the amount to-night, and to-morrow morning you can discuss the matter."

"Yes, yes," cried the other with evident relief. "I'll give you I.O.U.—promising to pay you to-morrow. Old Ritzoom will make it right—that's it, that's it."

Evidently he was trying to understand his position. He read the I.O.U. with great solemnity, and declared that one of the words was not spelt correctly. Presently he seized a pen and signed his name, "Father Relly."

"Father Relly," cried the man in whose name the I.O.U. had been made—"is that your name?"

"No, no, I'm drunk, that's what I am. It's James Relly. Make out another, and I'll sign it—prop'ly." This he said like one afraid.

When the affair was arranged, however, he sank back in the chair and seemed unable to move.

"By gosh, who is he?" asked one of the Irishmen.

"Dunno," replied the other with a laugh; "but I think we'll get our money."

"Anyhow, he must be got to bed," said Lancaster.

"Yes, but I'll take jolly good care he does not get away in the morning until I've had this out with him," replied the man, patting the piece of paper which the young fellow had signed.

When Lancaster got to bed he called to mind all that had happened through the day. He remembered many of the words which the young fellow, claiming to come from Limerick, had spoken.

"I think it's pretty plain," thought the young man. "If ever luck played into a fellow's hands it has played into mine; but I haven't quite cleared the ground yet. I have an idea that, to-morrow, matters will develop somewhat. The thing that puzzles me is that Father Ritzoom should have trusted that young chap to play the spy. He's not at all fitted for the job. But to-morrow will tell."

Next morning he was awakened by some one knocking at his door, and he heard the angry voices of men in the corridor outside.

CHAPTER IV

NORMAN LANCASTER began to dress rapidly, and on looking at his watch he found that it was after ten o'clock.

"It is easy to understand what's up," he thought, as he listened to the angry voices. "Our friend from Limerick has realised his difficulties, and this pair of Irishmen are making it warm for him."

"What can I do to serve you, gentlemen?" he said aloud as he opened the door.

The three men, who had been his companions the previous night, came in, two of them blustering and vehement, the third pale to the lips.

"This fellow states that an unfair advantage was taken of him last night," said one of the burly Irishmen presently. "I appeal to you, you who lost a trifle, whether everything was not fair and above board."

"I—I have no recollection of losing so—so much, or—or of signing that paper," said the young fellow tremblingly.

Whereupon many angry words followed, the older men protesting and threatening, the young man feebly declaring that he was ignorant of the obligations under which he lay.

"I do not possess so much money," he said at length. "I cannot get it. It would ruin me if I were to try."

"You said that some one by the name of Ritzoom would help you," said one. "Go to Ritzoom and get it, or we will."

"Ritzoom! did I mention his name?" he cried, and his voice trembled with evident fear.

"That you did," was the answer. "I have an idea that I can find out who Ritzoom is, and, by Gad! I will if this matter isn't squared."

"Look you," said Lancaster at length, "you are all strangers to me. I never saw any one of you until yesterday, but I think the affair can be managed. Will you two kindly leave me with this young man for half an hour, and perhaps at the end of that time I shall be able to suggest some amicable arrangement?"

"But you will not leave the hotel?"

Lancaster gave the man a look which evidently made him feel uncomfortable. He stammered something about "not meaning to offend," and the two walked hurriedly away.

A few moments later the two young men were alone together.

"Can you help me?" said the younger man eagerly. "Can you get me out of this scrape? If you can, I—I, God helping, there's nothing I will not do for you!"

Lancaster went to the door and fastened it. "I wish to know first why you told me a lie yesterday?" he said.

"A lie!" stammered the other.

"A lie," repeated Lancaster. "You came over with me yesterday from Holyhead, and yet you told me you came from Limerick. You spoke as though you owned property in that district, whereas you are a priest, and possess no property at all. Evidently you were instructed to dog my footsteps. I saw that by the way you acted. Now tell me the meaning of this? Your name is Father Relly, and, if I mistake not, you are a Jesuit."

"How—how do you know this?" he stammered, the perspiration standing in thick drops on his forehead.

"I do know it," replied Lancaster, "and the man who was with you on the boat yesterday is Father Ritzoom."

Relly sat down on the bed like one stunned.

"Now, mind," continued Lancaster, "I am no enemy of yours; rather, I am desirous of helping you out of the scrape into which you have got with these countrymen of yours. But before I do so I wish to know your design concerning me. Why did Ritzoom tell you to watch me?"

Relly placed his hand upon his moustache, as if in denial of Lancaster's statement.

"That moustache is false," said Lancaster. "Yesterday the lower part of your face was muffled, so I suppose you thought I should not recognise you again. Ritzoom thought so, too, or he would never have sent you to spy upon me. Now be frank with me."

"I dare not. I dare not," replied Relly.

"Why?"

"Because I promised, I promised—God help me, I promised!"

Lancaster pitied the young man, but he had a purpose in view. He believed that his acquaintance with Relly would assist him, provided he were careful. It was for this purpose he encouraged his advances the previous evening.

"You are in a sad mess, though," he suggested.

"I know I am. I was mad. I—I—the breath of freedom, the feeling that I was a man among men for a few hours was too much for me. I was spoken to as a man, and not as a——"

He stopped suddenly, and his lips trembled like those of a boy, while the tears welled up in his eyes.

Lancaster looked at him steadily. Relly's face was as free from guile as that of a young girl. That he was kind-hearted and true no one could doubt. He was warm-blooded and impulsive, too; strong in his likes and dislikes. Jesuit priest he might be, but no amount of training could make him one at heart. By what means he had been led to take the vows of his order Lancaster knew not, but he knew he was totally unfitted for such a calling.

"Look here, Father Relly," he said at length, "is this squabble with these men serious? Can they harm you? Do you dread Ritzoom having any knowledge of the matter?"

"He seems to read me like a book," replied the other, "but—oh, I would rather die than that he should know. Then I must have been drunk! Oh, the disgrace of it, the shame of it!"

Lancaster took his pocket-book from his coat, from which he extracted two Bank of England notes. "There," he said quietly, "take these to those men, and they will give you that incriminating paper back. Or stay, I'll go with you."

Relly took the notes and read them eagerly. "Do you mean it, do you mean it?" he cried.

"Of course I do. There, I'll be ready to go with you in two minutes."

The young priest caught Lancaster's hand with all the fervour of a lover. "Oh, bless you, bless you, my friend," he cried; "if there is anything I can do to serve you, I——" He stopped confusedly. Perhaps he remembered that he had just refused to tell Lancaster why he had been spying upon him.

"That is all right," said Lancaster; "now let us go to these men."

They had not reached the end of the corridor before they came upon the worthy couple. Evidently they were determined not to let Relly leave the hotel before paying the gambling debt. Possibly they had suspicions as to his calling, and believed that their money was safe, even although they had no legal claim to it.

"The drawing-room is empty," said Lancaster, leading the way to it. The men followed, evidently wondering what the upshot would be.

"Whether you are a pair of sharpers or no, I know not," said Lancaster quietly, whereupon both began to protest with great vehemence, also to threaten to take proceedings for defamation of character. "Well, you may be honest men," laughed the young man, "anyhow, here is your money. But remember, if a word concerning this matter goes beyond ourselves I shall take the trouble to find out who and what you are."

"We are gentlemen," they protested, "and as gentlemen we should not think of mentioning such a matter. We will take our solemn oath on that."

"Very well," replied Lancaster; "as for this I.O.U., it's done with," and he threw it in the fire. "I remember your names and your faces. I fancy I have seen you before, but I do not wish to see you again. Good morning."

A few minutes later he saw them get into a cab and drive away.

"There," said Lancaster with a yawn, "that's done with. Now I'll get some breakfast."

He did not speak a word to Father Relly, but found his way into the coffee-room, and sat down to his morning meal with a good appetite. He saw the young priest take a seat at another table, but seemingly he took no notice. Presently Lancaster finished his meal and prepared to leave the room. Before he reached the door the young priest had caught his arm.

"I must speak to you alone," he said earnestly; "I—I cannot allow——" then he stopped confusedly.

Lancaster had expected this. He had been summing up Relly's character all the morning, and he reckoned upon the young fellow's impulsive nature.

"Have you a private room which I could have for half an hour?" he said to the hotel manager, who happened to be near.

A few minutes later he was again closeted with the young priest.

"It's no use, I must tell you," said Relly. "Promise or no promise, I cannot go on acting a part against one who has been so kind. You have been so generous that you have actually befriended your enemy."

"Nonsense," said Lancaster with a smile. "You are not my enemy. You could be the enemy of no man."

"You think I am a fool," said the other; "I am, I know I am. All the same, you know I was trying to thwart your purposes."

"No, you are not a fool. You are simply an honest young fellow. You are totally unfitted for the work imposed upon you. You are too sincere to be a spy or a diplomat, that is all. Therefore you bungled terribly."

"Yes, yes—that is, do you think so?"

"I am sure of it; what puzzles me is that Ritzoom should have appointed you to an office for which you are entirely unfitted."

"Let me tell you——" cried the young priest eagerly.

"Tell me nothing," replied Lancaster. "You will be sorry afterwards. Besides, I think I know all you would say."

"What do you know?"

"Well, Ritzoom thinks I am engaged in a work which may prove detrimental to the objects of his life. He is not certain, and he appointed you to find out. Ritzoom may be right or wrong in his conjectures concerning me, but I cannot understand how a

fellow of his penetration commissioned such a simple, honest, transparent fellow as you as his agent."

"It was by my desire. Oh, I wanted to show my earnestness for work! It is long years since I lived in the world. I—I have been preparing for my vocation, during which time I have not come into contact with human beings. They have simply been those of my order. I thought my training had fitted me for almost anything. So when Father Ritzoom told me he should like to know what your plans were, I begged to be allowed to find out."

"And he?"

"He consented."

Lancaster reflected a minute. He fancied he saw the working of Ritzoom's brain. He believed that the older priest desired rather to test this young man than to discover anything concerning himself.

"Well, go on," he said.

"Yes; well, I dressed myself as a man of the world. I recalled to mind the life I lived before—I—I ceased to be a man and became a Jesuit. I became intoxicated. It was glorious to feel as others might feel. For once I felt that watchful eyes no longer rested on me. It is true I was acting a part, but it was the part of a full-lived man. I lived in a new world. I could think, feel, act as others might. It was too much for me. In my desire to appear a man of the world I forgot myself. It is years since I drank spirits, and I forgot the effect it might have on me. I thought you would have no suspicions concerning me if I drank freely. And then—you know what followed."

"You will have to give a report to Father Ritzoom," said Lancaster presently.

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I cannot tell him."

Lancaster laughed. "There will be no need," he said.

"Why?"

"Because he knows."

"You have not told him?"

"There is no need. Do you think you have not been watched? Ritzoom's desire to test you was as great as his wish to find out my purpose in coming to Ireland. Moreover, I venture to make a prophecy. You will never be entrusted with this kind of work again."

"Then what do you think I ought to do?"

"Tell him exactly what has taken place."

"But——"

"Oh, you need not fear. He will not be surprised. As you say, he reads you like a book, and will be prepared for all contingencies."

"But—but are you what—what he thinks you are?" asked Relly eagerly.

Lancaster looked at him keenly. "I believe he is more a Jesuit than I imagined, after all," he thought.

"What does he think I am?" he said aloud.

"I do not know. He told me nothing, except that you were an enemy to our faith. Are you?"

"I am a Protestant," said Lancaster, "therefore I must be an enemy to your faith."

The young priest crossed himself. "I will pray for you," he said.

Lancaster laughed. "Thank you," he replied.

"Yes, I will pray for you," he said earnestly; "believing, as you do, you will doubtless think I need to pray for myself. Still, I will pray for you, pray that you may be snatched from the burning. One of your evident goodness and kindness of heart should be. Moreover, if I can help you at any time, I will—oh, so gladly!"

He seemed more calm now and spoke less vehemently.

"Thank you again," said Lancaster; "but suppose I should desire to claim the fulfilment of your promise, where should I find you?"

He took a card from his pocket. "As far as I know at present, I shall be at that address during the next few weeks."

Lancaster read the card. On it was printed the name of the college for novices where Jack Gray was immured. Not a muscle of his face moved, however, as he read the card.

"And Father Ritzoom," he said, "where will he be?"

"I do not know," said the young priest.

"And now," said Lancaster, "will you continue to dog my footsteps?"

"No; I shall go back to Father Ritzoom," was the reply.

Lancaster felt that the young man was changing. He was becoming a priest again. The older man rose to his feet. "You will want to go back to your superior at once, I expect," he said, "and I will not detain you. Perhaps we shall meet again. I think we shall."

"I shall be at the college."

Lancaster laughed.

A few minutes later, the young priest left the hotel, while Lancaster pondered over the way matters had developed.

"Relly is more a Jesuit than I thought," he said presently, "but he has a heart, and he's an Irishman. No amount of training can destroy that fact and it may be that my money is not badly invested."

Meanwhile, Relly found his way to a house which adjoined a Roman Catholic Church, and before long was ushered into a scantily-furnished room. No carpets covered the floors, and the only articles visible there were three chairs, a table, and a small kneeling-desk, over which hung a crucifix.

On one of the chairs, which was drawn close to the table, sat the man with whom Lancaster had travelled the previous day. He was utterly metamorphosed. Instead of the pilot coat, he wore a black soutane, a loose garment which hung around his body like a robe. On his head was the ordinary biretta of an ecclesiastic. He went on writing as Relly entered, although he was evidently aware of his presence.

"Sit down," he said presently.

The young priest sat down.

A few minutes later he threw down his pen and looked up. "Well?" he said suddenly.

"I have failed, father, grievously failed."

Ritzoom did not move a muscle of his face or evince any surprise.

"In what way?"

"In every way."

"Explain."

"He saw through my disguise. He associated me with you."

"How do you know?"

"I sat at the same table with him. I said I had just come from Limerick, as suggested by you. When he left the room and had gone into the smoke-room, I asked a waiter to follow him and tell me what he was doing."

"Yes; well?"

"He was studying an Irish time-table. The waiter said he was looking at the trains on the Limerick line. There is no train from Limerick so late at night."

"I was at fault," said Father Ritzoom, after hesitating a few seconds. "Consequently, he was on his guard?"

"Yes."

The priest wrote a few lines in his notebook, then he fixed his black, piercing eyes on Relly's face.

"The best of us are liable to failure, my brother," he said; "but tell me the rest of your experiences."

The young priest hesitated. He had begun his report by twisting the truth. It was Lancaster who had told him about the trains.

"I found him to be a very clever man," he said presently. "He knew who you were. He had recognised you."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure of it."

"Tell me how?"

"He said he had seen me speaking with Father Ritzoom on the boat."

Ritzoom continued to look steadily at the younger man, and a smile, half sad, half cynical, played around his mouth. He did not know so much as Relly feared, but he knew a great deal. He seemed to be hesitating as to whether he should question him further, when a knock came at the door, and a boy, who acted as porter, mentioned a name.

"Ah!" he said, "our interview must end here, my brother. As you say, you have not been successful, and yet you have revealed more to me than you think. The fact of his recognising me tells everything. You must change your garments, and get back to your old work. This experience will have added to your education, and, I trust, to your usefulness. I am glad that you have been so frank; always remember that in dealing with me you will do well to be perfectly open."

There was a curious intonation in his voice, as well as a warning look in his eyes, as he spoke.

"Good-day, my brother; I have an impression that you will meet Norman Lancaster again." He said this as he walked out of the room. When he had closed the door, and had gone some distance along the corridor, he stopped, as though he would go back again. A second later, however, he went on his way.

"No, I have dealt wisely with the fellow," he said. "He is not fit for any delicate work; he never will be. His mind is not cast in the necessary mould, and he's an impulsive Irishman. But I had best let him be; I shall be able to make most use of him in that way. Had he confessed everything I should have had no hold upon him; now, by careful dealing and watching, I think I may ——Oh, but he is utterly unfitted for the work of our order! How in the world can the *bon Dieu* make such fools?"

As for Father Relly, he heaved a deep sigh of relief when his superior had gone.

"After all, I spoke to him not as a confessor, but as a brother priest," he said, as he went away to another room in order to

change his garments.

CHAPTER V

THE next day Norman Lancaster stood near the gates of an old building, seventy miles from Dublin. It was the Institution for Novitiates where Jack Gray had spent the last two years. The place was four miles distant from a railway station, and, but for another house about a mile away, no signs of human habitation were visible. Spring had only just begun to make its appearance, the trees were still bare, the hedgerows were only just beginning to show their bursting life, but the country side was very beautiful. In the valley near him a clear river sang its way towards the sea; on every hand the country was finely wooded. It would be difficult to conceive of a spot more charmingly situated; it would be just as difficult in a civilised country to find a neighbourhood more forsaken by living beings.

Norman Lancaster had tried to formulate plans for entering the old castellated building which stood on the wooded heights above him, had tried to devise means whereby he might be able to converse with Jack Gray. He had been utterly unsuccessful. He was sure that Father Ritzoom must have seen him with Carelton in London; he was just as sure that, by means of the numerous agencies at his command, he had discovered his mission, and would, therefore, use means for thwarting him in his purposes. But the young man had no idea of giving up. The love for adventure had been aroused within him, and that dogged perseverance which is peculiar to the English race, and which has helped to make our land what it is, was a strongly marked trait of his character.

I do not think he knew much about fear, and he appeared to be as careless and listless as usual as he stood near the gates which opened up the way to the house he desired to enter. He had adopted no disguise; he knew the futility of such devices where a man like Father Ritzoom was concerned. One thing he knew. The Jesuits did not like scandal. He was well aware, moreover, that the Roman Church desired to stand well with the English people, that it was the great desire of its adherents to win back the English race to the Roman fold. For that reason they would do much to keep any reports, which might harm their cause, from circulating in English newspapers.

"It is a funny business," thought Lancaster; "and if ever a fellow was engaged in a wildgoose chase, I am that fellow. But, by Jove! I believe I enjoy it."

Interested as he was in his mission, he took note of the rare beauty of the situation, and mentally congratulated the monks on their choice of a place of residence.

"After all, it must be rather a fine experience to become imbued with the rules and constitutions of Ignatius Loyola," he thought. "I shall be mightily glad to have a talk with Jack—if I can," and he laughed as he carefully relit his cigar.

He rang boldly at the door of the old house, and a few seconds later he heard steps along an uncarpeted hall. A young man in monk's attire opened the door and asked him his business.

"I should like to see a young man named Gray, Jack Gray," replied Norman quietly. "He came here about two years ago."

"Have you a letter of recommendation?" asked the young man.

"No, but I am an old college chum of his brother."

"Will you come in?"

Lancaster entered the building and followed his guide into a barely-furnished room. Arrived there, the young priest left him.

"Everything is orderly here," thought Norman; "no noise, no disturbances. Ah, but this will be a beautiful spot in summer!"

He looked around the room and noted the extreme simplicity of all the arrangements. "No carpets, not a comfortable chair in the place, and not a couch of any sort. The pictures are hideous daubs, while that crucifix above the kneeling-desk is enough to make a nervous man shudder. The place is as cold as a tomb, too," and the young man almost shivered as he buttoned his coat more tightly around him.

A minute later the door was opened and a priest of about fifty years of age entered. He was a quiet, inoffensive-looking man, with large, mild eyes and a somewhat ruddy face. All his actions were suggestive of indecision, as though he could never fully make up his mind what to do. In his hand he held a small black book.

"You have come for confession?" he said in a low tone.

"No," said Norman, "I have come to have a talk with a fellow whom I used to know as Jack Gray. I do not know whether he has a new name now. He came here about two years ago."

"He is a novice, and it is arranged for him to take vows in a fortnight from now—at least, I expect so."

"Still, there is no reason why I should not see him, I suppose?"

"It is not our desire that the minds of our novices should be disturbed by worldly influences," said the priest; "and we like,

as far as possible, to allow the grace of God to be unhindered."

He said this in a hesitating way and rubbed his hands nervously. Norman looked at his face keenly and tried to read the man. He saw that the hesitation was only seeming. Behind those mild, large eyes was a great deal of quiet strength.

"I will take your message to him," he continued; "I will ask him any questions you may desire."

"I should like to see him alone if I may," persisted Lancaster. "There are some things in life which one does not care to speak about indiscriminately."

He thought it best to be free of speech, for he felt sure that Father Ritzoom had been there and prepared the man for his visit. He was beginning to realise something of the unknown forces of the Jesuit order. By what means the purpose of his visit had been discovered he could not imagine, but he knew that the true Jesuit mind was of the most subtle nature.

"There is no secret between the superior and the novice," replied the priest; "there should not be. Is not that your opinion?"

"And you are the superior?"

"Yes. The work is not of a kind that I care for. I like quiet, freedom from responsibility, solitary communion. But what of that? I am here, I have been here for thirty years."

Norman began to be grave. There was something awesome in being shut off from the world for thirty years.

"Then you refuse to allow me to see Jack Gray?"

"I do not say that. I only wish to know that you do not desire to unhinge his mind. According to the ninth—one of the most important—of the rules in the Constitutions of St. Ignatius, it is incumbent that all novices shall beware of the devil's attempts to unsettle them in their holy vocation, and to fill their souls with sadness and trouble.[A] I should miserably fail in my duties as superior if I were to allow one of my children to be tempted of the devil."

"But Jack is still a novice and, I suppose, a free man?"

"In a degree, yes."

"But surely your faith in your religion is very small if you are afraid of a man seven-and-twenty years of age hearing of any matter whatever?"

"Even our blessed Lord prayed, 'Lead us not into temptation.' "

"He also prayed not that His disciples should be taken out of the world, but that they should be kept from the evil of the world."

The superior looked at Lancaster wonderingly.

" 'Kept from the evil.' Yes," he repeated. "Do you desire to do the young man harm?"

"No, I desire to do him good."

"Therefore there is no reason why you should not tell me the message you wish to give him?"

"We see things differently, perhaps," replied Lancaster. "But I have been told that Jesuits desire to appeal to reason; that they wish to do everything openly—in the light of day; that there is nothing they wish to hide from the world."

"Oh, that is true—quite true. We have no secrets, none at all."

"So a Jesuit priest told me once before," said Norman; "therefore it strikes me as peculiar, aye, and would appear very strange to the British public, if a University graduate who has become a novice was not allowed to see an old friend of his brother."

The superior seemed to be in deep thought for a few minutes.

"You shall see him," he said presently; "I will send him to you—that is, if I can arrange for——" He did not finish the sentence; it would seem as though the proviso he hinted at was intended as a kind of justification should he choose to alter his mind.

The superior left the room and found his way into one of the many rooms of the great house. As he entered he saw a young man kneeling before a crucifix. The priest waited a few seconds and then spoke.

"My brother."

"Yes, father."

The young man who rose from his knees looked quite thirty years of age. His face was pale, his eyes were bright and lustrous. He was thin almost to emaciation, and his hands twitched nervously as though he were excited.

"My brother," said the superior, "in a few more days your highest wishes will be realised. You will be able to take the vows of our most Holy Order."

"Yes, father," replied the young man, and a look of intense yearning shone in his eyes.

"You are fully prepared for your vocation?"

"I trust so."

"You have quenched all desire for worldly glory or worldly fame?"

"Yes, yes," said the young man quickly.

"And nothing would turn you from your purpose? Speak frankly, my brother."

"Nothing," replied the young man; then he hesitated, as though he was not quite sure, after which he repeated his answer,

"No, nothing."

"And you are willing to become nothing? to forget all human affection for the advancement of the Holy Church? You have no will of your own? You think only of the will of your Order?"

"That is all."

"You remember how our holy founder insisted upon obedience, how he urged it as the chief virtue? You also bear in mind the terrible doom which will be the punishment of those who, having put their hand to the plough, turn back?"

"Yes, yes."

"I ask you these things, my brother, for I think you are about to be tempted."

The young man turned towards the superior questioningly. "Have you seen a vision concerning me?" he asked, with a bright light in his eyes.

"No, my brother. But a man has come here from the outer world. He is a clever man. I think you knew him when you were in the world. I believe he is an emissary of the devil. You must see him."

"Yes, father. Will you allow me to ask a question?"

"Certainly."

"If he is an emissary of the devil, is it wise for me to see him?"

"Yes. If you do not he will place a wrong construction upon the refusal. He will say it is because you are afraid. He will tell it to the world, and thereby perhaps hinder many from coming to the light of the Church."

"I am ready," replied the novice.

It seemed piteous to see a young fellow of brilliant attainments and great capabilities so passive and yielding. Evidently he had no will, no purpose of his own.

"That is well," replied the superior. "You remember the words of the holy St. Francis of Assissi, 'I want dead men and not living ones to be my disciples?' that in effect was also the desire of our blessed St. Ignatius."

"I remember, father."

"You remember, too, that all outward attractions, all temptations from whatever quarter which tend to shake you in your determination to live the life of God, are a snare of the devil?"

The novice knelt before the crucifix and crossed himself. "I remember," he said fervently.

"Then come this way."

The novice followed the superior without a word. He asked no further questions, and walked along a corridor, his lips moving as if in prayer.

When they came near the room where Lancaster waited, the superior stopped.

"Norman Lancaster is a clever man, my brother. It may be that grace will be given you to convert him. I pray that it may be so. In any case you will bear in mind all he says and report to me."

"Norman Lancaster!" cried the young man, like one aroused from sleep.

The superior opened the door and ushered in the novice. Then he went away without speaking a word. Presently he hesitated a second, after which he entered another of the rooms similar to that which he had just left. A priest sat reading.

"My brother," said the superior, "there is a conversation going on in room No. 14."

The priest rose without a word.

"It is well to be always ready," said the superior, "and it is well you have learnt the art of shorthand writing."

The brother immediately took a note-book and pencil from the table.

"The conversation may be long," continued the older man, "and possibly of importance; hence every word, seemingly the most trivial, may be of value."

The priest left the room without a word. After that the superior remained for some time motionless, almost like a statue.

"I wonder whether it is all worth while," he said at length; "I wonder if, after all, this life——"

He shook himself like one impatient, then walked away with bent head.

During this time Norman Lancaster awaited the coming of Jack Gray. In spite of himself, the atmosphere of the place was affecting him somewhat; he was realising more and more the subtle, far-reaching influences of the Jesuit order. After all, it was a wonderful organisation which could destroy the individuality of many thousands of men and instil into their lives a love for obedience.

When the door opened and he saw Jack Gray, he was almost startled. This was not the eager young debater, the fighter of intellectual battles he had known years before. But Lancaster made no sign of surprise, he simply held out his hand.

"How are you, Gray?" he asked quietly.

The novice shook his hand, and then, after turning to the crucifix and crossing himself, he pointed to a chair.

"Why do you wish to see me?" he said.

[A] “The Jesuits: their Foundation and History.” Vol. i, p. 42.

CHAPTER VI

LANCASTER was almost thrown off his guard by the feverish eagerness with which the novice asked the question. The atmosphere of the place was so tranquil that excitement was out of harmony with all he had seen and heard.

"Why do you wish to see me?" repeated the novice. "You have some purpose in coming here?"

"You are right, Gray," replied Lancaster; "but even if I had not, there would surely be nothing unnatural in my looking you up. You are no stranger to me, and I know your mother and brother well."

"With reverence I repeat the words of our blessed Lord," said the young man, crossing himself, "'He that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven, the same is My mother and My brother."

"That is rather a queer statement for one who worships the Virgin Mary, to quote," said Lancaster, with a smile.

"I am not here to argue," replied Gray. "I have been told that you wish to see me, that you have some message to deliver. I have come to hear it."

"I *have* a message to deliver," replied Lancaster, "a message of vital importance to you. But I cannot speak of it hastily; it is too sacred."

"Nothing is too sacred for these walls, for they are consecrated to the service of God."

"Are you happy here, Gray?" said Lancaster suddenly. He wanted to prepare the young fellow for what he had to say. He felt sure that the novice was safeguarded in many ways, and that the very ease with which he had gained this interview indicated the difficulty of the work he had undertaken.

"Happiness is not the object of life," replied Gray; "duty, obedience to God, are the great end for which our lives are given. Besides, that has nothing to do with your visit. I am here to hear what you have to tell me."

"But it has to do with my visit," replied the other. "If you are happy, contented here, then my message will lose a part of its meaning and value. I have been wondering whether you have forgotten the old days, the life at college—aye, whether no memories remain of—other things."

"I came here to forget the world," replied the novice. "The world is full of deceit and wickedness; here I find rest from these things."

"Do you, Jack?" said Lancaster, with real kindness beaming from his eyes, for the young fellow's yearning eyes had broken the crust of his own indifference. "Is your heart dead? Is this life natural? Do you think God gave you such a nature as yours to have it buried within these walls, and among the dead men who have a name to live here?"

"What is natural?" asked the novice.

"To meet with men is natural; to fight the world's battles is natural; to love is natural; to take the one woman in the world to your heart is natural. And as surely as there is a God, it is the will of God."

"To some it may be, but not to me," replied the novice, after hesitating a few seconds. "I know the world, I have drunk its pleasures and its bitterness."

"Are you sure, Gray?" asked Lancaster quietly.

"I have come to see," went on Gray, without seeming to notice Lancaster's question, "that my vocation is to live the life of God, to be a priest of the only true Church. I find, too, that by joining the order of Jesuits I can best realise my highest hopes. For two years I have been learning one lesson."

"And that?"

"To destroy desire, to quell my lower nature, to crucify my pride, to become as meek as a child. In a word, it is the lesson of obedience."

"Obedience to whom?"

"To my Great Master. To learn that lesson I have been what the world would call degraded. I have undergone the severest penances, I have done the most menial of work. It was my desire when I came here to be spared nothing. I asked that my pride, intellectual as well as social, should be dragged in the dust. It has been. No hands have done more menial work than mine. Aye, even that which would have sickened a scullery slut has fallen to my lot, and I have done it eagerly. I have been subjected to more degradation than any one here. I have had to bear the scorn and derision of all."

He spoke rather to himself than to Lancaster; he had for the moment forgotten his purpose in coming thither, the light of a fanatic burned in his eyes, and yet behind the evident desire to be a worthy follower of Ignatius was doubt. Lancaster saw it, he could not help being impressed by it.

"You may not know," he went on; "in fact, the world neither knows nor cares about the sacrifices which have to be made by one who wishes to take the vows of the Society of Jesus. I have spent two years here, and during the whole of that time I have done nothing but study the Constitutions of St. Ignatius, and learn to obey. That is the purpose of the novitiate. This is not a place for the training of the mind, but of the will, the disposition, the heart. I think I have learnt my lesson. I care for nothing now—nothing. Property, name, position, ambition—all is gone to the winds. I am nothing, my order is everything. I am but a stone in the bridge over which the souls of men may travel to the realms of the chosen of God, an unseen pipe in the great organ which breathes forth the music of the world. Mark you, I am not wholly fitted for it yet, but my will and disposition are moulded to the divine will of my order."

"Then you dare disobey nothing?"

"I *desire* to obey in everything. Oh, it was hard, hard, terribly hard," and the young man began to walk to and fro in the room. "When I came here I was, in spite of my disgust with the world, proud—proud of my family, proud of my intellectual attainments. I was a wrangler, I carried everything before me—so the professors said. I was looked up to in debate, and was called a brilliant speaker. Oh, I was, I know it. I can speak plainly, for it is nothing to me now. I was the accepted candidate for a constituency in Devon. After my acceptance I spoke at a great meeting. The speech was fully reported, and the London *Times* spoke of it as eloquent, masterly. It spoke of me as one who would have a great career. When I came here I could not help remembering these things. I saw that many of the novices were inferior to me in almost everything, and I was tempted to look down upon them. Some of them were low born, badly educated, while I—but what does it matter? It's all gone now. I have learnt my lesson. I have learnt to obey. 'Let him that would be greatest among you be the servant of all,' said my Master, and I have realised something of His meaning."

Never until now did Lancaster realise the wonderful influence of the Jesuit order. He was introduced to a new world. He did not wonder that such men as Gray saw visions and dreamt dreams. Nor was it strange that Jesuits had such implicit faith. They had stultified the critical faculty; they had destroyed a great part of their lives.

"Obedience such as you speak of would, I think, be reasonable with one proviso," said Lancaster.

"And that?"

"That the one who commanded such obedience and who demanded such service were God."

"God does command it."

"I know of nothing in the teaching of the Founder of Christianity which corresponds with the Constitutions of Ignatius."

"What of that? My superior commanded."

"Who struck me as being a mild, good-natured, but somewhat weak man."

"Ah, but my superior stands for God to me!"

Lancaster smiled.

"Yes, you smile; but to me it is all reasonable. It was not at first, but I have learnt better. My superior gets his power to command from the Provincial, the Provincial from the General of our order, the General from the Pope!"

"And the Pope?"

"The Pope is the vicegerent of Jesus Christ," said the novice, crossing himself.

Lancaster could not help shrugging his shoulders.

"Oh! I know of what you are thinking. The old, stale argument of Protestants. You are thinking of the lives of some of the Popes. You think of them as base, dissolute, lustful men. You call to mind some of the orgies of Rome in the dark days. I've gone through all that. They might be devils. What of that? It is their office which I remember. They were but channels of divine grace."

"A dirty channel sullies that which runs through it," said Lancaster, "even if you admit the miserable dogma of the Papacy upon which your faith depends. The history of many of the Popes is the history of crime and false——"

"Stop, stop!" cried the novice. "I will not listen to you. I will not, I say. This is blasphemy!"

"Forgive me," cried Lancaster; "I intended to say nothing concerning such matters."

"And I—I," cried Gray, "had forgotten to whom I was speaking. It is well. When you came I was desirous to know what you had to say to me; but the desire went as I spoke of my hope and desire concerning my life in the Church. I thank God that the world has so little hold upon me."

"Why did you come here, Jack?" asked Lancaster.

"Because I desired to give myself to God."

"Yes; but what was the immediate cause of your coming?"

The novice flushed, and Lancaster smiled as he saw the heightened colour on the thin, pale cheeks.

"You know," he replied simply. "It was painful at the time; but now I rejoice, for my pain has led me to peace."

"But if that which led you to take such a step has no foundation in truth," said Lancaster; "if you were utterly mistaken?"

"But I was not."

"But if you were?"

The novice's eyes burned with a new light, his hands trembled. He did not reply for a time; then he said, "It would make no difference."

"Are you sure, Gray?—sure, mark you?"

"Yes, quite sure. You need not trouble to tell me anything. I have overcome; I have learnt to obey."

"You have stultified your natural affections, but not killed them. God would not allow you to do that. Love is the most sacred thing under the skies."

Afterwards Lancaster laughed at himself for uttering such words, but at that time they seemed right and reasonable.

"But she did not love me—she——But it does not matter, Lancaster, it does not matter."

"But it does matter, Gray; it does matter," replied the other, noting that he had called him by name for the first time.

"How?" asked the novice. "If I have killed all such feelings, how does it matter?"

"Gray," said Lancaster; "you have revealed by that question a bad side of your training, that you have not caught the true spirit of Christianity."

"In what way?"

"It has taught you to forget her."

"No, no;" the young fellow had mistaken the meaning of Lancaster's words.

"Yes, yes. You have been thinking of your own pain, your own heartburnings, but not of hers."

Gray staggered like one struck.

"Do you mean to say that she has suffered?" he cried. "She—she—Gertrude? God forgive me for mentioning her name!"

"Yes—she," replied Lancaster. "Her heart is breaking; she is dying for you."

"Do you mean that? Say, Lancaster, old chap; don't mock me, don't for God's sake!"

He had forgotten to speak according to the language of his order. For a moment he was a man again.

"I'm not mocking you, Jack. It was all a mistake. She never jilted you. You were jealous and demanded certain explanations; she was proud and refused to give them. But she was true to you—true as the sun. She loved you all the time. She is longing for some message from you—longing, my dear fellow."

"But where is she now? I heard she was married."

"She will be married to a bridegroom called 'Death' unless she hears from you. It is not too late, Gray. You have not yet taken vows. Strike the blow, man, and be free!"

"Is she ill, then? Tell me, Lancaster, quick!"

"Ill! She, in her despair, entered as a postulant in some enclosed order, and unless she knows that you still love her, she will take the veil."

"She—she has done that?"

"Yes."

The novice let his hands drop to his side. "May God forgive me!" he said.

"But it is not too late," said Lancaster. "In neither case have you yet taken the 'vows.' "

"How long was it after I came here before she became a postulant?"

"Six months."

"Then it is too late."

"Why?"

"Why! Because she has had to undergo all I have undergone. Because she has been led to crucify all natural affections. Because she has been taught to kill her heart."

"But if she still loves you?"

"But I tell you she does not!"

"But if she does? If I can prove to you that she still loves you; that, in spite of penance, fasting, and prayer, you are still her heart's great desire?"

"It cannot be! It cannot be!"

"But it is so. Within the last three months she has confessed as much—confessed it to her mother. Your brother Horace admitted it to Tom Carelton."

"Don't, don't, Lancaster! You are killing me, my dear fellow!"

"I am bringing you life and happiness, Gray. You love Gertrude Winthrop still, and she loves you. Why should you both ruin your lives? It is atheism to believe that God desires it."

Gray walked up and down the room like one demented. At times his eyes shone with gladness and hope, and again he seemed in the depths of despair.

"It cannot be; no, it can never be," he cried out at length. "I have put my hand to the plough. Cursed be me, if I turn back!"

"But why?" asked Lancaster.

In spite of himself, he was strangely interested. Had any one told him a week before that he would have undertaken such a

mission, and evinced so much sympathy, he would have laughed him to scorn. But the evident suffering of the man before him aroused him to feel—if needs be, to act.

"It's all a mystery to you," said Gray; "a complete mystery, no doubt. You cannot feel as I feel. You have not had the experience through which I have passed these last two years. Why, man, I feel a thousand unseen chains fastened upon me. I have not taken the vows, but I am bound all the same. You cannot be a novice two years in a Jesuit college and still live the life of other men. Here with you I feel a man; but you will be gone presently, and then all the old influences will be at work. Oh, I know; I know! One part of me tells me you are right, but another says you are an emissary of the devil."

"But what does your heart tell you?"

"My heart? My heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked."

"Rid your mind of cant for a moment, Gray. Is your love for Gertrude Winthrop sinful?"

"No, no—if ever a love was pure, that love is mine; but—but you don't know, Lancaster; you can't feel. I have placed my neck under the yoke; it has been there two years. I have willingly placed myself under Jesuitical influence, and I cannot shake it off. I know that in order to become like this I have had to trample on the gifts of which I used to be proud. But it's done. Even if I ran away I should be followed by haunting fears. I have been told so much about hell that I believe in it—oh, my God! I believe in it! Besides, I cannot believe that she still loves me."

"What would make you believe that Gertrude Winthrop still loves you?"

"I should want the words from her own lips."

"That you know is impossible."

"Then I should want it in her own handwriting. I should want to see the words written by her own dear hand, 'Jack I love you as much as ever. Jack, I want you to leave the Church and be my husband.' "

"It is a great deal to ask; but if this were done—if I could contrive means to see her, and get her to write such words—what then?"

"Then, God help me! Oh, Lancaster, don't mock me with such a dream of happiness. It can never be; never—never."

"But it can be—shall be. Be ready to receive such news from me."

"Oh, but it is impossible. I tell you I shall have to meet my superior presently, and he will drag every word of this interview out of me; and when he knows of all that has passed between us, he will place new restrictions upon me; he will have me watched morning, noon, and night; he will forbid my receiving any messages from the outer world."

"Do you mean to say that you will tell that mild-eyed fellow all that has passed between us?"

"Oh, I must; I must!"

"But you have not yet taken vows."

"It does not matter, I am here. I have spent two years as a novice. I am as good as dead. Give it up, Lancaster. It was all a terrible mistake—give it up, old man."

"No, I will not give it up. And you—be a man. Refuse to tell that fellow anything. Such confessions as these should only be made to God."

Gray smiled sadly. "You do not know," he said.

"Do not know what?"

"When I came here I promised that my superior should be as God to me. I have been led to look upon him as standing in the place of God. Thus all he says is binding upon me."

"No wonder these Roman Catholics so seldom give up their faith," thought Lancaster; "they are hedged in on every side. Aye, but it is a wonderful system—wonderful in its refinement of cruelty." Aloud he said, "But I am not afraid of your superior's threats or vaunted powers. And I tell you, old man, we'll snap these cords of his like Samson snapped those of the Philistines. Don't be afraid; in a few days I'll bring you a message from Gertrude—a message written by her own hand; and then, by Jove! we'll make these old Jesuits shake in their shoes if they try to keep you here."

They had been talking in a low voice all the time, so low that it would be difficult for any one to hear; as a consequence Gray's quick ears caught the sound of footsteps coming along the uncarpeted hall.

"Stop," he whispered, "some one is coming."

Lancaster rejoiced in the young fellow's evident desire that they should not be overheard. He had grave doubts about being able to do what he had promised, but he felt glad that he had made Gray feel as he believed every one ought to feel.

The door opened and a priest entered.

"I am sent to ask you, Mr. Lancaster, if you will not stop and have dinner with us?" said the priest. "There is no train to Dublin until half-past eight to-night, thus you have nearly three hours to wait."

Lancaster looked at his watch and saw that it was nearly six o'clock. Already the day was dying.

"Thank you," he replied, "but I must not stay long; it is four miles to the station, and I did not order a conveyance."

"You can walk there in a little over an hour," was the reply, "and dinner is quite ready."

"Then I shall be very glad to accept your kind invitation." He felt sorry the moment he had uttered the words. He wanted to

be out of a building which smelt like a vault to him. He wanted to breathe the free, pure air of God. Still, he had given his word, and he was afraid of arousing suspicion.

"Have you finished your interview with our brother?" continued the priest.

Lancaster looked towards Gray and then said "Yes" involuntarily. The novice was changed. He had, as it were, crept back into the shell of his order. He looked meek, subdued, resigned. The flash of positive life which he had manifested had gone. He was no longer a man, but clay in the hands of the potter.

"And this is the result of a system of self-suppression," thought Lancaster, but he replied quietly, "Yes, we've had our talk. Goodbye, Gray, till we meet again. Try and get some colour into your cheeks."

"Goodbye," said the novice. "May our Blessed Lady send you light. I shall pray for your conversion," and he left the room.

"Good," thought Lancaster, "this business cuts both ways. He is evidently desirous of throwing dust into the eyes of the priest. I wonder if he believes in the old proverb, which, rightly or wrongly, has been associated with the Jesuits, that 'the end justifies the means'? If he does, I see hope in this business."

A few minutes later he sat down to a good plain meal. Only a very few of the dwellers in the Institution were with him, but the time passed pleasantly. The priests laughed and told funny stories. One, an Irishman who retained the brogue in a very strong degree, told of his experiences as a lad, the recital of which Lancaster enjoyed hugely.

"It's lucky you didn't come a fortnight later," he said to Lancaster.

"Why?"

"Well, Lent will be here then, and, although we are not a fasting order, we could not offer you anything which, as a Protestant, you would care to eat. Well, let's make hay while the sun shines."

Lancaster ate a good dinner, but he was careful not to drink anything. In spite of the evident goodwill of the priests he was afraid. Presently, however, he rose to go.

"I must thank you, gentlemen, for your hospitality and kindness," he said. "If you will allow me to contribute anything towards your funds I shall be very glad."

"No," said the superior, "we are allowed to take nothing; but you have no need to hurry. I have ordered a conveyance to be here just before eight o'clock. The man can drive you easily in half an hour."

"This *is* good of you," said Lancaster; "it is dark now, and I was wondering how I should find my way to the station."

A little before eight the conveyance came according to arrangement. It was a dog-cart, and on the driver's seat was a burly Irishman.

"It's a dark noight, yer riverence," he said to the superior, "and it's movin' fast we shall have to be."

Lancaster climbed to the seat beside the driver.

"I shall not soon forget your kindness," he said to the superior; "my visit here has been a revelation in many ways."

"We exist to render help," was the reply; "I hope you will think kindly of us here."

"How can I help it?" was Lancaster's rejoinder as they drove away.

It was a dark night, moonless and starless. Perhaps it was for this reason that the Irishman drove slowly. Lancaster reminded him that there was no time to spare, but he assured him, with a laugh, that he had never yet failed to take a passenger in time for the train, and he would not fail now.

They had gone perhaps a mile and a half from the College when the horse dropped into a walk. They were going up a gentle incline, and on either side were dense woods.

"It's a gloomy place, this, sir," said the driver, "and it's little I like drivin' here. The divil offen has been seen between these woods."

"It's too dark to see anything," replied Lancaster.

"But he allus appears in a flame of foire," said the driver, crossing himself, "if this is one of his noights, it's see him plainly we shall."

Scarcely had he spoken when Lancaster heard a rustling among the brushwood at the side of the road. A second later the horse was stopped, while strong hands dragged him from his seat.

Not a word was spoken, scarcely a sound was heard. Lancaster struggled for freedom, but the hands which grasped him seemed made of steel.

"Who are you? tell me what you want?" he said.

But no reply was made. A second later he felt something put before his mouth and he inhaled a peculiar odour.

"Chloroform," thought Lancaster. "I see now. By Jove! what a blithering idiot I am!"

He realised that his senses were departing from him, he knew that he was becoming powerless, and he had not the will to fight against his unseen opponents. Soon after everything became as nothing to him.

CHAPTER VII

When Lancaster regained consciousness he was lying on a couch in a fine old room. He looked curiously around him and noted the objects by which he was surrounded. He saw that the lower parts of the walls were oak panelled, and that above the panelling were pictures of a religious nature. A large crucifix was also placed at one end of the room. The figure of the Christ which hung on the cross was almost life size. The floor was uncarpeted, but the furniture of the room was comfortable. In the large open fireplace burned a cheerful wood fire, which created a pleasant odour in the room. An air of restfulness pervaded the apartment. Three wax candles stood on the table near the crucifix, which made everything appear rather ghostly, but the young man's nerves were good. He rose to his feet and yawned.

"They've given me a beastly headache," he said to himself, "and my knees feel shaky. I suppose, too, I must regard myself as a prisoner."

He walked around the room and closely examined the objects by which he was surrounded. The windows were shuttered, the door was locked. He listened for some signs of life, but could hear none. Outside he was sure there were trees, for he heard the wind wailing through them. He fancied, too, that he could detect the sound of running water in the near distance, but he was not sure.

The silence of the place was oppressive. It seemed to make a noise; even the occasional crackling of wood in the fireplace added to the loneliness.

"I might have expected this," thought the young man. "I was a fool to think they would allow me to have an interview with Gray, and then let me get away. I have no doubt there were listeners to our conversation, and that everything we said was conveyed to the superior. I am afraid I was a bit excited at the time and thus acted like an idiot. Still, it is an experience," and he laughed quietly.

"I wonder where I am? If I cannot get away, all hope of getting an interview with Gertrude Winthrop is out of the question. It would have been hard enough, anyhow, but now it will be impossible, and I hate being beaten," and the young man shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

His eye caught sight of a bell-rope. "This must be here for a purpose," he said as he gave it a vigorous pull.

Listening he heard a clang, apparently a long distance away. It sounded rather awesome in the lonely house; but evidently Lancaster did not trouble.

"I feel better," he said, as he pulled an armchair towards the fire. "I don't see any notices prohibiting smoking, so I may as well make myself comfortable. It's lucky they didn't take away my cigars."

He lit a cigar by means of a burning ember, and lying back in the chair began to smoke. Presently he heard the sound of footsteps. "Ah! that's better," he thought, "I shall have a chance of asking a few questions now."

The door opened and Father Ritzoom entered. In spite of himself Lancaster's heart beat quicker than was its wont. He felt that Ritzoom was no ordinary man. He was clad in ecclesiastial attire, and the garb made his presence more imposing.

"Ah! you are better," said the priest as he entered; "I am glad your illness is not serious."

"It is because of my illness that I am indebted to you for house room, I suppose?" said Lancaster drily.

"It is part of our duty to give shelter to those who need it," he replied.

"But I am quite well now," replied Lancaster, "therefore I need trouble you no longer."

"Pardon me, but you are not well enough to be removed. You need careful nursing and watching."

Neither of these men referred to their previous meeting, neither asked for or made explanations. They knew there was no need. Each knew what was in the mind of the other.

"Do you smoke?" asked Lancaster, producing his case. "By the way, I hope I am not breaking the rules of the establishment," pointing to the burning end of his cigar.

"I'll join you in a weed with pleasure," replied Father Ritzoom. He took a cigar and lit it with a steady hand.

"By the way," said Lancaster presently, "how long do you think it will be before I shall be well enough to be removed?"

"In about a fortnight—that is, barring accidents," replied the other.

Lancaster yawned. The action was partly forced, partly natural. He felt that it would be an awful bore to be confined for a fortnight, and he wished to impress Ritzoom with the fact that he was by no means excited.

"I am rather particular as to the part of the country in which I reside," he said, "I don't wish to be too far away from Dublin."

"You are in the healthiest part of Ireland," was the reply.

"Beyond that you could tell me nothing, I suppose?"

"Nothing."

"It's night now?"

"Yes."

"My watch has stopped, that is why I asked. How long have I been—ill?"

"I really have not inquired."

"Ah!"

They were fencing carefully; neither had gained much advantage, although Ritzoom fought with weapons of which Lancaster was comparatively ignorant.

"Suppose," said Lancaster presently, "we be a little more explicit."

"I shall be delighted," said Ritzoom with a smile. "Let me congratulate you on the quality of your cigars," he added.

"I suppose you know you are playing a dangerous game."

"Perhaps, rather. But I know how to play it."

"I am sure you do. You've played it before, I expect."

The priest smiled.

"To be plain, you intend Jack Gray to take vows."

"That is his evident vocation."

"And the girl?"

"She will take vows, too."

"Of course you would not like these facts to be made public?"

"I am not particular—after the vows are taken!"

"No? That is rather strange. I could tell an ugly story."

"Which you would be called upon to prove."

"Which I should be able to do."

"I doubt it."

Lancaster shrugged his shoulders.

"I repeat, I doubt it. You could prove that you gained entrance into a college for novices. You could prove that you were allowed to have an hour's conversation with Gray."

"Yes, and I could prove that Gray would have refused to take vows on certain conditions."

"That is where you make a mistake."

Lancaster smiled.

"I tell you that is where you make a mistake. You think, possibly, that you could get Gray to give testimony to the fact that he would never have taken vows—under certain conditions. If such a business came to light, he would testify that nothing could have hindered him from taking vows. He would proclaim before a thousand witnesses, if needs be, that he gladly abjured everything that he might become a member of our society."

"I see," said Lancaster; "and the girl would, if necessary, do the same thing?"

"Certainly."

Lancaster could not help an expression of contempt.

"You judge wrongly," said Ritzoom, looking steadily at him. "You do not understand our motives. Do you think it matters to me, to any of us, what becomes of Gray—that is, personally? We look at the matter from an entirely different standpoint. Why, man," and there was a touch of passion in his voice, "I would a thousand times rather be a man of the world, but for one thing—duty. It's a strange word to you, perhaps, or, if not strange, you do not understand it as we do. It lies here. There is one chance for the world's salvation—one chance, aye, and one means—the Church. To you this seems narrow. You scorn the thought that God has confined Himself to any scheme, plan, or institution. This shows your blindness. The Church is the body of Christ, it contains all truth. It embodies everything—everything. It is God's chosen means. Outside that means there is no hope. The world, a large part of it, is opposed to us; all the more reason for converting the world. Therefore we stop at no means in order to make our Church conquer everywhere. I will be perfectly frank with you. We wish to convert England back to the faith. Personally I scorn England, I hate her pettifogging prejudices, the narrowness of her outlook, I have told you so before. But what of that? She is the greatest power in the world. Her language is becoming universal. If we can convert England we have our key to the conversion of the world. Let England, her parliament, her colleges, her institutions, be ours, and we will use them in such a way that all the rest of the nations shall fall at our feet."

Lancaster became interested. He caught a glimpse of the man's ideas.

"For that reason," he went on, "we are very patient, very considerate for England. The prayers of many millions are going up daily for her conversion. But we believe in actions as well as prayers. In fifty years we have changed the thoughts of your

country concerning our Church. Cardinal Wiseman came to England and he found Roman Catholicism a despised sect; when he died it was a Church, and a powerful Church. Then Manning and Newman were converted. At their heels followed thousands more. The Church was wise. Both Manning and Newman were elevated to high positions. Manning especially made Catholicism a working force. He placed Catholics on the staff of every important newspaper in your country. He made friends with the mammon of unrighteousness in the shape of Cabinet ministers, editors, and the leaders of your Government. He influenced the national policy both at home and abroad. Did he, do we, care about England in all this? Not a bit of it. We care only for the Church. What were Wiseman's dying words? 'I never cared for anything but the Church.' Manning and Newman could have said the same. Because of that, Newman submitted to the famous Vatican decrees, even although he hated them. We are one, we of the Church. Well, Gray is a fellow of promise, great promise. His love affair was our opportunity. At first I thought he would serve us better as a politician. I do not think so now. In ten years' time he will be a missioner to the cultured of England. He possesses the passion of God; he will cause thousands of conversions, not among the poor, the ignorant, but the wealthy, the educated. He will make Roman Catholicism popular. At present we have no great preacher. I will admit it. We have not a man among us who, like that Spurgeon, can sway the multitudes. But Gray will. Now you see what is in my mind. I have no selfish purpose to serve, except that I am a part of the body of the Church and I seek to serve the Church."

"You Protestants can scarcely understand this," continued Father Ritzoom presently. "You do not believe in our sincerity, our devotion."

"On the contrary, I believe in it entirely," replied Lancaster. "I believe that Pope Paul IV. was sincere when he turned Europe into a battlefield in order to carry out his views; that Sixtus IV. was sincere when he signed a bull for the roasting of the Spanish Moors and Jews; that Pius V. was sincere when, with the refinement of cruelty, he persecuted the Protestants and gave orders to take no Huguenots prisoners, but to kill them all. I have no doubt, either, about the earnestness and devotion of the novices in your monasteries and convents. The thing that struck me was the pity of it all."

"The pity of it all! What do you mean?" asked Father Ritzoom.

"The pity of it all, because you are trying to bolster up a decaying cause, a huge system out of which all life has gone."

"It can never be a decaying cause."

"It is, and you know it; and what is more, you know that you know it. This struggle of you Romanists for supremacy is one of the most pathetic sights of the century. If ever there was a system on which failure was written, it is this Church of yours."

"No."

"Yes," replied Lancaster, aroused to feel for the first time a real interest in the subject. "You start by making an absurd claim. You say that your Church is built on the rock of Peter, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail. You claim to be the only Church of Jesus of Nazareth. Well, a few years after your priests began to assert their foolish claims, the Eastern Church separated from you. After that, for centuries your chief representatives were among the foulest men in Europe. Then in the sixteenth century, after you had stifled by imprisonment and fire such voices as that of John Huss, the Reformation took place. You say that Luther and his fellows were of the devil, yet they prevailed against you. Although you had the armies of the civilised world at your back, Europe was cleft in twain and the most vigorous life of the nations left you. Your Pope blessed the Spanish Armada, which was to restore England to the Papal fold, and yet the Spanish Armada became drift. When the Prussian dukedom became the Prussian monarchy, your Pope cursed the whole business, and yet from that time the greatness of Prussia began to be."

"And yet," said Ritzoom, "in spite of all this the Catholic Church is the largest Church in the world."

"Just now," replied Lancaster, "it was the *only* Church, now it is the largest. If numbers go for anything, it may be the largest; but if influence and power are to be reckoned with, you are nearly dead."

"A wild, foolish assertion."

"Is it?" said Lancaster; "Think a minute. Take Europe as the centre of civilisation, and think of the countries dominated by the Papacy. What do you find? Weakness, ignorance, decay. Three hundred years ago Spain was practically the mistress of the world. What is Spain to-day? A decaying civilisation. And Portugal? It is merely a name on a map. Austria is stagnant. Italy is slipping from your grasp, while France is largely a nation of atheists. The great dominant factors in the life of Europe to-day, outside Russia, which certainly does not belong to the Papacy, are England and Germany, and both these nations laugh at the pretensions of the Pope. Why, there is not a growing and enlightened nation in the world at this present time which yields allegiance to your Pope; he drags at his heels only the peoples who grow weaker and weaker."

"And if I admit all that," said Ritzoom, "what do you adduce from it?"

"The failure of your system," replied Lancaster. "These facts show that your religion does not make nations strong, progressive, victorious. Vigorous life repudiates your dead hand. Think of America, for example. There you have, in many respects, the greatest nation in the world. The foundation of American life is opposed to Popery, and the number of your adherents in America is scarcely as great as the number of emigrants who have gone thither during the last thirty years. Time was when you dominated the parliaments of the world, you ruled Europe from the chambers of kings and queens. What is your condition to-day? The Pope has, with but one or two very poor exceptions, no more power than any man of decent position.

Nay, more, if he tried to interfère, that interférence would prejudice the very cause he has at heart."

"I can assure you, Mr. Lancaster, that you make a huge mistake. Why, even in England the trend of the nation is towards Romanism. Your Anglican Church practically asks the Pope to admit the validity of their orders. Your clergy are calling the Reformation a gross error, and they are aping us in every possible way."

Lancaster laughed. "One feels like utilising Disraeli's famous sentence about lies," he said. "Suppose we alter 'lies' to 'fools,' and say there are three kinds of fools: fools, blithering fools, and the typical, lisping, high-church frocked curates. At any rate, that is the opinion of the intelligent Englishman. Of course a number of women follow them; but as for the people as a whole—tsh!"

Ritzoom rose from his chair and threw his cigar end into the fire.

"And what then?" he said scornfully. "What then, Mr. Lancaster? We know nothing of failure. If every word you said were true, we should go on as though every knee in Europe bowed to us. Doubtless you say all this to try and show the futility of seeking to retain Gray and utilise him as a missioner in England. I tell you it is no use. It is not for us to think of immediate success or immediate failure, because we know we shall ultimately succeed. Meanwhile we go on working, we go on making converts. You may tell me that the Roman Catholics of England are, as a rule, poor, ignorant, degraded; you assert that we have lost power among the great nations of Europe, you state that we do not appeal to the cultured, the intellectual, and that we are losing the people who once belonged to us—what then? We go on doing our work all the same. And why? Because as individuals we are nothing; we do our work, and leave all the rest to God. To such as think as we do, there is no failure, can be no failure. Humanly speaking, you have presented a strong case, but presently God will speak out of the whirlwind, and all your puny arguments will disappear like thistledown on a windy day."

"But thistledown contains seeds, and they spring up and grow," replied Lancaster.

"I came to hear what you would say," went on Ritzoom. "I will admit I have been disappointed in you. I expected reproaches, threats, denunciations, and you have uttered none."

"A man is none the less dangerous because he utters no threats," replied Lancaster.

"True," replied Ritzoom, "but there—you hinted when we commenced our conversation that it would be awkward if you told of your imprisonment to the world. But we are not all fools. I know that you are not the kind of man who goes whining to the world because you are beaten."

"I am not beaten," replied Lancaster.

"You are not well," retorted Ritzoom, "and as a consequence you will be carefully nursed until—well, you are better. Have you any requests to make?"

"No," replied Lancaster, "none at all, except that as soon as I am well enough to walk I shall have a little outdoor exercise."

"Oh, you shall."

"Soon?"

"Oh, yes, perhaps to-morrow."

"Meanwhile, I should like the shutters taken down. It is a pleasant thing for the eyes to behold the sun."

Ritzoom looked at Lancaster as though he would read the thoughts in his mind.

"You will not try to escape?" he said.

"I shall promise nothing," replied Lancaster.

"It does not matter," said the priest, after hesitating a few seconds; "the shutters shall be taken down at once. Anything else?"

"Yes," said the young man; "are you to be my gaoler all the time I am here?"

The Jesuit did not reply. Evidently he did not expect the question, and the colour mounted his cheeks.

"Goodbye," he said presently; "we may never meet again."

"But we shall," replied Lancaster. "We shall."

A few seconds later he heard the footsteps of the priest echoing through the gloomy building. The young man thought long and carefully. It seemed as though it were impossible for him to be successful in his mission; but there was no look in his eyes which suggested despair, or even defeat.

CHAPTER VIII

A FEW hours later Lancaster was walking on a grassy slope outside his prison house. He noticed that he was surrounded by walls from twelve to fifteen feet high; near him stood two priests. They did not seem to be watching, but Norman knew that his every movement was noted. He did not know where he was, he did not know how long he had been unconscious. He had tried to obtain information from the priests, but without avail. They conversed freely, almost gaily, on all other matters, but concerning his imprisonment they were silent.

So far his food, although plain, had been good and wholesome, a varied selection of books had been brought to him, and within certain limits his actions had not been restricted.

"They have had the best of the encounter as yet," thought the young man, "and for the present I seem powerless. Ah, what's that?"

The cause of this sudden exclamation was a thin column of smoke which rose some distance from the small enclosed garden in which the young man walked.

"Another house," concluded Lancaster, "or else a building attached to this. If the latter, this must be a very large place."

He made his way to the spot where the two priests stood.

"Do you not feel lonely here?" he asked.

They shook their heads.

"Ah, I suppose there are a goodly company here. You fellows have fine times together."

"No, we are very few," replied one of the priests; "five only live here."

Lancaster gave no sign of surprise. To himself he said, "Then why this big house?"

He chatted a few minutes on trivial matters, and then found his way to the highest point in the garden. The high walls hid everything from him.

"I wish those blessed fellows would look away from me," he thought; "I would be over that wall in two minutes."

But not only did they watch him closely, they came close to his side.

"What a life you fellows live!" said Lancaster, with a laugh. "No wonder you are looked upon as dead."

"We trust we are dead to sin, but in no other way are we dead."

Lancaster shrugged his shoulders.

"In what way are you alive more than we?" asked one.

"We of the world, you mean?"

The priest nodded.

"We live our whole lives," replied Lancaster, "animal as well as mental and moral. You are dead physically as well as——"

"What?"

"Mentally."

The priest's eyes flashed slightly.

"No," he replied, "we are dead neither physically nor mentally."

"Bring a pair of boxing gloves," said Lancaster; "let us prove your statement."

"No," replied the priest, "I shall not box with you; but when occasion necessitates it, we can prove ourselves equal to you of the world, even physically."

"You both look as limp as the clothes you wear," laughed the young man; "yes," and he caught one of them by the arm, "your flesh is as soft as that of a baby."

The young priest's face flushed. Evidently he resented Lancaster's behaviour.

"Come, now," continued Norman, "let us have a little innocent fun. You see that tree," pointing to a tall elm in the middle of the garden. "There are fifteen feet of trunk without a branch: let us see which can climb to the first branch in least time."

"No," said the elder of the two priests, but the younger looked as though he were eager to accept Lancaster's challenge.

"Surely there can be no rule against it," laughed Lancaster. "I know I am your prisoner, but no harm can be done by such simple amusement. You go first," he continued, nodding to the younger priest, "and your friend shall keep time."

The young priest threw off some of his garments. "Good," cried Lancaster. "I like that. Let us understand what we have to do. You shall climb to the first branch, touch it with your right hand, and come down. If you will do that in less time than I, I will withdraw all I have said."

The elder priest shook his head doubtfully.

"What harm can there be in such innocent diversion? Ask Father Ritzoom if he objects."

"Father Ritzoom is not here to ask," replied the younger priest. "Yes, I'll accept your challenge. Brother Anthony, you keep time. I will show that we are not such incapables as Mr. Lancaster thinks."

The elder priest still objected; nevertheless, he took Lancaster's watch, and prepared to mark time. At a given signal the young priest began to climb. He mounted the tree with the agility of a monkey, touched the branch with his right hand, and descended again in a few seconds.

"There," he said, as he came down, "you do it more quickly."

Lancaster divested himself of his coat. "Ready!" he cried, and he climbed with even more speed than the other. When he reached the branch, however, he cried out.

"What is the matter?" asked those underneath.

"I have twisted my hand a bit, that's all," he replied. He cast his eyes quickly around and then descended rapidly. He had accomplished the feat in exactly the same time as the other.

"Forgive me for misjudging you," he said, as he put on his coat. "I believe you are a better climber than I."

"No," answered the young priest; "you would have done it more quickly than I, but for your hand. Are you badly hurt?"

"No; the feeling startled me for a minute, that is all."

That which had caused Lancaster's exclamation, however, was not the pain in his hand. He had accomplished the purpose in his mind: he had discovered his whereabouts. When his hand touched the branch of the tree his eyes caught sight of the building in which Jack Gray was immured.

"The convent garden must be on the other side of the wall," he said to himself.

"You see that a Jesuit priest need not be a weakling, after all," said the elder of his two gaolers.

"No, not in body," replied Lancaster, but neither of the others caught the significance of his answer.

A little later Lancaster was alone in his room. "I have discovered two facts," he thought; "they may not be of importance, but I think I can turn them to good use. One is, that Father Ritzoom is no longer here; the next is, that I am in all probability close to Gertrude Winthrop. By Jove! the case grows interesting."

For a long time he sat cudgelling his brains. With all his ingenuity, however, he could not see a way to extricate himself from his difficult situation. He realised beyond all doubt that he could obtain no help from the priests who were his watchers. They had received their orders, and would obey them to the letter. True, they were not clever men, but their training had made them suspicious and subtle-minded. There was no chance of their becoming traitors. There are but few of that class among the followers of Ignatius Loyola.

Outside his room he heard occasional footsteps and sometimes muffled voices, but nothing of importance reached his ears.

"I hate being beaten," said Lancaster presently. "I hate being beaten—and by a set of priests, too. Well, I must not be, that's all."

He paced his room with soft, noiseless tread, thinking deeply. It was the apartment in which he first found himself after his imprisonment. Presently his attention was drawn towards the crucifix. He looked long and steadily at the face of the Christ.

"And these people pretend to believe in the Man of Nazareth," he said thoughtfully.

On the table lay a book entitled *Catholic Belief*. The young man turned its pages listlessly. To him it was utter inane twaddle. It appealed only to the foolishly credulous. A man with the slenderest knowledge of history, the slightest acquaintance with the New Testament, or having the faintest spark of the critical faculty, could but smile at its teaching. And yet millions accepted what was therein written.

This fact interested Lancaster; he tried to understand what it meant. Presently his thoughts reverted from the Catholic world in general, to Gertrude Winthrop and Jack Gray in particular. How should he bring them together? How would it be possible for him to speak with the former? He was alone, and pitted against him was what was said to be the most perfect and far-reaching system in the world. It was a problem.

Presently he gave a start.

"That is Father Relly's voice!" he said. He listened with keen attention, but could hear nothing save receding footsteps along the corridor outside.

He was sure he was not mistaken; nevertheless he wondered. Surely Father Ritzoom would not willingly allow Relly to reside in the same house with Lancaster, himself having gone away. Was fortune in some way favouring him?

So far his food had been brought to him by one of the brothers of the order. They had done the work of servants. He had been given to understand that this was a part of their duty. Each brother took his turn in doing certain menial duties. He looked at his watch, and noted that the time for his evening meal drew near. Lancaster made up his mind to make judicious inquiries. Hitherto, the brother who brought his food had uttered no word, save to ask if there was anything he desired and if his meals had given him satisfaction.

A few minutes later there was a rattle of plates outside the door, and Lancaster appeared to be busily reading *Catholic*

Belief. When the door opened the young man gave a start; the servant on this occasion was no other than the man he desired most to see.

Evidently Relly did not know whom he served, or, if he did, his acting was of a high order. He brought the food to the table, without casting a single glance around the room, and, although Lancaster watched him closely, he showed no signs of excitement or especial interest.

When he had completed his duties he looked towards Lancaster.

"Your food is——"

He did not finish the sentence. He appeared too frightened. "How came you here?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Do you not know?"

"No, I know nothing."

"Where am I, then?"

"I—I do not know—that is, I must tell nothing."

"Then you have something to tell?"

The priest looked anxiously around the room, then crept stealthily to the half-opened door and closed it. "I must not stay," he whispered; "but tell me why you came here, and how you came?"

"Surely you know?" said Lancaster.

"I tell you I know nothing. I was told to take food to a stranger, that I must be careful to enter into no conversation, that you would stay here for a few days; beyond that, nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"I will give you an account of my experiences presently," said Lancaster, "but before I do this I should like to know what you have been doing since I saw you."

"I cannot tell you now. I must go at once. Perhaps I shall be able to say more when I come back."

"Before you go, tell me this; Do your fellow-priests here know that we have met before?"

"I think not—no, I think not."

The young priest went away noiselessly and rapidly, closing the door behind him and locking it.

"Is this a happy chance, or a part of a scheme which I cannot comprehend?" thought Lancaster. "Anyhow, I'll make the most of it."

The sight of Relly excited him a great deal; nevertheless, he ate his dinner with a good appetite.

"No," he concluded presently, "I do not believe under any circumstances that Ritzoom would knowingly allow me to come into contact with Relly. But I must find out."

Lancaster was enjoying himself hugely. He saw a possibility of success now, and many hopes came into his heart. When Relly returned he was ready with his questions.

"Tell me your experiences with Father Ritzoom after you left me. What did he say to you?" he asked.

Relly told him rapidly, looking anxiously around the room the while.

"That is all?"

"Yes, all."

"Then no one knows of your experiences at the Cosmopolitan?"

"No; except my confessor."

"He is, of course, bound to secrecy. Neither, I think, does he know anything of Father Ritzoom's plans."

"And they?"

"I received orders to undertake a mission."

"What mission?"

"I must not tell you, I was told it would take at least a fortnight."

"Yes; what then?" asked Lancaster, and a smile played round his lips.

"Things turned out differently from what was expected, and I finished my work in a couple of days. After that I came here. I arrived only three hours ago."

"Do you think Father Ritzoom had anything to do with your mission?"

"I do not know. Possibly; but I should think not. It was so very simple, very uninteresting."

"I see. In that case your superiors here will not know of our former meeting?"

"I do not think so; but how came you here?"

"I should like to tell you, but it would take some little time."

"Then I must go. I must not stay longer. I may be watched even now."

"I say, Father Relly, will you do something for me?"

"If I can, but I dare not do much. Do not ask me to help you to get away. I could not do that, really."

"No, I'll not ask that. I say, could we meet without suspicion? I mean, I wish a long chat with you."

"No, it's not possible—not possible."

"But you fellows sleep."

"Yes; what do you mean?"

"Well, my bedroom is locked, but you will know where the keys are kept; could you not come and see me, say at midnight? I want a chat with you. It means a great deal to me, more than you think."

"Should I really be serving you if I came?"

"You would, indeed."

"It would not mean helping you to get away? My orders are very strict, you know."

"No."

"I owe you a great deal," said the young priest. "I'll risk it."

"You know where I sleep?"

"Yes."

"Then I may expect you to-night, say at midnight."

"May our Lady forgive me, but I'll try."

He hurried away like one afraid.

"This Jesuitical training cuts two ways," thought Lancaster. "I am sure he desires to serve me, and I fancy, Irishman though he is, he will be able to hide his plans from the other fellows."

Presently his brow became clouded. "I must be very careful," he thought, "for I am risking a great deal. I must remember that Relly is a Jesuit, and taught to regard the Church of more importance than anything else on earth; moreover, I am not sure that Ritzoom may not have sent him here for the very purpose of discovering anything I may have in my mind. And yet, and yet ____"

Lancaster pondered over many contingencies, and presently thought himself ready for any event which might happen.

"I think I can see my way to meet him, whatever may be his motives," he said with a smile. "By Jove! I am enjoying myself."

As twelve o'clock drew near he confessed to himself that he was more than usually excited. He could hear his heart beating, he could not sit still.

Midnight struck and he listened intently. All was silent.

"I hope the beggar will come," he said, somewhat testily.

A quarter of an hour passed away and still he heard no approaching footsteps.

"Have those other fellows discovered that we have met before?" he thought. "Has anything happened?"

Still another quarter of an hour passed, and all was silent. "I may as well give up for the night," was his conclusion. "I'll go to bed."

He had scarcely formed this resolution when he heard a scratching sound near the keyhole of the door.

CHAPTER IX

I HAD almost given you up," said Lancaster quietly, as Relly entered.

"I was afraid to come earlier," replied the priest; "I heard the sound of voices."

"And is all quiet now?"

"Yes. What do you want? tell me quickly; I am afraid."

"Nonsense, man. What is there to be afraid of?"

"I don't know. I am full of dread. Besides, although I am breaking no definite order, I am committing a sin. Tell me what you want and let me go."

He was doubtless sincere. The man was not acting; Lancaster was certain of that. He trembled violently, his face was pale to the lips.

"Is it a sin to doubt?" he said piteously, without waiting for Lancaster to reply.

"To doubt what?" asked Lancaster.

"To doubt one's vocation; to doubt whether I have not made a mistake in being a priest?"

"A sin? Certainly not," replied Lancaster. "Any young man might mistake his vocation. But why do you ask?"

"I scarcely know; except that I have fears lest I have wasted my life. I have no enthusiasm; I cannot find pleasure in many of the things in which my brothers seem to find joy untold. I—I—but——" he stopped as though he were ashamed. "I ought not to speak in this way," he stammered.

Evidently the young fellow had for the time forgotten why he had come to Lancaster.

Lancaster did not reply; he was considering whether Relly was in a fit condition to listen to what he had to say.

"You cannot understand me," he went on presently. "You cannot realise what I have suffered these last few days. That breath of outside life, that conversation with you, has unsettled me."

"Do not trouble," replied Lancaster. "You believe in Providence, I suppose?"

"Yes, yes; of course."

"Then you will be guided aright."

"Ah, but you do not understand. I have been taught to believe that God and Providence are the Church. That God lives, speaks, acts, in and through the Church. That there is no Providence outside. Somehow—I cannot tell how—but you have ——" He hung his head, as if ashamed to finish his sentence.

"I am afraid my faith is very vague," replied Lancaster; "but be sure of this—God is greater than Churches. However, we can talk of this later. I want to ask you something."

"Yes, yes," said Relly, like one relieved. "What do you wish to know?"

"This is not the college you spoke of?"

"No. How do you know?"

"It is about two miles away. There is a nunnery attached to this building?"

"How do you know?"

"It does not matter how I know; enough that there is. Have you any intercourse with the nunnery?"

Lancaster fixed his dark, penetrating eyes upon Relly, and the young priest yielded to the stronger personality.

"Why do you wish to know?"

"For no harm, I can assure you. You priests, I take it, have some intercourse with the nunnery?"

"But the intercourse is necessary; it is holy."

"Certainly. At the same time you are obliged, you priests who reside here, to render service to the inmates of the nunnery?"

"Some of us are the nuns' confessors—nothing more. We never see them."

"Never see them?"

"No. Not even the father who instructs the novices ever sees them; he simply speaks to them through a grid or grating."

"Do you know the names of the sisters?"

"Yes."

"I wish you to do me a favour."

"I will if I can—you know I will. I promised I would—but what?"

"You must make it possible for me to speak to one of the nuns."

"It is impossible; I cannot."

"You must!"

"I—I cannot! Our rules are severe; every precaution is taken."

"If necessary, the rules must be broken." And Lancaster fixed his eyes steadily upon Relly's face.

"I do not know these sisters; I can do nothing."

"But they confess to you?"

"Yes."

"Very well. There is a girl in the convent adjoining—an English girl, a novice—who used to be called Gertrude Winthrop."

"Possibly."

"Very well; I wish to speak to her."

"For what purpose?"

"A good purpose."

"Ah, I see! This is why Father Ritzoom suspected you; he discovered why you came to Ireland."

"Never mind. Ritzoom is not here now; he cannot hinder you from doing this."

"Explain yourself further; but, oh, do not ask me to—to commit sin!"

"Commit sin? My dear fellow, what I ask you to do is simple enough. Look here. Within the convent walls is a young girl; she is breaking her heart."

"Why?"

"She entered the convent eighteen months ago because she believes that the man she loves ceased to care for her. He did not; he is dying for love of her!"

The young priest's eyes flashed with a new light.

"Love—love!" he said.

"Yes, love," repeated Lancaster. "Now, I wish to see her, to speak with her for just five minutes. She has not yet taken vows, and, therefore, all is not lost. If you will help me to do this, you will save two lives from ruin."

"Where is the man?" asked Relly.

"I cannot tell you now. You told me at the Cosmopolitan that you would do anything to serve me. Do this, will you?"

"But how can I?"

"You are this girl's confessor," hazarded Lancaster.

"What if I am?"

"Let me take your place."

"As priest?"

"Yes."

"No, no—it cannot be! That would be outrage, sacrilege, blasphemy! No, I tell you!"

"Very well," replied Lancaster quietly. "She will obey her priest, will she not?"

"Yes—that is——"

"Then you must arrange means whereby I can meet her. You must tell her that an old friend has come to her from Jack—that he must see her on a matter of life and death."

"It is not possible; it's not, really!"

"It is—it must be!" replied Lancaster sternly. "I can take no refusal; this must be done, and at once!"

Lancaster had gauged Relly's character correctly. He felt himself under an obligation to the man who had paid his debt in Dublin, and he had promised to serve him. Moreover, he was clay in the other's hands. In spite of his years of rigorous training he could not resist the stronger will of the man who commanded him. It is ever thus. The most perfect system of training becomes as nothing when it touches a man of a really strong personality. It is not systems that are great, but men. The Jesuit system is, or rather, has been, great, because there have been men at its head who have swayed and moulded the lives who have come under their influence. From the time of Ignatius Loyola downward, it has been a few men who have given life and force to the rigorous rules. Once let a man come whose life cannot be governed by rules, and the thing breaks like a rotten stick in the hands of a giant.

Hence it was that Relly, who for years had lived by rule, found himself unable to resist the stronger nature of Lancaster. His sense of gratitude was strong, he admired him and yielded to his more powerful will. Besides, Relly was not a typical Jesuit; he was too transparent, too impulsive, too much the creature of circumstances to be ever great in the order to which he had become attached. After all, the power of training is exceedingly limited. Jesuitism reckons without its host, it fails to realise that a man can be stronger than a set of rules. That is why it has been constantly breaking down any time these last three hundred years.

"But this would be sin," said Relly feebly.

"No, it is not sin. It is never sin to lead people into the path in which God intended they should walk."

"But I cannot do it."

"Yes, you can. Arrange that I shall get into one of these nuns' cells, then——"

"No, no—it is impossible."

"Then tell her to be at a certain secluded spot in the grounds. If you are afraid, let her be on one side of a wall, and I on the other."

The young priest opened the door of the room and listened attentively; then he came back and began to pace the room like one demented.

"Do you know," he said weakly, "I cannot resist you? Don't be cruel, don't be unmerciful."

"I am asking you to do nothing which I would not do myself if I were in your place," replied Lancaster quietly.

"Oh, if you had had my training, my experiences, you would not say so," cried Relly excitedly. "You would be a great man amongst us, you would be like Ritzoom. Your nature would have submitted to nothing but the general rules, and these you would in time have bent and interpreted to suit your own needs. That is how our great men become great. Every rule is capable of different interpretations, and the great men among us are those who shape the rules to suit their own purposes, while seeming to keep them to the very letter. I am not of that order; I walk by rule and line, until—but there, I——"

"You can arrange this for to-morrow night," said Lancaster.

"No, no—let me tell you how impossible is the task you set."

"I wish to hear nothing of difficulties," was Lancaster's quiet rejoinder; "I do not ask to know how you intend doing anything. The *modus operandi* is nothing to me. I am respecting your scruples which forbid you to allow me to act as a priest at confessional. What I wish is that you shall arrange for the novice who, when living in England, was called Gertrude Winthrop, to meet me in the grounds, say to-morrow night at midnight at some secluded place. I should want only a quarter of an hour's chat with her."

Father Relly walked up and down the room muttering feebly. He seemed to realise his weakness, his impotence to resist Lancaster.

"You will want nothing more of me?" he asked presently.

"Impossible to say, but I should think not."

"Oh, do not ask anything else. I—I, that is, she will come to me for confession in the morning, and I——"

"Do not tell me anything about it," said Lancaster. "I wish to know nothing, nothing." He saw the influence he had gained over Relly and believed that he would obey him. His great fear was that Ritzoom would return before his plans were carried out. In that case Relly would fall under the power of his superior, and because Ritzoom could fight with weapons unknown to Lancaster, would most probably thwart him in every direction.

"You are cruel," said Relly impulsively; then, as if ashamed of himself, he went on, "No, not that; take no notice of me, I will do my best."

"Very well; good-night," yawned Lancaster, "I wish to go to sleep."

"These Irish are a strange people," thought Lancaster, as he stretched himself on the narrow bed in the corner of the room which had been given to him as a sleeping apartment; "they are very good, very kind, but very impulsive. On the whole, I like them. Had Relly been a typical Englishman I could have done nothing with him—nothing. As it is—well, I look forward to to-morrow night with great interest. I wonder what the upshot of the business will be?"

In another part of the same building two girls sat together; they were breaking the rules of the nunnery. They were speaking of things which the regulations of the life into which they had entered strictly forbade. But they were young, they were simply yielding to those promptings which the good God has placed in the hearts of all.

So long, I suppose, as maidens meet together, so long will they desire to confide in each other. Confession is one of the impulses of the soul; like every other feeling of life it can be abused, but in truth confession is one of God's means whereby the human heart can be eased of its burdens. The Roman Catholic Church has turned this innate desire into a mighty instrument, whereby it holds in its grasp many millions of people. Whether it uses its power wisely, or whether it has the right to use it at all, let the history of the nations tell.

One of these young girls was Gertrude Winthrop. In the convent she was known as Sister Theresa, for when entering there she had been commanded to forget the old name and the old life. A nun belonging to an enclosed order is supposed to destroy all worldy desires, all worldly hopes. She is dead to the world, and lives only to say prayers, perform certain ceremonies, and commune with her own soul. Therefore, while she was Miss Gertrude Winthrop when living in the world, she was only Sister Theresa in the convent, and by that name we must speak of her.

She was a pale, thoughtful-looking girl, with fine dark eyes and clearly-cut features. It needed but a glance to see that she could be easily influenced by the mysterious. The mystic in her nature was highly developed. Of her sincerity there could be no doubt, that she would obey the dictates of her conscience was evident. Sister Theresa belonged to that class of women of which saints are made. Under certain circumstances, too, inquisitors are manufactured quite as easily. Her tendency was to become morbid. Trained on certain lines, and having spent years under mystical influences, she could, if needs be, walk calmly

to the stake or suffer her body to be torn in twain. Under those same influences, too, she could commit another to be burnt for not believing in the things which had become truths to her. If her whole nature were developed, and no part allowed to suffer because of the undue pressure placed upon another, she would become a woman of the order of Elizabeth Fry or Florence Nightingale. Trained in a narrow school, however, she could become, for conscience' sake, as cruel as Catherine de Medici.

At present she was in a transition period of her existence. Her heart still lived. She had not been able to kill the power for loving, which God had given her. At times, moreover, she broke artificial restraints; the strong independence of her nature made it impossible for her to be amenable to narrowing influences. But these were rare occasions. Since she had entered the convent there had been no food for the natural life. She had been allowed to read no books which made mention of human love, not even the Bible. Still, training cannot destroy memory, and it takes many years to deaden other gifts of God.

The other girl was of a different order. Not that her face was less pure, less beautiful; indeed, the casual observer would pass judgment that she possessed a nature just as refined and that she was more strikingly handsome. But the beauty was different. She was fashioned on a larger plan, and she gave no indications of being a possible martyr, nor even a willing ascetic. It needed no especial penetration to see that she could enjoy life to its fullest extent. She possessed humour, vivacity, and was capable of passion. Her sense of reverence was not so great that she could not laugh at the reverend mother superior's peculiarities. Indeed, at times she asked questions which made that lady doubt her fitness for the "holy life." Not that she had ever really doubted it herself. The truth was, her parents had died while she was yet a child, and she had been placed in a convent school. While there she had been led to believe that it was her duty to take the veil, and knowing next to nothing of the outside world she had offered no resistance. Obedience to the order had become second nature, and had she not come into contact with outside life, she would probably have grown into middle age without a serious doubt. After that time it would have been next to impossible for anything to have happened. The once plastic nature would have become hardened and settled into the mould into which her life had been cast, and the matters concerning which she had been instructed in childhood would have become fixed beliefs.

At present she was a beautiful girl of two or three and twenty, full of poetical, romantic fancies and vague yearnings. Of men she knew nothing. She had scarcely ever heard the sound of a man's voice except that of a priest. She had been led to look upon love for the opposite sex as a snare and a sin, the very thought of which would pollute the soul of one who had taken the veil. She was known in the convent as Sister Constance, and it had been suggested that after years of training, her force of character would make her fitted for a great work.

Sister Constance had been listening to Sister Theresa's story. We know what it was, and so need not repeat it here. She had told how she had met Jack Gray, and how, after learning to love him, their engagement had been broken.

"And he is going to be a priest?" asked Sister Constance.

"I have heard so."

"And where is he now?"

"I do not know, except that he is somewhere here in Ireland."

"And do you love him still?"

"Hush—do not ask that!"

"But do you?" persisted Sister Constance. Her eyes had a strange light in them as she spoke and her hands trembled nervously.

"Oh, it is wrong to speak of it, wrong for us to be here together at all; but I do, I do!"

"Tell me about him," said the girl. "Tell me what he used to say to you. What were the words he used when he told you that he loved you and asked you to marry him?"

Sister Theresa looked anxiously around the little room, and then the two girls drew closer together. For the time Gertrude Winthrop had forgotten that she was a novice, preparing to take life-long vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

"He said"—and then the girl whispered with many tears, and sighs, and blushes, the words which Jack Gray had spoken to her.

"And does he love you still?"

"Oh, no! How can he?"

"I do not know. I should think he does."

"Oh, no, I must not think of it; but should you, should you really think so?"

"Yes, but I do not know. I know nothing of such things. Oh, Theresa, I cannot help it, but I long for some one to love me. If a man loved me, if he told me so, I should——" the girl ceased speaking and sobbed vehemently.

"Hush, hush," said the other; "don't; remember your vows. This is sin; it is wrong of us to meet together like this. Besides, we go to confession to-morrow morning."

Sister Constance started guiltily. "Yes, yes, you are right. We ought to be dead here, and I long for life. I am young and—oh, Holy Mother, help me!"

The two girls separated, but neither could forget what the other had said.

" 'Yes, yes,' she said, 'you are right. We ought to be dead here—and I long for life!' "

CHAPTER X

FATHER RELLY made his way, along the corridors of the part of the house where the priests lived, towards the nunnery. He went thither with a heavy heart. He had not slept since he had left Lancaster, and his mind was sorely distracted. He felt sure he had promised to do that which was not right, and yet he could not see why that which Lancaster suggested was wrong. The truth was, he began to doubt that a set of human rules could have Divine authority. Was it certain that the superior of a monastery could speak with the voice of God? Had not such men been often in the wrong? Moreover, was doubt a sin? Was it sin to live a natural life? Did not the Maker of mankind intend that all our powers should be used and sanctified, instead of suppressed and killed? Was it right that any man or woman should bury what God had given to them? These and many other questions passed through his mind as he drew near to the spot from whence he heard the nuns' confessions.

He entered a kind of bureau and looked eagerly around him. The place would be set apart for his own use for a considerable time; no one would come near save the nuns, who would approach the grating through which they told the secret thoughts of their lives to a man who claimed to have power to pronounce forgiveness of sins.

He heard the story of two or three listlessly, almost carelessly. The things which these nuns told him seemed very unimportant; surely they were scarcely worth bearing in mind, much less recounting. Still, he spoke sympathetically, kindly, and after mentioning certain penances, gave absolution.

Presently, however, his interest became feverish, for he recognised the voice of the sister who spoke through the grating. It was that of Sister Theresa.

I will not try to repeat her confession here. The inmost thoughts of one's life ought not to be written down for all to read. In the main, however, we know it: it was the story of her love, her fears, her struggles, her hopes, her desires.

"And do you desire to destroy this love?" asked the priest.

"I do not know," was the reply; "sometimes I think I do, at others it is as dear to me as my own life—aye! dearer than life, for without it all is blackness."

"And do you still desire to take vows?"

"When I think of the torments of the lost I do; but, oh! the memory of my love is very sweet to me."

The priest hesitated a second, then he said, "Yours is a strange case, my daughter, and I am going to inflict a strange penance; perchance it will lead to a removal of your difficulties."

"Yes, father," said the novice; "what is it?"

"I wish you to go to the eastern wall of your garden to-night at midnight. I think a messenger will come to you. Keep this a secret from the reverend mother. Pray earnestly, my child, and may God guide you aright."

"The eastern wall at midnight, father? What part of the wall?"

"At the northern extremity, and be careful not to betray your purpose. The reverend mother would not understand what I am saying. You understand, my child?"

"It will be very difficult, but I will try and obey you."

Sister Theresa left, and the priest waited outside. He had not seen her face.

Again he heard a girlish voice; it was richer, fuller than that of Sister Theresa's.

"I am fearful lest I have committed a great sin, father," said the voice.

"Yes, my child; what? God is merciful and His Church is kind. You have thought and prayed much before coming here, I trust?"

"Yes, father."

"Then tell me your sin."

"I am sorely tired of my life here. I hate the daily routine, I find no help in my prayers. I long to leave here and live in the world outside."

"Have you had any communication with the outside world?"

"No, none."

"And yet you long for that world?"

"Yes."

"Not for the sins of the world, I trust?"

"I do not know what you mean. I have been told that everything in the world is sinful for such as I. Still, I long to live as

other women live, to mingle with the crowds, to do life's work."

"This is sin, indeed," said the priest. "This devil must be fought, my child, or, like the blessed Saint Paul, you are in danger of becoming a castaway. Think of the doom of those who break their vows. 'Their worm dieth not, and their fire is not quenched.' For ever and ever you will be burnt in the lake of fire and brimstone."

He said this like a boy repeating a lesson; there was no conviction in his tones. This was natural, for that desire which he condemned as sin was hourly growing stronger in his heart. He heard the nun sobbing at the grating.

"Are you sorry for your sins, my child?" he asked, but he heard no reply.

He pronounced a penance, gave advice, and the nun went away.

When his duties were over, Father Relly went back to his own part of the building and tried to forget his doubts, tried also to forget that he had commanded a novice to meet a man that night, who would tell her what would perhaps unsettle her mind more than ever. But he could not help himself; Lancaster's will had overpowered him, and although he regretted what he had done, he knew that had he to pass the day again he should repeat his words.

He did not see Lancaster through the day, but when evening came he brought his food to him. This may seem strange, but a Jesuit undertakes the most menial work without question. Indeed, had Lancaster's relations to him been different, he would have been delighted to have undertaken such duties. Sometimes their life in the monastery was so monotonous that duties which a scullery-maid would regard as distasteful, the brothers eagerly welcomed. As it was, he found his way to the room in which Lancaster took his meals, with much dread and yet with eager anticipation.

"Well?" queried Lancaster, as he entered.

"God forgive, but I have arranged it."

"Yes; when?"

"To-night, at midnight."

"Where?"

Relly told him.

"You had a talk with Miss Winthrop then? you told her what I wanted?"

"I did not mention your name."

"How did you manage, then? what did you say, and what did she say?"

"I cannot tell you. She will be there."

"You are sure?"

"Yes; you need not fear."

"I see. She will come alone, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"I shall require your help to-night. I shall also——"

"Yes, yes," whispered the priest fearfully. "God forgive me, everything shall be done!"

Lancaster looked at him steadily. "Yes," he said presently, "you will not fail me."

"I know I am a fool," he said to himself after Relly had left him; "no one who was not a blithering idiot would undertake such work, but I enjoy it. The very newness of the business gives me pleasure. I fairly delight in my imprisonment. These dead-alive priests make me interested in a new phase of existence. But how is it all to end? I must remember Ritzoom. He is not a man to be trifled with like Relly. However, luck has played into my hands so far; otherwise Relly would never have got here so soon. Ritzoom evidently made wrong calculations and felt safe in going away. He knew, too, that under ordinary circumstances it would be impossible for me to gain any knowledge of the nuns. Well, the game's not played yet, and Jack Gray is still a novice."

When twelve o'clock came the door opened as if by magic and he saw Relly. The priest made no sound, but led the way along a dimly lighted corridor, and after descending some stone steps came to a small postern door, which he opened.

"I will wait here till you come back," he said to Lancaster.

"But where is the place?"

"You cannot miss it. Keep along by that wall until you reach the end; there you will find a door."

"Is it opened?"

"Go; may God forgive me!"

Lancaster needed no second bidding, and crept along under the shadow of the wall. After walking about a hundred yards he stopped and listened. Not a sound stirred the silence of the night, not a breath of wind moved the branches of the great trees which overhung his path. He left the shadow of the wall and went out into a kind of meadow. At first he thought he was outside the precincts of the convent, but he soon found out his mistake. The meadow was surrounded by a high wall. The dark cloud which overshadowed the moon presently passed away, and he could see things more clearly. He saw a part of the great building in which he had been immured. In one of the rooms a faint light was burning. He had heard through the day that one of the inmates of the place had died, and he connected the light with the dead person.

"I suppose those priests have placed candles over the body of the poor brother to light its soul on its journey to the other world," he thought, with a grim smile. "I hope the poor beggar will escape purgatory and land safe in Paradise. I suppose these poor fellows believe in all this paraphernalia. Well, if it gives them any comfort, let them have it."

The thought haunted him, however, and the picture of the man lying dead with candles near his body played upon his imagination.

"The whole business of the place seems with the dead," he said aloud, and then started at the sound of his own voice. "But Father Ritzoom is not dead yet, neither is Jack Gray; as for Gertrude Winthrop—well——"

He was brought back to the mission upon which he was engaged, and yet he was not able to shake off the influence of the place.

"I don't wonder that these old fellows are full of ghostly ideas," he thought; "I should be inclined that way myself if I lived here a few months. There is something in the influence of a monastery, after all, although what connection it has with the plain open-air life and beautiful teaching of the Founder of Christianity I cannot for the life of me see."

Again he crept along by the wall, and presently he came to an angle, near which was a door.

"This is doubtless the place," he thought. "By Jove! I believe I am excited."

He placed his ear to the door and listened, but heard no sound. Then he coughed aloud, but heard no response.

"It would be impossible to converse with any one through this door," he thought; "if it cannot be opened I must climb over the wall."

A cloud had again overshadowed the moon, so that he could see nothing clearly. He felt the door carefully, and presently his hand touched a handle. He turned it eagerly and the door opened noiselessly.

"Good!" exclaimed Lancaster.

A few seconds later he was within the garden of the convent, where no stranger is supposed to visit!

He looked eagerly around and saw several large shrubs, also the outline of the convent in the distance, but no living being met his gaze.

"It is the general impression that no nun would ever disobey a priest," he thought; "nevertheless, the girl may have had a difficulty in getting here."

This thought had scarcely passed through his mind when he heard a rustling sound behind one of the shrubs. A moment later a figure in a nun's garb appeared before him.

For the first time he fully realised where he was. He was in a convent garden at midnight, and he was alone with a woman clothed as a nun. Cool and self-possessed as he generally was, he was at a loss to know what to say. Besides, he was not sure that the woman was Gertrude Winthrop. Might it not be the mother superior, or one of the old nuns whose work was to spy upon the novices?

"I must get no one into a row if I can help it," he thought; "and yet it is hard work to begin a conversation with a creature whose face you cannot see."

The nun stood perfectly still, and Lancaster took off his hat as he went nearer to her.

"Pardon me, madam," he said, "but are you the lady I expected to meet?"

He knew the question was a foolish one, and yet he knew not what better to say.

"Yes, yes," was the reply; "tell me who you are and what you have to say to me."

The sound of the woman's voice broke the spell which for the moment had been upon him. The voice was human, and, more than that, he recognised it as Gertrude Winthrop's.

"Miss Winthrop," said Lancaster, "don't you remember me?"

She took a step towards him and in the light of the moon saw his face.

"Mr. Lancaster!" she cried.

"Yes—Norman Lancaster. We last met at Brighton, I think."

"Yes, yes. Why have you come here now? I can stay but a few moments; it is wrong of me to be here now."

"No," replied Lancaster; "besides, your priest——"

"Yes, yes; but tell me what you have to say."

There was a plaintive wail in her voice. Evidently Lancaster's voice had aroused old memories, and for the moment she was a woman, with a woman's fears and a woman's hopes. The sadness, moreover, was not lost upon Norman. Cynical as he had been for years, he was a gentleman, and thus was moved by a woman's helplessness and sorrow.

"I have come to tell you that you have made a great mistake," said the young man.

"How? Why?"

"It is always a mistake to ruin your life."

"Is that all? No, I have entered into a new life since I came here. It is wrong for me to speak to you at all—I am sure it is, although I came because I——" She hesitated a moment, and then went on rapidly, "No, it is a sin to say I have ruined my life."

"You are ruining your own life," said the young man, "and not only your own life, but Jack's as well."

"Jack's?" she cried. "What do you know about Jack?"

"I know he is eating out his heart for you—dying for you."

"No, no, it is not so! Besides, if he is it does not matter, I am happy—very happy. But tell me what you said is not true. It cannot be!" And there was eager questioning in her tones.

"It is true, Miss Winthrop."

"No, not that name; she is dead—dead for ever. You are speaking to Sister Theresa. It is wrong for me to listen to such words. Besides, you do not know for sure that it is so, do you?"

"I do, Gertrude Winthrop," replied Lancaster; "I do know. Who led you to come here I do not for the moment care. If you were persuaded to come here, it was a sin; if you came here of your own free will——"

"I did, I did!" she interrupted feverishly.

"Then you did wrong."

"But Jack——?"

"Jack also made a great mistake. He loves you dearly—loves you like his own life. That misunderstanding had no true foundation."

"But he is happy. My mother—that is, I was told he had forgotten me. He is eagerly looking forward to becoming a priest."

"That is a lie; he is not happy. He did look forward to the time when he should take vows, because he hoped that thereby he would be able to kill his love for you; he thought you had ceased to love him."

"And now? Tell me quickly!"

The woman's heart burst through all restraints. She forgot for the moment the life upon which she had entered.

"Now he knows—or hopes—that you love him still."

"How do you know?"

"Because I saw him only a few days ago."

"You saw him—saw Jack?"

"Yes."

"Oh, how did he look? What did he say?"

"Look! He looked like a dead man who walks and sees," cried Lancaster almost savagely. "He has been degrading his best life in accordance with the Jesuit rules; he has been trying to stultify the powers which would have made him great; he has been dying to all true life, simply because he has believed that you jilted him."

"I jilt him?"

"He believed it, or something of that sort. Well, I managed to see him. I told him that you loved him—always had loved him."

"Oh, that was wrong! I have killed all that; I am the spouse of——But what did he say when you told him?"

"Say! It was too much for him. His eyes burnt like fire; it made him almost mad with happiness—for the moment."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this. He could not believe it altogether; he said it was too good to be true. Besides, he was under the influence of the monastery; he has been learning for two years the Constitutions of your Jesuit system, and the consequence is that his manhood is undermined. I begged him to leave the place, to defy the whole lot of his superiors and come and claim you."

"And what did he say?"

"He said that what I had told him was too good to be true; that he could not believe it."

"But if he could?"

"If he could he would leave that tomb and be a man again. He told me this; he said that nothing could make him believe that you loved him still but your own words. He wanted to see your own handwriting, telling him that your heart was still his. I promised him I would obtain this. I need not tell you by what means I came here; suffice that I have come. Now, Miss Winthrop, I want you to write just a few words, telling Jack that you love him—that you have always loved him. If you will do this all this miserable nonsense will become only a dream, and you will live again—live with the man who is dying for you."

The girl was sobbing bitterly.

"Come!" continued Lancaster. "I have a pocket-book and pen here; there is light enough to enable you to see to write."

"Oh, I cannot, Mr. Lancaster—I cannot! You do not know!"

"What?"

"Oh, I love Jack—I do, I do! I would gladly die for him, but I am afraid—so terribly afraid!"

"Afraid of what?"

"Oh, you do not know—you cannot think! You are a Protestant, I am a Catholic; and even although I have not taken my vows, I cannot break away from my promises."

"Promises?" repeated Lancaster, with a sneer in his tone. "Are the promises of a jealous woman, made under the influence

of chagrin and sorrow, to be kept?"

"Yes, yes! You do not know; you do not believe; you sneer at sacred things! I have put my hand to the plough; I cannot turn back!"

She had repeated Jack Gray's own words, and Lancaster saw how both had been moulded by the same influences—saw how terribly hard it was to break away from the power of the priests even while heart and mind pleaded against it.

"You will break Jack's heart, then?" asked Lancaster.

"Better break his heart than that we should be both untrue to our faith! Better die, even, than suffer eternal torments hereafter!"

This she said like one arguing with herself, and the hopelessness of her words embittered Lancaster's heart more than anything else which he had encountered.

"Very well, Miss Winthrop," he said quietly; "I can do no more. If you choose to be an atheist, if you will believe in such foolish inventions rather than in the goodness of God, if you will be true to a fad rather than to the promptings of your heart, if you can, without remorse, destroy not only your own life, but that of one of the best fellows that ever lived, I will say no more!"

"Without remorse!" said the girl. "I tell you my heart is breaking! Oh, I would die so gladly for him—so gladly!"

"Live for him instead; it will be more sensible," remarked Lancaster.

"Oh, but what is this life? Only a few years, and after that there is eternity!"

"Yes, and God is good, else there is no God at all!"

"Yes, but God speaks through the Church."

"Very well; I can do no more; I will go. I will tell Jack that you love what a lot of frowsy old priests tell you, more than you love him!"

"Oh, don't, Mr. Lancaster—don't! You do not understand; they speak with the voice of God. But I will consider. Oh, I do love Jack—I do, I do! I know it was all a mistake, but it is too late now!"

"It is if you ask the priest to advise you, but not if you consult your heart. Think, Miss Winthrop; you have not yet taken your vows. Why not live, love, and be happy?"

"Do not tempt me! I will think about it, I will—Holy Mother, forgive me!—I will! Hark! I hear a noise!"

"No," said Lancaster, "there is no noise."

"There is—there! I must go!"

"Not yet."

"Yes, I must! Can't you hear? If I can, I will try and be here to-morrow night. It is terribly difficult—and, oh, the sin of it!—but I will try."

"But——"

"I cannot stay longer. Good-night!"

She glided away among the tall evergreens and was lost to sight.

Little thinking what he was doing, Lancaster followed her. For a time he could not see any one; then he saw a dark form standing under the shadow of a huge rhododendron bush and almost hidden by its dark evergreen leaves. He went up to her without hesitation, and spoke eagerly.

"One word more, Miss Winthrop, before you go," he said.

"No, no—I must not speak to you!" was the reply.

Lancaster started back. The voice was not that of Gertrude Winthrop! it was deeper, richer, fuller—a contralto voice full of music and beauty.

"You are not Miss Winthrop?" exclaimed the young man.

"No, no! Go away instantly!"

"Who are you, then?" asked Lancaster.

CHAPTER XI

THE woman did not reply to Lancaster's query. Instead, she crept closer beneath the shadow of the huge shrub, as if she were afraid.

"Are you the—the superior of the convent?" asked the young man.

Brief as was the reply, Lancaster thought he detected a note of amusement in it. Instantly he was more at his ease.

"Have you heard the conversation which passed between that lady and myself?" he asked, almost sharply.

"No."

This time impatience was indicated. Evidently she was not pleased at the thought of being accused of eavesdropping.

Lancaster began to enjoy the situation. Who was this nun who possessed such a fine voice? What purpose had she in being there? For Gertrude Winthrop's sake he would find out. She might be a nun, and thus amenable to nuns' rules and influences, but she was still a woman.

"Perhaps—you can help me," he said presently, trying to think of a way whereby he could draw her into a conversation. He had no qualms of conscience about getting a nun belonging to an enclosed order to talk with him. He scorned with all his heart the restraints under which they were placed; for, although he was not deeply religious, he had a vague faith in a Beneficent Creator, and was sure that He would not be angry with a woman for being true to the nature He had given her.

"I cannot help you. You have no right here."

"I do not suppose I have," replied the young man pleasantly; "but then, you see, I am a prisoner in the house which is, I suppose, in some way connected with your convent. And prisoners, you know, take all the liberties they can."

"A prisoner?" There was a note of interest in her voice.

"Yes, a prisoner. Father Ritzoom—do you know him?"

"Yes, did he——?"

She stopped suddenly. Evidently there was a conflict going on in her heart. She belonged to a religious order, and yet she was enough of a woman to have interest in anything mysterious. Besides, place a woman under any number of rules and restrictions, bind her by a thousand vows that she will die to all human interests, and she still longs to know something about her fellow-creatures. There is not a nun, of any sort whatever, but who at times, while she is young, is eager to put her hand upon the pulse of the busy world.

She to whom Lancaster spoke was Sister Constance. During the day, Sister Theresa, torn by conflicting thoughts, had opened her heart to her and told her what the priest had said. The novice had also asked for her assistance. It so happened that the nun who had special care of the novices was ill, and Sister Constance was appointed to act in her stead. It was her duty, therefore, to lock the door of the dormitory in which the cubicles of the novices were placed, and take the key with the other keys to the reverend mother superior. This she did at the ordinary hour, but, instead of taking all the keys to that lady, she extracted from the bunch those which would enable Sister Theresa to go into the garden as she desired. She knew this was sin, but the longing to come into touch with the outside world overmastered all other influences. When Theresa had gone she yielded to the impulse to follow her, and thus, when the novice had returned, she found herself face to face with Lancaster. At first she was fearful beyond words, but presently the romance of the situation and her woman's curiosity led her to forget her vows. Still, the influences which had so long surrounded her life held her fast. "I must not stay here," she cried; "leave me!"

But Lancaster did not obey. The rich tones of the woman's voice touched him. Cynic as he had been, his heart was not dead to romance, and there *was* romance in meeting a nun alone at midnight in the grounds of her own convent. He determined to find out who she was, and why she was there. As for anything that might happen to him as a consequence, he never thought of it.

He knew enough of a woman's nature, however, to realise that she would say nothing to him until he had quieted her fears. But how could he do that?

"I used to be a friend of Miss Winthrop's," he said. "I know—that is, I know her story—know why she came here. I am deeply interested in her. Do you know it, too?"

She did not mean to answer him. She had made up her mind to rush back to the convent and escape to her cell by the same way she had come out, but somehow she felt riveted to the ground. Perhaps it was owing to her fear, perhaps some secret longing, which she could not understand, chained her. Or it might be that her nature revolted against giving up this breath of liberty, the moment she first felt its sweetness; or was it that the deep tones of Lancaster's voice charmed her?

Anyhow, she did not move away from him, but said, like one compelled to speak against her will, "Yes, I know it."

"Has she told you?" asked Lancaster.

"Yes."

"Told you everything?"

"Yes, everything," she said, and yet she could not have explained why she answered him.

"Then I shall be betraying no confidences in speaking about it," he said. "Of course, I remember that I am speaking to a lady, and that therefore anything I may say will be kept a secret. Of course, too, you would not think of mentioning our meeting to any one?"

For a moment she forgot that it would be her duty to tell everything to her confessor. Her true gentlewoman's nature destroyed the remembrance of it. "Certainly, I should not think of mentioning it," she said.

Lancaster could not help smiling to himself. "She is a lady," he said mentally, "and priestcraft has not killed the fact."

"She has told you about Jack, too?" he queried.

"Yes."

"He was such a fine fellow," said Lancaster, "and they would have been so happy. I have taken this unusual proceeding in order to save them. He would give up the idea of taking those foolish vows if she consented to leave here. I came to Ireland for that purpose, I heard that they were both breaking their hearts, unknown to the other, so I came and saw Jack first; but Ritzoom was too cunning for me. He took me prisoner and brought me here. Then I discovered that this was the very convent in which Miss Winthrop was immured."

"But how did you find out?"

She was still under Lancaster's influence, and her woman's heart was curious.

"It would be hardly fair for me to tell you, would it?" he replied pleasantly. "Not that I would not trust you fully, only I promised the one who helped me to say no word how my purposes were accomplished. And a promise is a promise, isn't it?"

He aroused her fear by these words. He made her remember her vows.

"Yes, yes," she cried. "I must go now; oh, I have done wrong! Oh, Mother of God, forgive me!"

"No," said Lancaster, "you have done no wrong. No one has the right to impose unreasonable rules upon you. You are not a child."

"Oh, but I promised to abide by—you do not know, you do not know!"

She did not move away, much as she feared. There was something in Lancaster's personality which held her. Besides, the sin of speaking to him was very sweet.

"Perhaps I do not know the thoughts that are in your mind," he said; "but if there is a God, I know that He is greater than the rules which any man may invent in order to carry out a system. Besides, I want you to help me to make Gertrude Winthrop and Jack Gray happy."

"Oh, I cannot; I dare not—that is," she added hastily, "Sister Theresa is happy—all nuns are happy."

"But she is not happy," said Lancaster; "just now she confessed that she wanted to die. And Jack; you never saw Jack, did you?"

"No."

"I wish you knew him; you would try and help me then. Jack looks more dead than alive. He was such a handsome fellow, too; but that life in the monastery has made him a mere shadow. He is filled with false ideas of life, utterly false; he fancies he is pleasing God by destroying the powers which He intended him to use. He is living an unnatural life, when his Creator intended him to live a natural one. He was made for service in the world—active, healthy service; he was intended for a fighter, a fighter of great battles with injustice, and cruelty, and formality, and lies, and he is on the way to become an automaton, a mere machine who speaks and acts according to order. He is killing a fine individuality; he is crucifying a great nature at the altar of a fad."

Had Lancaster been told a month before that he would utter such words as these, he would have laughed grimly, and possibly have said that he had cut his wisdom teeth, and therefore was not quite a fool; now, however, he spoke with a touch of passion, as though he really meant what he said. And in truth he did.

"Oh, but you are wrong," said the girl; "you are quite wrong! He will become a priest of God, and there is no calling so high as that. And he will be happy—all the religious are."

"Are you happy?" asked Lancaster.

"Oh, yes; that is, I——" and a sob choked the rest of her answer.

"There," said Lancaster, "you contradict your words. And I am sure you will help me to bring Gertrude and Jack together again. You have such a kind, beautiful voice."

"I—I a beautiful voice? No, no!"

"Yes, a rich, musical voice. The world ought to hear it. It would grieve me very much if I thought I should never hear it again." And there was a feeling in his heart like pain.

"But you never will. It is wrong for me to speak to you now. Had I known that you would have spoken to me, I should not have come. I must go back now and forget that I ever saw you."

"But I shall never forget you. The memory of your voice will ring in my ears, and I shall think of you throughout the coming days. But I must see you again. Are you a novice, too?"

"No, no. I have taken vows. Oh, Holy Mother, forgive me!"

"What if you have?" said Lancaster. "God would rather have bad vows broken than kept."

"But mine are not bad vows. They are holy—holy—holy! Oh, *I* am breaking them in speaking to you! Let me go! Let me go!"

And still the girl did not move. She stayed by Lancaster's side as though some mystic power held her.

"What are they? Poverty, chastity, and obedience?"

"Yes, yes."

"And they are wrong."

"No, no; I will not listen to you."

"They are wrong," repeated Lancaster; "that is, they are wrong as you interpret them."

"No; how can that be?"

"Take them, one by one, and examine them," said the young man ruthlessly. "Poverty—the Creator has made the good things of the world for our use, that we may thereby fulfil His will. What law is there, human or divine, which commands you to renounce the gifts of a kind Providence? They are given for use, not for renunciation. Chastity—yes, it is a beautiful word; but what is chastity? Is it to shut yourself away from the life of the world, and to become a mere negation? Chastity lies in thought, in motive. Is a true wife and mother unchaste? Why, the very woman to whom you were praying just now, if she has done nothing else, has revealed to us the glory of motherhood. Then there is obedience. Obedience to whom? Obedience is right, rightly understood; but it must not be blind obedience to man, or obedience to an unreasonable set of rules which men have made to glorify an unreasonable system. The only absolute obedience of life should be to God."

"Yes; and that is what my vows teach, and God speaks through the priests," panted the nun.

"Who said so?" asked Lancaster.

"Why, they themselves—the rules of our order."

"And who made the rules of your order? A priest. Jesus Christ never taught such things; there is no recorded word to that effect."

The girl shuddered. This man was cruelly stating the unexpressed longings and feelings of her own heart. And yet the spell of years of convent life was upon her. Habit had almost become second nature. She had become enmeshed in a system of rules which she had been taught to believe were divine.

"Oh," she cried, "go away—do go away! It is sin for you to speak so! You are a Protestant, an atheist, and you do not know—you cannot know—the truth. It is a greater sin for me to listen. You are speaking to me as the Evil One spoke to Eve."

"That is the teaching of your order, not the teaching of your heart," said Lancaster, almost eagerly. Why, he could not tell, but he longed to break the bonds by which this girl was held.

"Oh, I am not clever enough to answer you!" said the girl. "By and by, when I am alone, I shall see how wrong your words are. You make right seem wrong, and wrong right."

"No," said the young man, "it is not that—it is not that. It is simply that your mind has been poisoned by a false education. Have you been under these influences all your life?"

"Yes, yes!"

"And how long ago was it that you took your vows?"

"Oh, a year ago, when I was twenty-one!"

"And you took them willingly?"

"Oh, yes—eagerly! I looked forward to taking them as the great end of life."

"You were taught to do so, I suppose?"

"Oh, I will not answer you; but I will pray for you and—for myself!"

"Yes, do pray for me," said Lancaster. "I shall be glad to remember it, for then I shall know that you are thinking of me."

"Oh, then, I must not—I dare not!"

"Yes, you will. You have promised, and you will help me to make Jack and Miss Winthrop happy, won't you?"

"Oh, no, I must not, I dare not!"

"Yes, you will. She promised to come to-morrow night here at this place. You must come, too; we must meet again. You need not let her know, but you must come."

"Oh, no, no!"

"But we must; I do not know why, but we must meet again."

"Oh, I dare not! The sin would be too great, too great!"

"But we must! Promise me!"

"I dare not; I—I will consider——Oh, why are you so cruel? Why did I come here? Mother of God, help me!"

"Thank you. Yes, you will come. I shall be here at the same time to-morrow night, and then I shall hear your voice again."

"Oh, do not tempt me—do not, I pray you! There—I *will* go; you *shall* not keep me longer!"

"One moment more. Grant me one other favour."

"No, nothing; do not ask me!"

"But you must!" Lancaster spoke almost as feverishly as the nun. "Nay, be kind to me, and grant me this one favour—nay, two."

"I cannot—I cannot! What is it you desire?"

"Tell me your name."

"I have no name. I am nothing to the world; I am simply Sister Constance in the convent."

"Constance—Constance—thank you! It sounds beautiful as you speak it. Now, one thing more. Let me see your face."

"No, I cannot—I will not—I dare not! It would be sin—deadly sin—no!"

"Please!" said the young man pleadingly.

The girl looked into his eyes with a wild, despairing, yet fascinated expression on her face. She knew she was breaking her vows in doing this, but she could not help it. The man's eyes were full of fire, and as the moonbeams played upon his cheeks they revealed strong, clearly-cut features. It was the face of a man who was not easily beaten.

"Don't—don't!" she cried.

"Please let me see your face!" he pleaded. "Let me see if it accords with your voice"; and the girl detected a strange huskiness as he spoke.

She lifted her hand to pull aside the veil, but at that moment they both heard the sound of a clock striking.

"Oh, I cannot—I dare not!" she cried.

A cloud swept across the moon, and a night bird made a dismal sound. It seemed to break the spell which had been cast upon her; it aroused all the fears which Lancaster's presence had charmed away. With a low, fearful cry she rushed across the garden towards the convent.

CHAPTER XII

LANCASTER left the garden like one in a dream. When he had closed the door behind him, and stood in the part of the grounds allotted to the men, he heaved a sigh of relief. In spite of the fact that he thought himself invulnerable to the influence of women, he had to confess that Sister Constance impressed him strangely. He knew that the memory of his experiences that night would remain with him. Moreover, he realised that his interest in Jack Gray and Gertrude Winthrop had lessened. He thought more of his next interview with Sister Constance than of Sister Theresa's answer.

He did not go directly back to the house. He almost dreaded the thought of being confined within the four narrow walls of his bedroom; and so he wandered among the trees and tried to realise his position. There seemed to be something almost irreverent in what he had done. In spite of his scorn of the convent system, the fact that he had been a party to a nun committing a sin against her order haunted him. Moreover, had he not done wrong in sowing the seeds of doubt in the young girl's mind? True, the peculiar tenets of the Roman Catholic religion were to him as groundless as the fairy tales of children; and they had no more foundation in reason and history than the story of Cinderella. But did they not bring comfort to many women —aye, and to men, too, sometimes?

He saw the light still burning in the room where the dead man lay. He knew that the candles had been placed by reverent hands near the brother's head. It was supposed to symbolise a faith which had no more foundation in reason and fact than scores of the most ludicrous pagan superstitions. To him it was impossible for any sensible man to believe in practices which had their birth before knowledge had emerged from its swaddling clothes. But what of that? Millions believed in them. Even men like Newman and Manning threw reason overboard in order to accept them as part of their religious faith. It was a strange business; but there, beneath the shadow of the convent, it did not seem so preposterous as it would in open daylight.

He wondered if he would ever see Sister Constance again. If he did not——

On arriving at the door from which he had left the building, he saw Relly, eager and excited, awaiting him. Evidently the young priest desired to ask him concerning his experiences, but he spoke no word. He led the way to Lancaster's room, and then looked up into his face like a faithful dog might look into the eyes of his master.

"I must go again to-morrow night," said Lancaster presently.

"No," said Relly, "I cannot arrange for it. You have not seen her, then?"

"You have been very good," said Lancaster, without seeming to heed the priest's questions. "I hope I shall not need such service after to-morrow, but I must trouble you then."

The priest answered only by a sigh. He could not resist Lancaster's stronger nature.

When morning came the young man was disappointed by seeing another priest bring his morning's meal. "I hope there is nothing wrong," he thought. He looked intently at the face of the man who acted as a servant, but it was as expressionless as a stone. He made some inconsequent remarks, but the monk replied only in monosyllables.

Breakfast over, he went to the window for the purpose of going into the garden, but the rain fell heavily, it was impossible to go out. He stood and watched the dripping trees for some time, then he turned to the few books which lay on the table. He opened one listlessly. It contained the life of Ignatius Loyola, together with the history of the Society of Jesus which he had founded. Lancaster drew a chair to the fire and began to read. Presently he came to a story which told how, after Ignatius had received his call, he was riding along the high roads in the kingdom of Valencia, when he fell in with a Moor. The conversation turned upon religion, and, to the horror of the saint, the infidel denied the Virginity of the Mother of Christ. For a moment Ignatius debated whether he should not immediately kill the Moor, but presently decided upon the following plan. Letting the bridle hang on his horse's neck, he determined that if at the next cross roads his steed should take of its own accord the road chosen by the Moor, he would kill him. The horse however, took the other course, and so the man was spared. Ignatius regarded this as a sign from heaven.

Lancaster threw down the book with a laugh. He was not in the humour to read about signs and dreams and visions.

He turned again to *Catholic Belief* and opened the volume at haphazard. This was the first sentence that caught his eye—

"Our Saviour gave no hope of salvation to the Samaritan woman unless she entered the one true Church of that time, saying to her, destitute of a sure guide, 'You adore that which you know not; we adore that which we know, for salvation is of the Jews.' So likewise there is no salvation for any one who, having by God's grace come to the knowledge of the truth, obstinately refuses to join the true Church of God."

Lancaster threw down the book with a derisive laugh, but the laugh died on his lips, for, turning, he saw the door open and

Father Ritzoom enter.

"I am glad to see you studying Catholic literature," said Ritzoom, with a smile.

The young man did not speak. He was wondering what Ritzoom's sudden appearance portended, and immediately connected it with the fact that he had not seen Relly that day.

"I hope you do not find your stay here a weary one," went on Ritzoom. "Perhaps these books save you from the complaint of Louis XIII.?"

"How much does he know?" thought Lancaster. "*Catholic Belief* can scarcely be called exciting reading, in spite of its sweeping statements," he said, pointing to the passage he had just read.

" 'Faith is a gift,' " said Ritzoom, reading hastily.

"I should judge so," replied Lancaster, his eyes resting on the book.

Rltzoom drew a chair close to Lancaster's and took out a cigar-case from under his garments.

"I liked your cigars the other night," he said; "try one of mine."

"Thank you, I am well supplied," was the answer.

"Mine are a special brand," said the priest; "they are remarkably good for sleeplessness. By the way, you look as though they might be good for you."

The Jesuit said this very quietly, his face betraying no special expression, but Lancaster felt sure that he knew of his previous night's adventure. The question was, how much did he know?

"I sleep like a child," replied the young man.

"That is a great boon," said the priest; "it suggests an easy conscience."

"It is like faith, it is a gift," laughed the other.

"You are right," said Ritzoom; "sleep is a great restorative, too. You should soon be well enough to leave."

"I feel quite convalescent now," replied Lancaster.

"Oh, there is time enough yet; a patient should never be over-daring. As one who knows something of doctoring, moreover, I forbid night air; it is dangerous."

"That is a played out fallacy," was the reply.

"Nevertheless, I forbid it. Last night, for instance, you did not have proper rest, and to-day you are like Louis XIII.—you are *ennuyé*."

Lancaster slowly rose and stood before a mirror which stood close by. "I see no sign of it," he said quietly.

"It will mean a hindrance to your complete restoration," said Ritzoom.

"Explain how."

"Moonlight deranges the mental power; it leads to strange fancies concerning apparitions and the like."

"I can assure you my mind is not easily deranged," replied Lancaster.

"I do not think it would be now I have warned you," said Ritzoom. "Indeed, I am sure you would not be troubled by a vision to-night, even although you placed yourself under lunar influences."

Lancaster gave a sigh almost of relief. Ritzoom had not used the term "visions," but "a vision." He hoped that he knew nothing of his meeting with Sister Constance.

"I presume you have the power to materialise visions seen by moonlight."

"You are a man of understanding, in spite of your insular prejudices," replied Ritzoom.

"I am obliged for the compliment," replied Lancaster.

"I think I have told you that I delight in frankness," said the priest. "I know this virtue is not supposed to be enjoyed by those belonging to the Society of Jesus; but suppose we take it for granted that I am an exception to the rule."

"I shall be delighted to have some evidence of the fact," retorted Lancaster quietly.

"And I shall be equally delighted to give it," was Rltzoom's reply. "To be brutally plain, I have just had an interview with a novice who is called Sister Theresa, but who once bore the name of Miss Gertrude Winthrop."

"You priests are favoured fellows," replied Lancaster. "When I knew her she was a most attractive young lady. Rather given to fads, it is true, but still above the average modern girl."

"The rules of the convent are rather strict," said Ritzoom, without apparently noticing the young man's reply. "At the same time, I shall be delighted to play the part of postman if you wish to correspond with her."

"I do not care to accept your offer. I am given to understand that your rules are so strict and so honourable, that superiors of convents act as editors; nay, more, I have heard that the Russian system is adopted."

"We are greatly interested in the happiness of our children," said Ritzoom. "The Church is a mother to her daughters, and sometimes she has to be very stern."

"Still, when children come of age they are supposed to be responsible for their own actions."

"Children are never of age with us," said the priest.

"So I should judge," retorted Lancaster.

So far neither had gained much advantage in this combat of wits. Each felt that he had to do with a clever man, and thus was more than ordinarily careful. Ritzoom had the advantage in that he was to a certain extent master of the situation; but at times Lancaster noticed that he betrayed a certain anger in his tone. Perhaps his extraction made him somewhat impatient, in spite of years of rigid training. Possibly, too, he was not accustomed, as a priest, to be thwarted. Lancaster, on the other hand, was as cold as an icicle. If he were sure that Ritzoom knew nothing of his meeting with Sister Constance he would have enjoyed this interview. A man who can be earnest and yet keep his senses cool is always a strong man. Perhaps this quality has done a great deal in making the English a great people.

"Of course, you speak as a Protestant, or, perhaps, as an atheist," said the priest, the colour rising in his dark cheeks. "Doubtless you would maintain the foolish dogma of private judgment in matters of the soul."

"Certainly I intend retaining that right for myself," replied Lancaster.

For a minute Ritzoom puffed away silently at his cigar, then he said quietly—

"It is hard to kick against the pricks; it is foolish to attempt the impossible."

"True," replied the other; "but what is impossible to one man may not be to another."

"Let us be frank," repeated Ritzoom, with a smile. "Let us speak plainly."

"Go on," said Lancaster.

"Tell me of your interview with Sister Theresa last night."

"*Cui bono?*" laughed Lancaster. "A novice would dare hide nothing from her priest under pain of torture. What did she tell you?"

"Enough to make it impossible for you to get the letter you desire," said the other, in a tone of impatient triumph.

Lancaster shrugged his shoulders.

"Did you really think we were such fools, Mr. Lancaster," Ritzoom continued, "as to believe that you could accomplish your designs so easily? Nay, nay. I will be frank with you. Concerning this novice, I care but little; that is, as a matter of policy, although the condition of her soul is a more serious matter. But when it comes to Gray, we do care. The Church needs him."

"The Church must be in a sad way when she is afraid of liberty, afraid of truth."

"The taunt is unjust," was the reply; "the Church allows perfect liberty, and courts the truth. On the other hand, she shelters her lambs from the wolves."

Lancaster laughed.

"I note your inference," he said, "and am not angry. You praise frankness; well, now, be frank. Answer me a few questions. Suppose you are conscientious in all your actions, suppose all goes on as you wish. Assume that Sister Theresa takes her nun's vows, and Jack Gray becomes a priest. What then? Who will be the gainer?"

"That is easily answered. Sister Theresa will be the gainer; she will be free from the snares and evils of the world. Gray will be the gainer; he will have become a priest of God, and a priest, so said St. Francis of Assisi, is higher than an angel."

Lancaster looked at Ritzoom steadily.

"That is hard to believe," he said quietly.

Ritzoom's face became more deeply coloured, but he took no notice of Lancaster's words.

"The world would be gainer," he went on. "Gray, as I told you, has a genius for preaching; he has a passion for souls. He will win thousands to the true faith."

"That is your side of the question. Now let me put mine," rejoined Lancaster. "Take your statement point by point. You say Miss Winthrop will be the gainer. How? You say she will be shielded from the sins of the world. And what then? She will belong to what I believe you call an enclosed order of nuns. Now, will you tell me the good of such creatures? As nurses, district visitors, teachers, one can see plainly that they can render some service to the community; but as creatures who spend their lives in performing ceremonies and saying prayers, of what value are they?"

"They save their own souls," replied Ritzoom.

"Rather they stultify them. What is the magnificent result of a nun's life, after twenty, thirty, forty years of fasting, performing rites, and saying prayers? She is a mere negation, that is all. She does not sin outwardly, perhaps, because she has no temptations, or she has starved her nature. On the other hand, suppose Miss Winthrop goes out into the world. She becomes a happy wife, the mother of children; she lives a full life such as God intended her to live. She can, as a wife and mother, be as free from sin as in a convent, and her virtues will be positive instead of negative.

"Then take your other points. Gray will become a priest and win converts. Now, I put it to you as a man of the world, suppose he does? Suppose England were to become Catholic, what would be the net result to the community? What if we prayed to the Virgin Mary, the saints, and accepted all the rest of the paraphernalia, how should we be the better? Suppose that I, for instance, could take at one big bite all that you teach, how should I be the better? I should perform all your ceremonies, I should be sprinkled with holy water, I should kiss the cross on certain occasions, I should mumble a set of words at stated times—what then? Should I be a better neighbour, a better citizen, a better man?"

Ritzoom rose to his feet.

"It is useless to talk," he said. "You do not understand; you are blind. If the Church were the institution of man, your words would have force; but it is not. It was established by God."

"Years ago," replied Lancaster, "I used to read Church history and theology. I have also read the Gospels, and Paul's letters, as well as those of Peter and John; now, will you tell me of some resemblance between the peculiar tenets of your Church and the teaching of the New Testament?"

"Again I repeat that it is no more use talking to you than speaking of scenery to a blind man. You must be touched by grace before you can understand."

"But I suppose I belong to that class to whom, if you are successful, you will send Gray," persisted Lancaster; "and he will preach to us the necessity of conforming to all these performances of yours. Would you mind telling me what authority the Founder of Christianity gives for them? As I read the sayings of Jesus, where there is one word about ceremony there is a hundred about truth and right living."

"You speak like this because you have been nursed on Rationalism," replied Ritzoom. "You cannot grasp spiritual matters, you cannot understand the spiritual authority vested in the Church. The Church is greater than the Bible, about which you talk so loudly; it is the body of Christ, it is Christ visible on earth; therefore, whatever she teaches is the word of God, her commands are the laws of God. I believe in all the Church has ever taught or done, I believe in all she will do or teach."

"Even the Inquisition was right, I suppose?" said Lancaster.

"Certainly," said Ritzoom.

Lancaster yawned. "I wish you joy in your work," he said. "You are right, we have no common ground on which to stand. I did not mean to talk religion with you. I was very foolish."

"You were," said Ritzoom, "you were. God hides the secrets of His kingdom from the wise and prudent, and reveals them unto babes. And the Church will do her work, Mr. Lancaster, and all your paltry arguments will no more stop her progress than the words of Canute stopped the onward sweep of the ocean. I am glad I have had this conversation with you, and I think you understand that it will be wrong for you to breathe the night air."

Lancaster was silent.

Ritzoom rose to go. "I am sorry you will not be well enough to leave for a few days yet," he said; "my advice to you is, keep quietly in this room. I may also say that Sister Theresa is now perfectly happy and contented. She rejoices in suffering for last night's disobedience."

Lancaster gave a gesture of impatience.

"It is really best to refrain from attempting the impossible. Some time I trust we shall meet on common ground, and then we shall be able to laugh at these things. May God give you grace," and the priest left the room.

"He never mentioned Relly," thought Lancaster, "and he has never hinted at my meeting with Sister Constance. What does that mean? I expect my door will be safely locked to-night; but no matter, I will manage to get into the convent garden."

CHAPTER XIII

LANCASTER saw nothing of Relly during the day, and when night came he entered his sleeping-room as usual. A candle had been allowed him, and so he could see all the objects by which he was surrounded. Several religious pictures, besides a crucifix, hung upon the walls, and in spite of the projects he had in his mind he fell to studying them. One of the pictures portrayed a young monk, who afterwards became a saint, fighting against temptation. He had been told the story connected with it, which described the saint as being tempted to leave his cell in order to rescue a maiden who was in danger from a bad man. Natural promptings, inclinations, chivalry, all said go and save her; this was the subtle temptation of the devil. Conscience, educated by the Church, said that this would be a sin, and that his duty was to remain in his cell, say his prayers, and trust in God. He had obeyed his conscience, and as consequence became so good, that in after years the Church canonised him. Underneath was written the text, "If any man come to Me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple."

Lancaster turned away impatiently. "Jesus Christ never meant that," he muttered; "it would be against the genius of His whole life; and yet——I must confess," he went on presently, "that in point of faithfulness these Catholics have it. If obedience be the greatest virtue of life, then they stand high. At any rate, this is so among the religious. The net result of the faith among the people where it is all-powerful is simply terrible. Take Spain, for example; but there——"

Lancaster's door was locked on the outside, but he did not seem to trouble about it. He did not pay any attention to the door, save to place his ear to the keyhole and listen attentively. When all was quiet he prepared for action. He took a knife from his pocket which was peculiarly shaped. It was large and contained many useful instruments.

"It is lucky this was not taken from me," he said to himself; "lucky, too, that I have picked up odd scraps of knowledge in going around the world."

Three minutes later he had picked the lock and stood in the corridor outside. The place was silent as death. Possibly there were monks near him who knelt and prayed throughout the night, but he did not trouble about them. Most probably those who were not asleep were too absorbed in prayer to notice any sound he might make, and even if they were not, they would think it was some brother keeping watch on the place and seeing that all was right.

He went noiselessly along the corridor through which Father Relly had conducted him the previous night, and then descended to the little door from which he made his exit.

"I wonder what has become of Relly?" he thought, as he came to the door. "I expect the poor beggar is doing terrible penance by this time. I wonder if I shall ever see him again?"

With as little noise as possible he struck a light and examined the door. It was bolted, not locked. "Fortune favours me," he thought. "I wonder, now, if there is any meaning in this?" He did not hesitate, however, and a minute later he was creeping cautiously beneath the shadow of the high wall.

Meanwhile, Sister Constance was in the throes of a great terror. Ever since she had left Lancaster, the blackness of bitter anguish enveloped her. When, after some little difficulty, she reached her cell without detection, she sat down to think, and then she seemed to hear the distant rumblings of the thunders of the Church. She felt herself to be a guilty soul, and that a yawning hell, full of unquenchable fire and grinning fiends, in which the Catholic faith had taught her to believe, was open to receive her. She, a nun, who had voluntarily taken religious vows, had, of her own sinful will, left the convent at midnight to see a man. It is true that in doing this she had not expected to speak to him, but she had yielded to a worldly spirit and had gone. And then, more shame upon her still, she had spoken to him, and had almost promised to meet him again.

To Sister Constance, sitting alone in her solitary cell this was sin beyond words. She did not know that her woman's nature was breaking the bonds by which the Church had bound it. She did not realise that her action was as natural as that of a caged bird, who, when the door opens, flies into sunshine and liberty. To her it was sin—black, damning sin. She had been made to believe that virtue meant absolute obedience to the rules of her order. These rules represented the will of God, and God was pleased when she obeyed, and angry when she disobeyed. She believed that God took a particular interest in what she ate on a Friday, and was sure that He would be very angry with her if on stated days she ate flesh instead of fish. She had no reason for this save that the Church said so. Moreover, she was sure that He was specially angry at any form of doubt, and would terribly punish her if she did not accept every jot and tittle of the thousand petty trifles which the Church insisted upon. Religion, when brought down to actual practice, was the performance of a hundred little things which, as far as she could see, did

nobody any good, and the abstention from a hundred other things which would do nobody any harm. If a tender conscience were a sign of God's pleasure, then she pleased Him much, for she felt condemned even if she should happen to smile at certain ludicrous things which occasionally happened.

What she had done, therefore, was terrible, and she rocked to and fro in her misery. She was sure the saints were angry with her, sure that the countenance even of the Virgin Mother must be clouded. She dreaded the coming day, for she would have to confess what she had done, and then, in order to save her soul, she would have to pray and do penance. Indeed, her prayers would be a part of her penance.

How could she tell the priest about this man she had met? Indeed, she had promised she would not. How, then, could she break her word?

This thought brought back to her mind the words which Lancaster had spoken. The seeds of doubt which he had sown began to germinate. After all, what harm had she done? Was it right that she, a young girl of twenty-two, should be dead to all the world's beauties and pleasures? Must she never know the meaning of a rich, free, full life? Did God send her into the world only that she might stultify, destroy the powers He had given her? And she longed for the world, too—longed for love, and laughter, and pleasure. When she forgot the sin of it, her meeting with Lancaster was like a memory of Paradise.

Why need she confess? Or, even if she did, could she not do so after she had met him yet once again? The punishment would be nearly the same, so would the pain of confessing. No one knew of what she had done, not even Sister Theresa. She could get out again, and she would, and she would say nothing to any one.

The reverend mother superior was a good, kind woman. She had never a doubt, a fear; forty years of convent life had destroyed in her all desire for the world. To her the joy of the religious was so great, and it was so long since she had been in the world, that she could not realise the passion which must surge in the breast of one like Sister Constance. Moreover, there had been no case of insubordination for a long time, and she believed that all the nuns were perfectly content, perfectly happy. As a consequence, her rule was not so strict as it would otherwise have been. The nuns spent the prescribed number of hours in prayer, they did not complain of the food, they did that which was allotted to them without complaint, and the motherly old lady thought all was well.

When daylight came she saw Sister Constance.

"You look pale and ill, my child," she said. "The day will be fine; go into the garden a little."

The nun gave a sob.

"You are a little hysterical, too, my child," said the abbess. "You had better not fast to-day."

This almost broke down the resolution of Sister Constance, and she was on the point of telling her what she had done. Something diverted the mother superior's attention, however, and the confession was not made.

The day passed without accident. Father Ritzoom had seen Sister Theresa, but she did not know. The usual routine was gone through, the usual ceremonies performed, the usual prayers said, and by and by the convent was quiet for the night.

Sister Constance went to her cell. She did not intend going out; she told herself again and again that although Sister Theresa might go, she would not. She would beseech the smile of the Virgin Mother, and sleep if she could.

She prayed fervently, but she could not drive the thought of Lancaster from her mind. She did not know his name, but she remembered him as she had seen him through the thick folds of her veil; she, who knew nothing of men, thought of him as tall, strong, masterful. Would he succeed with Sister Theresa? She had thought so much of her own experiences that she had almost forgotten her sister. Oh, how sinful she had been! She ought to have been praying for her soul, and striving to keep her from the world, instead of being silent. Oh, she was a terrible sinner!

Midnight came. She had left the doors unlocked, as on the previous night, but had Theresa gone out? She had not heard a word from her through the day, and she wondered greatly. She would like to know. After all, the sin had been committed, and there could be no harm in going out again. She would be more careful this time, too; the man should not see her. She had noted a spot in the garden through the day where she could hide herself and see all without being seen.

She could get out easily. The abbess, never dreaming of danger, had taken no particular precaution, and she could use the same means she had used the previous night Besides, it might be her duty to watch; she was almost sure it was.

A few minutes later she was in the garden. She was trembling, partly with fear, and partly through a wondrous sense of joy. Oh, the sin, if it were sin, was sweet! Every nerve of her body vibrated with a sense of exquisite pleasure; her heart seemed to burn within her. What did it mean?

It was past midnight, but it was not dark. The moon shone brightly, so brightly that she was glad when a cloud dimmed its rays. She crept quietly among the shrubs; she saw the great rhododendron bush where she had decided to hide and watch. Oh, yes, the hiding-place was perfect—no one could see her without making a special search for her, while she could watch easily.

She scanned the garden hastily. No one was in sight; what did it mean? Was not Sister Theresa coming? Had she decided against taking this man further into her confidence? Yes, the garden was quite deserted, and she would have to go back without seeing what she had expected.

A feeling crept into her heart which she could not understand. Yes, she was disappointed, sorely disappointed. Besides, it

was very lonely, and she was afraid. For the moment the anger of the Church had no terror for her; it was fear of another nature. She desired a human protector, human companionship.

Again she looked round in vain. "I may as well go back," she thought, and yet she waited.

A moment later her heart gave a great leap, for she heard a rustling among the shrubs behind her, and then she felt that her outstretched hands were grasped by others, strong and warm.

"I could not see you," said Lancaster. "I was afraid you would not come. I am so glad you are here."

For a moment the nun was too excited to speak, yet, in spite of her fear of Lancaster, his presence made her feel safe; a sense of glad confidence possessed her.

"But why are you here?" she whispered presently.

"I said I should come," he replied simply. "I have been waiting a long time."

"But you came to see Sister Theresa?"

"No; I did not expect to see her."

"But you told me last night that she had promised to come, promised to bring you a letter."

"Yes, I know, but I have seen Ritzoom; he found out."

"Father Ritzoom! Does he know about me?" This she said like one in great fear.

"No; he knows nothing—nothing. I am sure of that. He suspected that I wanted to see Miss Winthrop, and he has questioned her; you know his way. I have no doubt she told him everything."

"About me?"

"No; how could she? She did not know, unless you told her; have you?"

"No; but I must go back now."

"Not yet. No one knows you have come?"

"No; but I must return; I did not expect this."

"Neither did I. It seemed too good, but I hoped, nevertheless; I have been building on it, looking forward towards it all the day. I should have been sorely disappointed if you had not come. Thank you so much for not disappointing me."

Again the power of Lancaster's presence encircled her. She had no desire to go away, much as she felt she ought. His voice had a charm for her, and the consciousness that for the moment she was living and acting just like another woman might, was as sweet as morning dew.

For a moment there was a silence between them. Lancaster felt he had much to say, and yet he knew not how to say it. Somehow there was a partition between them, a something which he could not understand. The very fact that she was a nun made speech hard; and because they had no reason for meeting, save the longing desires of their hearts, neither had anything definite to say.

Nevertheless the silence was blissful; they were together, and the fact meant untold joy. Why, neither could have told, but each knew that the night was laden with sweet perfume, and that every sound was as full of music as the rustling of angels' wings. For the most blissful of life's hours cannot be explained. There was seemingly no sufficient reason why these two should rejoice in each other's presence. Neither knew anything of the other. Had Lancaster been asked to describe the nun, he could only have said that her name was Constance, and that she had a rich, musical voice. Had the nun tried to tell her impressions concerning Lancaster, she would possibly have said that he did not believe in the Catholic faith, and was therefore nearly as bad as an atheist. Perhaps she would have added that he was a tall, strong man, who, when he spoke, made her feel that she must obey him. Yet each was drawn to the other as if by an occult power, and now that they were together both felt that life was broader, richer, freer. Lancaster forgot his cynicism as he stood by her side. He was no longer the same man as when, a few hours before, he parried the thrusts of Father Ritzoom. This was only the second time that they had met, and yet, perhaps because each meeting was stolen, it was more to them than a dozen interviews might be to man and maid meeting under ordinary circumstances.

Friendship, and that which is deeper than friendship, is not a matter of time. It does not depend on intimacy, as the word is ordinarily understood. One flash of the eye, one tremor of the lip, one fluttering sigh, tells more, means more oft-times, than years of companionship. Tragic events happen suddenly. Often they discard all laws, all men's conceptions of what ought to be. The passion of a lifetime is born in a second; the fires which burn in the soul flash into being suddenly. Why—how, we know not—care not.

Who was this nun? Lancaster knew not—cared not; he did not stop to consider. The self-contained, cautious man cast to the winds all those cramping influences which had made his life little more than a mockery; and, although he scarcely understood it as yet, he had begun to live.

For a few seconds they stood, the man holding the woman's hands.

"Don't!" said the woman.

"What?" said the man.

"Hold my hands."

"Why?"

"Because it is wrong. We must part now—we must part now. I am nothing to you; you are nothing to me. I must go back to my cell."

But she made no effort to move. The man's warm, strong hands, holding hers, made it impossible. She was no longer a nun, but a woman. She was drinking deeply of that nectar which brings untold pain, but without which life is no more than a voice of the wandering wind. She lived more during those few seconds than during the years she had spent in performing the rites of her order. It was pain beyond words to be there; and yet the pain was so softened by a power of which she knew nothing that to suffer it was heaven.

"It is not wrong," said Lancaster; "it is not wrong; it is right. You must not go back. Do you know why?"

"No."

"Because, if you go, I must go, too."

"You? No, no."

"Yes. Shall I tell you something?"

"What can you tell me? I am committing sin, that is all. Oh, I must suffer for this; God help me!"

"You are not committing sin, I tell you. *You are not*, YOU ARE NOT. Yes, I will tell you. If you go back, I must go with you; because, because——" The man hesitated, he was afraid of the words which hung on his lips.

"Because what?"

"Because I cannot live without you now!"

He had not thought of saying this a few minutes before, had never dreamed of the meaning which made them pierce the maid's heart like a knife. It was only when he felt her hands tremble in his that they were born in his heart. He had never seen her face, it was hidden by that ghostly veil, emblem of the death of which she had become the spouse; but the moment he had felt her pulses throb in unison with his own, his blood coursed madly through his veins, burning like molten fire. And yet he knew nothing of her; he was a man, and she was a woman, that was all!

Did the God who made them intend his love to be only an insatiable fire, consuming his soul? Was it His will that the woman who had fanned the smouldering fire into a flame, and without whom the world would be an arid waste, should never enter his life, and never make that love the manna which is the food of angels? Was it the purpose of His Son that the woman should dwell in darkness, starving the heart which is made to love?

"What?" said the woman trembling.

"I cannot live without you now!"

The words were spoken and repeated. She hardly knew what they meant yet. She only knew that, although listening to them might mean hell in the future, they lifted her into heaven now! It might be sacrilege, blasphemy, for her to hear them, but she would not have them unspoken.

"Listen," said Lancaster, for his tongue was unloosed now, and he could not help but speak on, "I did not mean to say this; I—I did not know I should tell you anything of such a nature; but I could not do otherwise. I never met you but once before, never until last night did I know of your existence; but you have made the world new. You do not wish me to leave you, do you?"

The girl answered by a fluttering sigh. She did not wish him to leave her; it was partaking of a joy unknown to the saints to hear him speak, and yet, because she was largely the creature of habit, and because conventual life had entwined itself into every fibre of her being, she said—

"Yes, you must leave me, you must. You are unkind, cruel! you are frightening me; you are making me sin. You must go, you must leave me."

"Do you mean that?" asked Lancaster, in a hard metallic voice. "Do you wish me to go?" and still he held the nun's hands.

"Yes, yes, I have token vows, I have promised never to speak to a man. I—I——"

"Very well," said Lancaster, like one dazed, "then I will go."

He dropped her hands and turned away from her.

"You wish me to go?" he repeated. "Say it again, if you dare."

The nun was silent.

"I cannot go," said the young man, "I cannot go."

She gave a low cry which was half a laugh.

"I cannot go," he repeated, "but I will not hinder you. Go back to your cell if you will, go back and forget me. But I will tell you this before you leave me. You will send me to hell. Do you know why? I will tell you. I love you—love you, do you hear?"

Sister Constance laughed. She did not know that a sound had escaped her lips; she did not realise that in listening to such words she was, according to her order, sinking her soul deeper into perdition; but the sound which came from her was a cry of relief, of joy beyond the power of words to express.

To Lancaster, however, it sounded like derision. A great fear entered his heart—the woman did not, could not return his

love. How could she? He did not know of it himself until a little while ago; how could she learn to love him as he had learnt to love her? Doubtless she had come there out of curiosity. She had some sort of interest in Sister Theresa and Gray, and had come to know what would be the outcome of their expected meeting. Thus his words would be wild, foolish to her. Knowing nothing of the ways of the world, he had first of all bewildered her, and then made her laugh at his madness.

"Do you laugh?" said Lancaster. "Very well, go, then, go! I will go, too, and you shall never see me again."

She was surprised, frightened by his words. She did not know their meaning, save that they contained a threat to leave her.

"No, no," she cried, "not that."

He caught her hands again, fiercely, madly, so fiercely that he hurt her, and she gave a little cry of pain.

"What is it?" he pleaded. "I love you, do you hear? I cannot live without you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes," she whispered. "I understand, I understand."

"But do you love me?—do you? Tell me, tell me quickly."

He was in no playful mood, and the girl felt it. This unconventional love-making was the outcome of years of avoidance of the society of women, and the peculiar circumstances under which he was placed. Constance realised the terrible intensity of his tones, and it seemed to her as though her heart was torn in twain.

"Do I love you?" she said, like one distracted.

"Yes," he said. "Forgive my speaking like this. I understand nothing; everything has come so suddenly I cannot reason with myself. Tell me, Sister Constance—Constance, tell me that you love me. That we do not know each other is nothing—nothing. I love you—do you love me?" and he held her hand fast.

"Oh, I must not, I dare not," she moaned. "Oh, please go away, please, please!" and even as she spoke her hands fastened themselves more tightly around his.

"Tell me," repeated Lancaster. He slipped his left hand from hers and slid it around the girl's form. Closer and closer he held her. "Tell me, Constance," he said again and again; "all my life is gone out to you; tell me."

She did not think of what she was doing. She realised nothing of their little knowledge of each other. She forgot her nun's vows. This man's arm was around her and a delicious warmth filled her bosom.

"Yes, yes," she whispered; "I love you, I love you. Holy Mother! God forgive me! I cannot help it, I love you!"

The moon came out from under a cloud and shone upon them. It might seem as though the angels wanted more light that they might witness the scene. Sin or no sin, their love was sweet to them, as sweet as the joys of Paradise.

Lancaster held her with his left arm; her words made everything possible to him. He freed his right hand and then took the nun's veil and lifted it. She made no demur, no movement to stop him. Perhaps to her as well as to him it was natural that he should do this. A second later and her face was uncovered. The bright moonlight revealed every feature plainly, and Lancaster, while he held her to him, devoured every detail.

It was very pale—at least, it looked so beneath the moon's rays; but the vermilion of her lips, the fire of her great brown eyes, fully atoned for the pallor. It was a grand face, too—oval, finely rounded, the face of a pure, noble woman.

Lancaster looked like one fascinated, as indeed he was. Was it the strange circumstances under which he saw her, was it the love which filled his heart that made her more lovely than all other women? Or was it that she was surpassingly beautiful? He could not tell, he did not think; he only knew that since Adam first saw Eve in the Garden of Eden none of the daughters of men were as fair as she.

"My beautiful! my beautiful!" cried Lancaster; "and she is mine, God be thanked! she is mine."

The girl heard the words. Had she ever before been told that she was beautiful? She only knew that she rejoiced with a great joy that this man thought her so. The rich, warm blood mantled her cheeks up to her forehead. The young man seized the band which had been placed across her brow and tore it away. He saw her short, brown tresses.

"My beautiful!" he repeated.

Their faces drew nearer to each other until their lips met. She, the nun, never before knew what it was to be kissed by a man. As for Lancaster, his whole heart went out in the kiss he gave her.

There be many who read this who will say the kiss was a sin. Let them say it. To the ignorant maid—aye, and to every son and daughter of God, the first kiss of love is the sweetest joy which the Great Father has to give this side the grave.

She did not withhold her lips, for her heart seemed on fire. All the pent-up love of her being, a love which had been stultified and starved through the years, burst its bonds and filled her life. Everything, everything was forgotten in that blissful moment. Had she lived the life of the ordinary maiden of the world she would doubtless have felt and acted differently; she would have been coy, self-conscious, hesitating. But she knew nothing of the world's laws, she was simply obeying the dictates of her new-born love. With a wild abandonment she threw her arms around Lancaster's neck.

"Oh, my love, my love!" she cried, as she kissed him again and again, "you will never leave me, will you?"

"No, by God! no!" cried Lancaster, as he held her more closely to him. "No power on earth shall separate us now."

"It is my duty to tell you that you are quite mistaken."

Both started back, and turning, Lancaster saw Father Ritzoom standing by him. Immediately the young man became

cautious and watchful; but he was in no mood to be trifled with. He realised the peculiar circumstances, but he cared not a fig for the threats of priests or the combined powers of the Church. With Sister Constance, however, all was different; the voice of Ritzoom was the voice of authority, the voice of conscience, the voice of terror. The spell of a lifetime's training and influence was again upon her; her guilt became terrible. For the moment she had yielded to her sinful heart, but she still believed in the teachings of her Church. The presence of the man whom she believed to be a priest of God, possessing supernatural powers, was to her like the warning of God. For a mad moment her fears became uttermost, and with a wild cry she rushed across the garden towards the convent, leaving Lancaster and Father Ritzoom alone.

CHAPTER XIV

I HOPE you will forgive my intrusion," said Ritzoom quietly, "but you remember your excellent English adage, 'Duty before pleasure.' "

For a moment Lancaster felt like replying in angry, passionate terms, but one look at Ritzoom caused him to place a check upon himself. If his part had been difficult before, it was more difficult now. He remembered his man and was cautious.

"I told you the night air was bad for you," continued Ritzoom. "You really ought to remember your doctor's advice."

"Doctors of certain institutions have a bad reputation," replied the young man; "it has sometimes been to their interest to keep the patient ill."

"No, that is a mistake of the patient, I can assure you."

Lancaster shrugged his shoulders; he did not feel in the humour to keep up the farce.

"Do you think," went on Ritzoom, "that you have acted quite honourably with me?"

"I am afraid I do not understand," sneered Lancaster.

"Pray do not be angry, Mr. Lancaster," said the Jesuit; "I meant just what I said."

"I am very glad for that," said the young man. He began to realise that Sister Constance had gone back to the convent, and would now be guarded jealously. This made him feel bitterly towards the man who had surprised and thwarted him.

"When you know the Jesuits better," replied Ritzoom, "you will know that they never resent insults. They act as though they were never given, they just go on doing their duty."

"Duty seems to be interpreted strangely among you," answered the young man. "By false means you spy upon a man, you imprison him, and then you think he ought to obey your wishes."

"We more than think he ought, Mr. Lancaster, we insist."

Lancaster thought of the few minutes he had spent with Sister Constance, and, in spite of the course events had taken, he felt triumphant.

"Yes, you insist," he laughed.

"And in the end our wishes are always obeyed," replied the priest. "As I once before mentioned to you, we do not know what defeat means. Seeming defeats there may be; but it does not matter, we just go on."

Lancaster paused a moment, and realised something of the meaning in the Jesuit's words. He saw that the system against which he was fighting was as relentless as fate. So far, in spite of his seeming successes, he had been defeated at every turn. Ritzoom, by that strange divination which the man possessed, seemed to read his mind.

"I ask you to consider a moment," he went on. "You started out a few days ago to get Gray back to the world. You laid your plans carefully; moreover, you thought yourself to be the last man in the world to be suspected of such a mission. It seemed impossible that any one should know anything about it. Well, what happened? We discovered everything; we let you go just as far as we thought wise, but no further."

"Not even to-night?"

"I will be frank with you. I thought it possible that you might be interested in some one besides Sister Theresa. Consequently I made it possible for you to leave the house. You had a longer interview than I intended—that is all."

"The end is not yet," replied Lancaster.

"Oh, yes, it is. It is true you may not be well enough to leave us for a day or two longer, but the play, as far as you are concerned, is practically at an end."

Lancaster was silent.

"You do not think so," went on Ritzoom, "but that does not matter. Our order always succeeds in its purposes. Shall I tell you why?"

"It would be interesting to know."

"It is because we have no traitors."

"Indeed," said the young man, thinking of Relly.

"Yes, it has no traitors, that is one reason. But there is another, a more powerful one. We place duty before everything."

"I would drop that word if I were you," suggested Lancaster; "that is, until I had learnt its meaning."

"I use it because we have learnt its meaning—its truest, highest meaning. I am an older man than you, Mr. Lancaster, and can therefore speak freely. Why have I and others acted as we have acted? Simply from a sense of duty. To us souls are more

than bodies, and we will fight for a man's soul even to the brink of hell. If you had succeeded with Gray, you would not only have perverted one who would have been a great winner of men and women to the faith, but you would have damned his own soul, you would have sent Miss Gertrude Winthrop to perdition."

"A noble faith," sneered Lancaster.

"Our faith is not man-made, but God-made," replied Ritzoom. "It is not for men to like or dislike it; it is the eternal truth of the world. It is just like the air around you—breathe it and you live, refuse to do so and you die. Do you wonder, then, that we are not easily thwarted? Both Gray and Miss Winthrop had put their hands to the plough; cursed be they both if they turn back now! But they will not turn back. They have been through the furnace, but they have come out unscathed."

"Not until I have had another try," thought Lancaster, but he said nothing.

"The sweep of Time is not stopped, in spite of all men's efforts," said Ritzoom, as if divining Lancaster's thoughts. "It goes on. We are like that. We are simply the instruments of God. Men of your sort do not understand us; but what of that? We go on all the same."

For the first time a feeling of despair seized Lancaster. Concerning Jack Gray and Gertrude Winthrop he cared not, in comparison with his anxiety for the young nun he had just left. He realised at that moment, more than ever, the truth of the words he had spoken to her. He felt he could not live without her. She had caused a fire in his heart which nothing could put out. Her kiss was still warm on his lips; her words still rung in his ears. Born suddenly as his love was, he knew that it would abide for ever. If Father Ritzoom's words were true, his sky would be black for ever; life to him would be a bitter mockery. He tried to see a weakness in the Jesuit's armour, but at that time it appeared invulnerable. The man, moreover, was as adamant as the system he represented.

"Of course you do not believe this," went on the priest; "that is because you cannot understand us; but please try and understand the turn things have taken. As for the farce which I interrupted just now, let us agree to forget it. It is true you have played upon the imagination of a sensitive girl. I will admit that your temptation has come in a trying form. But what of that? The Church has had to deal with foolish girls before; it will again. In a week from now she will loathe your memory. I am sure you are not a bad man, Mr. Lancaster, and I am just as sure you are not a fool. Forget her, my young friend, forget her! But of course you will. What do you, a man of the world, care about a silly child's foolishness?"

Lancaster's heart began to burn with rage, but he spoke no word.

"The whole affair has turned out differently from what you thought when you started, has it not?" continued Ritzoom. "Of course it has. You believe us lying, cruel, unjust. But what of that? We are accustomed to be misrepresented; but, believe this, we act in love towards our children; we live and work to save souls. Can you not see this, Mr. Lancaster? Can you not see our purposes, our ideals? Had you not better join us than fight against us?"

Ritzoom had mistaken the impression he was making upon Lancaster. He did not truly estimate the man with whom he had to deal. He did not realise the possibilities of his nature, or the smouldering fires which the nun's words had fanned into a flame. To him his cold exterior suggested that his purposes had obtained no great hold upon him, and, Southerner though Ritzoom was, he did not really know what it was to love.

"Join you?" cried Lancaster.

"Yes, join us, my friend. You would be received as kindly by us as a loving mother welcomes back a wayward and mistaken son." This he said in honeyed tones.

"Join you? I could more easily become a Mohammedan—an atheist!"

Ritzoom felt that he had made a mistake. "You will see differently some day, my friend," he said, "for one day you will understand what the Church means."

Lancaster did not reply; he felt sorry that he had blurted out his last speech. Usually he was cool and self-contained in talking with Ritzoom, and he was angry with himself for betraying any passion. He was now master of himself, however, and began to formulate plans as to what he should do. As for Ritzoom, he looked steadily at the young man, as though he were trying to estimate the forces at his command. Then a seeming change passed over the priest.

"Will it not be better to regard the game as played out?" he said quietly.

"You can do so if you will," replied Lancaster.

"That, I take it, is your promise to meddle no farther with our plans or purposes?"

"That is your affair."

"Then you do not promise?"

Lancaster was silent.

"I am only anxious to save you from disappointment," continued Ritzoom. "Believe me, you can do nothing—absolutely nothing. Your task is impossible. Can you not see this?"

"In some things I believe in Napoleon," was Lancaster's rejoinder.

"Yes, but he, who was a greater man than either of us, found out that the word had a meaning. I tell you plainly that even although you had the power to bring Gray and Miss Winthrop together, the man would still be a priest and the woman a nun. I

assure you our training is not without an effect."

"I believe you," replied Lancaster.

"As for the nun, that was foolishness. She will do penance and be forgiven. You will never see her again."

"You are not God Almighty."

"But the Church is."

Lancaster laughed.

"As I told you, we never confess defeat."

"No, you do not confess it."

"Neither are we ever defeated. We still go on."

"Yes; you go on—but whither?"

"I see it is no use talking further with you."

"Indeed." Lancaster was looking quietly around him.

"I am glad we have had this conversation. It clears the sky; it reveals to us both how we stand."

"You think so."

"I am sure of it."

"And now let us return," continued Ritzoom. "I am sorry you are not well enough to go to Dublin. I have no doubt, however, but that the air and treatment of the place will set you up in a few more days."

"I have not the slightest doubt about it."

Ritzoom gave him a swift, searching glance. He was beginning to be less sure of his man. At first he had him at advantage—his interruption had doubtless come upon him as a surprise; but now he seemed to be gathering strength. To one of his experience and knowledge of men, moreover, a silent man is always more dangerous than one who speaks freely. Had he miscalculated the strength of this young Englishman? He did not betray his doubts, however, and, in spite of his passing fears, he believed in his own strength and resources.

"Then let us return, Mr. Lancaster."

"No."

Again his eyes swept quickly across Lancaster's face, and quick as a thought he placed his fingers to his lips. He had scarcely begun to breathe forth a shrill whistle when Lancaster struck him a blow which not only caused the sound to cease, but the priest to stagger heavily to the ground. Before he could rise to his feet, Lancaster had climbed a place in the wall which had caught his attention a minute before. When Ritzoom had recovered from the effects of the blow, Lancaster was beyond the pale of the convent garden.

The Jesuit manifested but little anger or even impatience; his disappointment, however, was great. He did not fear what Lancaster could do, but he was sorely chagrined at the fact that again the young Englishman had succeeded in opposing his will.

He thought long and deeply.

"He is a strong, capable man," he said presently; "of that there can be no doubt. He would be worth more than Gray, ten times more. He is keen, far-seeing, and full of resources. It is men such as he who make our success so hard. We cannot touch them; nay, we seem to repel them. A few converts of his stamp would do us untold good; but we cannot get them, we cannot get them. Deny it as we may, the English converts mean very little. I always know beforehand the kind of men and women who leave Protestantism, or become Catholics. On the one hand, there are those who do not think, but to whom a sensuous, showy ritual appeals, and who swallow wholesale the teachings of the Church; on the other, there are a very few so-called materialistic philosophers, who get tired of their mental wanderings, and who, with a violent reaction which is natural, accept a system which practically forbids thinking. But Lancaster is neither the one nor the other, and he is a type of the great mass of educated Englishmen. I wonder why it is, I wonder why it is. I cannot help admiring the fellow, and if I followed my inclinations, I should let him take away that nun; but I cannot; I dare not."

He did not resent Lancaster's blow; he was not of that nature. Nay, he almost admired him for his prompt action. He rather wondered what could be done to make him sympathetic towards his purpose.

"If Sister Constance had not taken solemn vows," he thought, "it could be managed. I would communicate with Rome and make it possible for her to marry him. That would link him to us; it would give us an advantage. But it cannot be. We must be as enemies, and I must beat him. I wish it were otherwise; I wish some provision were made in our Constitutions whereby ——"

He turned on his heel, as though he were impatient with himself, and then, passing through the door of the convent garden, made his way back to the house.

"The Church is relentless in such matters," he said as he entered the house, "as relentless as death. Men and women are nothing where her commands come in. After all, we are only pawns in this great game of chess which the Church is playing to win England back to the fold. As yet, too, in spite of our few vaunted converts, the intelligence of that beastly little country

laughs at us."

He entered the door by which Lancaster had made his exit, and ere long found his way to an apartment where an older priest sat.

"Well?"

"We are beaten for the time; he has escaped."

"But why? Everything was in readiness."

"He is no ordinary man."

"No," said the older priest; "he is very stubborn."

"He combines three of the qualities which have made these conceited Anglo-Saxons such a force in the world."

"And they?"

"Coolness, enthusiasm, and tenacity of purpose."

"The terms are contradictory," said the older priest.

"But he combines them all," replied Ritzoom.

After that the other asked many questions concerning the details of Ritzoom's experiences that night; but, although he said many things, his questioner was no wiser at the end of their interview than at the beginning.

"Oh, by the way," said the old priest, as Ritzoom prepared to leave him, "I have heard nothing of the arrival of Relly."

"No?"

"Nothing."

"Do you suspect anything?"

"It is always wise to suspect."

Ritzoom was silent for a few seconds; he was evidently puzzled.

"What a pity it is," he said at length, "that the Church has to trouble about people that are not worth troubling about!"

"It is because all have souls."

"Have they?" said Ritzoom slowly. "If the Church did not teach it, I should——But there—it says nothing about the value of some of them!"

"No," laughed the other; "and Relly is a fool!"

"Yes, but some fools are dangerous," said Ritzoom.

CHAPTER XV

Do you not feel the sin of it, my child?"

Sister Constance covered her face with her hands. The poor girl was sorely distracted. Ever since she had left Lancaster she had alternated between wild, delirious happiness and maddening despair. When she remembered Lancaster's words, and thought of the hot, burning kisses he had pressed on her lips, she dwelt in heaven, she realised a bliss beyond the power of words to express. Life was ecstasy, untold joy. When the memory of her vows came back to her, and with it the teaching of the Church concerning the sins of broken vows, the pains of hell got hold of her.

"Do you not feel the sin of it, my daughter?" repeated Ritzoom, who, by special arrangement with the Reverend Mother Superior, was speaking with her.

The nun lifted her head; a wild light shone in her eyes.

"No," she said, "I do not!"

"I am sorry for that," said Ritzoom, "because steps will have to be taken to lead you to feel it. Those steps will probably be painful."

She heard these words without making any sign; she knew what they meant, and was prepared for them. Perhaps she did not know it, but a new force was working within her, making her bold. She could not explain why, but she felt less fearful of Father Ritzoom; neither did his threats seem so terrible as if they had been uttered two days before.

Still she did not reply to him; something seemed to seal her lips.

"Come, my daughter," said the priest, "I am dealing very leniently with you, and I have taken much trouble to make this interview rather like a daughter confessing to a father than a sinful nun confessing to a priest. Surely you do not, cannot, love this man after seeing him only twice?"

Sister Constance looked steadily at him, but spoke never a word.

"Of course, you know the consequence of continuing in this guilty state of mind?" said Father Ritzoom.

"Yes," she replied hoarsely.

"That is well. God is very kind to the penitent, my child, but angry with the impenitent. For those who die in their sins there is eternal damnation. Their worm dieth not, and their fire is not quenched; the smoke of their torment ascendeth for ever and ever."

The girl shuddered. She had heard so much of the Catholic hell that it was very real to her.

"But I would not bring you to a state of repentance through fear," said Ritzoom. "I would rather appeal to your higher nature. Think, my child, of the sin of breaking your vows. You remember them, because it is not so long ago since you took them. Think of them now, my daughter, think of them now; for if you forget them on earth, they will haunt you throughout eternity, they will be written on the fires which burn you. You know what it is to feel the touch of fire on your flesh, but even that conveys no idea of the torments of the lost. And if there is one poor, lost soul that suffers more than another, it is that of a nun who violates the vows she took when she became the spouse of Christ. Even the devils must shudder at and flee from such a one."

Sister Constance had thought of this again and again through the night. She believed in it firmly, for her faith in the terrible dogma of hell was woven into every fibre of her being. Once during the night she had fallen into a fitful sleep, and she dreamt that she died and descended into the bottomless pit. She heard the jabbering of doomed spirits, she felt the unquenchable fire scorching her vitals. It was ghastly, fearful beyond words; and yet she knew that she would dare it, if by so doing she could hear Lancaster's words again. Her heart's longings, just then, were stronger than her fears of hell.

"Besides," went on the priest, slowly and distinctly, and every word seemed to pierce the young girl like a heated dagger, "you, if you were to continue in your sin, would not only be a betrayer worse than Judas himself, but you would miss all the joys of the religious, you would miss all the blessings which come to the faithful."

"Yes," she said hoarsely, "yes, I know; but why?"

"Why, my child, why? Do you need ask?"

"My life has seemed so empty, so useless," she said. "Some of the sisters have grown old here. Of what use have they been? They have prayed long, kneeling on cold stones, they have done penance, some of them for thirty or forty years; they have learnt obedience all the time, and what are they now? Simply colourless, stupid old women. Their lives are made up of paltry trifles."

"Trifles, my child! These trifles are of infinite value to God. Do you not remember the words of our blessed Lord, 'He that giveth a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, shall in no wise lose his reward'?"

"Yes, but they give no cold water," cried the girl, pouring forth doubts which she had not believed she possessed, but which had been struggling for expression. "A nun simply lives to save her own soul; and oh! surely God cannot care for such trifles. Father, this has been coming on me for months. I long for freedom, for activity, for life. Life here seems to be made up of suppression. I do not live, I die."

"Yes, to live eternally. What is this life? Only a few days of suffering; but after this life is eternity. You knew this when you took your vows. It was the vow of death to this world, my child, death to this world. Your veil is the emblem of death. You became the spouse of Christ, and in doing this you died to this world."

"And I long to live! Oh, Holy Mother! I long to live!"

The girl's voice rose almost to a shriek. It was a bitter cry—the cry of a despairing heart, the natural cry of a girl of twenty-two who for one brief moment has tasted the sweets of life.

"It is too late to think of that now, my child. You have taken solemn vows. If you break them, eternal doom must be your portion!"

"Then I cannot be free? I cannot go out into the world and live?"

"The Church cannot allow you, my child. She may seem cruel, but it is the cruelty of love. She cares little for the vile body; she cares everything for the soul. No, my daughter, the Church will not allow you to be damned. For all your sufferings here there will be Paradise, if your repentance is real and sincere, and you again enter into the spirit of obedience."

"Oh, I do not care for Paradise," she cried wildly—"I do not care for it! I want to live now. I am young, father—I am young—only twenty-two; I do not wish to die! Surely God did not give me youth and beauty that I might bury them here!"

"Youth—beauty?" said the priest. "This is but the voice of the devil. What is youth? A passing dream. What is beauty? Beneath what you think beautiful is a grinning skull. All the beauty of the world is like that. Besides, who has spoken to you about such a thing?"

She did not answer, but she remembered Lancaster's passionate exclamation as he kissed her; the tones rang in her ears now. It might be a sin to think it, but surely God could not be angry with her for loving. Oh, and she did love! All her heart's love went out like a mighty torrent to the man she had never seen but twice.

"I tell you this, my child," went on the priest. "The Church has power to bless—to bless beyond the thoughts or the imaginings of man; but she has the power to curse, too. Remember that!"

She did remember it; she had learned the lesson well. But even while the priest told her of the doom of the disobedient, there came to her a vague feeling that God was greater than these poor little conceptions of Him in which she had been taught to believe. She knew little of the Bible. Nearly all her reading had been confined to such books of prayer as the Catholic Church had prescribed, together with stories of the lives of the saints. And these stories seemed so poor, so trivial. Their teaching was that God was confined to little narrow grooves which the Church had made; that He could bless only on the lines which the Church had marked out. She remembered how certain saints had seen visions of the Holy Mother, telling them how pleased she was because they had stifled certain natural affections in order to obey her behests, and how certain unfaithful ones had suffered because they had obeyed father and mother rather than the commands of the priests. She had accepted these trifles years before, had never thought of doubting them; but somehow Lancaster had shaken the foundations of her being, had torn to shreds the system which had enveloped her. At this moment, too, there came back to her some words which she had once heard in the Church. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts higher than your thoughts."

She had not thought of the meaning of the passage at the time, but it came to her now as she talked with Ritzoom. After all, was not God greater than what she had thought? was not life more than a mere suppression of natural desire?

For a moment these thoughts, though vaguely realised, were powerful, but their influence soon passed away. The power of a lifetime's teaching and training laid its spell upon her again, and she became penitent. The priest spoke long and earnestly to her, and as he spoke those chains which Lancaster had snapped asunder became complete again, and held her fast, body and soul. Aye, and something of the joy which comes with penitence entered her heart. For human nature is so constituted that any act of self-suppression, even if it be for a mistaken idea, brings with it a certain amount of satisfaction. The religious, is, in many respects, the strongest of all instincts, and obedience to it, in spite of perversion, is laden with compensation.

Thus it was that presently she went to a dark cell without resentment. The feeling of her sin possessed her, and a desire to appease the anger of God and to flee from wrath, was strong within her. Faith had leapt up again, too. She no longer doubted the authority of the priest, and with a vague consciousness that through fasting and the saying of many prayers she should turn away the anger of God and win His forgiveness, she knelt down on a cold, damp, stone floor and began to repeat the words which had become almost meaningless, but which now obtained their old ascendency over her.

"I must hate the love I bear him," she thought. "I must hate the words he spoke to me, I must hate the voice he thought so sweet, I must hate the beauty of my face, I must hate him as a man, and think only of my soul; and if I do this I shall, after many

weeks of fasting and prayer, win the smile of Heaven. Oh, God, hear me! Jesu, hear me! Holy Mother of God, hear me! St. Peter, St. John, St. Andrew, St. Philip, pray for me, and help me, for I love him more than I love my life! Oh, God, Mother of God, help me! help me!"

For many long hours in the silence and darkness of her cell she prayed, sometimes longing for the smile of the Church, and believing that God would help her to kill her love; at others, rejoicing with a great joy because of her new-found love, and caring nothing for the vows by which she had bound herself.

Presently morning came and she appeared before the Mother Superior.

"Do you truly repent, my child?" she said.

The nun sobbed, but gave no other answer.

"Perhaps it may help you," went on the older woman, "if I tell you that that sinful man was only laughing at you. Doubtless he has forgotten you ere this."

The girl remembered the look in Lancaster's eyes, the passion of his words, and the burning kisses he had given her.

"No, no!" she cried.

"Yes, my child," said the Mother Superior; "and he has left the district now. May God have mercy upon his sinful soul!"

"Is there no hope for me?" sobbed the nun.

"None in this world, my child, but every hope in the Church, and in Heaven, if you repent."

"But can I not leave the religious life? can I not——?"

"You have taken solemn vows," said the Mother Superior sternly. "Not even our Holy Father, the Pope himself, could absolve you. You are the spouse of Christ; you are dead to the world."

The eyes of Sister Constance became hard and dangerous.

"Rest your head trustfully again on the bosom of the Church, my child," said the Mother Superior; and then, as if divining the thoughts in the nun's mind she went on, "Do not think there is any chance for you to escape. The Church loves you too truly to allow you to be damned. Besides, the world cannot help you even if it would."

"Why?" asked the nun, thinking of Lancaster's words. She had heard vague stories about nuns escaping, and although it was unlawful for her to think about them, she could not help cherishing them in her heart.

"Because," replied the Mother Superior, "you could be kept the remainder of your life in a dark cell, never seeing the light, and the world would not know. You might die, and the world would be none the wiser. No one has the right to enter these walls, and nothing is known to the world, except those things which we feel disposed to tell. And we love you too much to place you in danger again."

Sister Constance shuddered.

The Mother Superior could not help pitying her. She was a woman of kind heart, and perhaps some memory of the time when she herself was young came back to her. Perhaps she thought of some eager, boyish face; perhaps she remembered some fond, foolish words that were spoken in the far back past.

"Everything is done for your welfare, my child," she said. "It is for us to fight the world, the flesh, and the devil. We love you too well to expose you to danger. Remember your vows, and forget the man, who has forgotten you."

"I cannot! I cannot!" she cried piteously.

"But you will—you will. We shall all pray for you; the Church will help you. In a little while you will loathe your sin and dwell in the sunshine of our Holy Mother's smile."

Again she went away into darkness and solitude, again she struggled and prayed and fasted and wept. There was no hope for her. Human help could not reach her. The Church was as relentless as fate.

Before another day had passed away she thought she saw some sign of excitement in the Mother Superior's face. During this time she had been brought twice before her, but otherwise she had had no human companionship nor heard the sound of a human voice. No food had passed her lips save bread and water.

"Have you fully repented, my sister?" asked the Reverend Mother.

"I do not know," replied Constance.

"That is enough. Return to your cell."

At midnight the cell door opened and the Abbess entered.

"Pack your clothes immediately," she said sternly.

She looked up questioningly.

"Satan must be driven from your heart," continued the older woman. "Kindness and persuasion have been tried. Pack your clothes at once. You leave here in less than an hour."

"Where do I go?" asked Constance.

"It is not for you to know; you simply obey."

Even this command came to her as a welcome change. She would have a new cell, and that might afford her some diversion.

"Can I bid goodbye to the sisters before I leave?"

"No. They will not know you are gone."

She had but a few things, and in a few minutes they were placed in a box. The Mother Superior stood silently by her side all the time.

"I am ready, mother," said Constance.

"You will stay here until I am ready," was the reply. She left the cell, locking the door carefully behind her.

Constance sat upon her bed like one stunned. Where was she going? she wondered. Why was she to be taken away? What would become of her?

A great hope shot through her heart. Was not the man she loved trying to effect her escape? and they were removing her because of the possibility of his succeeding. For a moment she felt like laughing aloud, her joy was so great. True, she did not know his name, but he had not forgotten her; perhaps, perhaps he would set her free. This feeling, however, was quickly followed by despair. She would be taken to a place unknown to him, and he would not know where to find her.

She heard a rasping sound at the door, and the Mother Superior entered again.

"Come," she said, "follow me."

Constance arose, but looked at the little box which contained her clothes.

"I have altered my mind," said the Abbess; "you will not take that."

"Am I not to take my clothes?"

"*Your* clothes? Nothing is yours," said the Abbess; "everything belongs to the convent."

Presently they reached the outer door of the building, where two women stood, clothed from head to foot in black. Their faces were completely hidden. Outside the door was a closed carriage.

"May God give you grace to repent," said the Abbess. "You have a long journey before you. Drink this!" and she handed her a glass of wine.

The girl drank without a word.

"We shall never meet again in this world," said the Abbess. "God grant that we may meet in Paradise."

Constance entered the carriage, and the two women entered silently after her, and they were driven away into the darkness, she knew not whither.

“ ‘Think, my child, of the sin of breaking your vows.”

CHAPTER XVI

NORMAN LANCASTER stood at the door of the college where Jack Gray was completing his novitiate.

"I know I am a fool," he said to himself as he rung the bell, "but I'll see this thing through if I can."

The door was opened by a young priest, as on the previous occasion, who showed no surprise at seeing him.

"You remember me, perhaps?" said Lancaster; "I came the other day to see an old friend. I should like to see him again, if I can?"

Without a word he was shown into the waiting-room, and a few minutes later the Superior of the institution came to him.

"I am sorry to trouble you," said Lancaster, "but I should be glad to see Gray again."

"I do not think it is well," replied the Superior in his hesitating way. "He was much disturbed by your last visit."

"Very likely," replied Lancaster quietly. He was perfectly sure that the man was informed concerning all that had passed between them, and he would not pretend that the subject of their interview was a secret. He had no doubt, moreover, that Father Ritzoom had been to the college and given full information concerning all that had passed.

"At the same time," he went on, "seeing that Gray has not yet passed his probationary period, and that it is a part of your system to test every man's fitness for the vocation of priest, you will not forbid my seeing him again, even although I may disturb him somewhat?"

The Superior appeared to be in deep thought. He walked to and fro in the room, as though he were much perplexed.

"I remember my position," he said at length; "I bear in mind the fact that I am, to a large extent, responsible for the souls of those entrusted to my care. As I told you when you were here before, our founder laid it down particularly in his Constitutions that all novices should be, as far as possible, kept from disquieting influences."

"You did," replied Lancaster quietly.

The priest raised his mild-looking eyes to Lancaster's face. Perhaps he knew something of the thoughts passing through the young man's mind. He felt sure, moreover, that the Englishman would not hold him guiltless concerning the kidnapping which took place after his last visit. True, he had not hinted at it in any way, but then Lancaster was not the kind of man to talk about such things.

"You are, of course, a Protestant," he said wearily, as though he wanted rest.

"I hardly know," replied Lancaster grimly. "Certainly I have been much impressed with your system."

"You are not a Catholic, and thus you cannot understand us," said the priest. "I know, too, of all the false stories which have been afloat concerning—but there——" His mild eyes flashed as though he had taken a great resolution. "To let you see how far different we are from the popular conception, you shall see Brother Gray again."

He left the room as he spoke, and a few minutes later Gray entered the room. The young novice was, if possible, more pale and thin than when Lancaster saw him before. His hands trembled, too, and his eyes burned with an unnatural light.

Lancaster looked at him steadily.

"I am come again, Gray," he said cheerfully.

"Yes. Tell me at once your business; I must get back to my work."

"You know the terms upon which we parted," said Lancaster.

"Yes, yes, but it does not matter. You caught me at an hour of weakness. God has given me grace since then."

"I have seen Gertrude Winthrop. I have spoken with her."

"It does not matter; that is all over now. I have set my hand to the plough, so has she. I will not send her soul to perdition, to say nothing of my own, in order to gratify my heart's sinful passion."

"But, but——"

"It's no use, I tell you," said the novice. "God has opened my eyes. It was His will that I should be led here, it is His will that we shall both remain in the religious life. There is nothing else to say, I believe. Goodbye. May God give you grace."

"But she loves you, man. She told me so; her heart is breaking. This decision of yours will kill her."

"Better her body should die now than that she should die eternally," he cried feverishly.

The light of a fanatic was in his eyes, and his whole body quivered as if with pain.

"If that is all you care for her, I have, of course, no more to say," replied Lancaster; "but you used to be a gentleman, Gray."

The taunt stung him.

"Care for her?" he cried, starting up. "Care for her? Why, my whole being is crying out for her. Every nerve in my body, every passion in my life is telling me to rush out of this place and drag her from the convent. Care for her! What do you know about it? You are a cynic, a Sybarite. This is a pleasant pastime for you. It amuses you to come to Ireland and interest yourself in a couple of novices you once knew in the world. You cannot understand the feeling of duty which possesses every true child of the Church. To you the struggles through which I have gone since I saw you last are nothing. You Protestants know nothing about conscience, about self-sacrifice."

"Poor Gray!" said Lancaster, half pityingly, half mockingly, for his experiences of the last few days had made him bitter.

"Nay, nay; pity me not!" cried the novice. "I am a thousand times happier than you, even in this life; as for the next, may God have mercy upon you!"

"You happy?" said Lancaster.

"Yes, I. Soon I shall have taken simple vows. Then my doubts will be dispelled, my fears gone. I shall have taken another step in the holy life. If I am very studious, and prove worthy, I shall be ordained priest in less time than is usually allotted. Bearing in mind my University career, the General of our order will arrange for a special dispensation, and then, in a very few years——" He ceased speaking and the old fanatical light came back into his eyes again.

"Then a woman's broken heart counts for nothing?"

"The bleeding heart of my Redeemer counts for more," said Gray, crossing himself.

"Let us understand one another, Gray," said Lancaster, with a touch of scorn in his voice. "I came here because I understood you were in ignorance as to the true state of Gertrude Winthrop's feelings towards you. You admit you came here through a misunderstanding. Well, I found her broken-hearted, trying to comfort herself by prayers and Masses and relics, but still a lonely, sorrowing woman. It is true the Church has woven its net around her, even as it has been woven around you, but she loves you still; she told me so."

"She told you so? How did you see her? But no, I do not want you to answer me, I forbid you to answer me. My question was of the devil."

"She loves you still," went on Lancaster. "I had it from her own lips. If you do not give up this fad of yours, she will drag out a weary existence, a useless existence, in sorrow and bitter memories."

"No, no. She will be blessed among women. I tell you it is no use. I have fought that battle. She has a vocation; so have I. It has all come plain to me. It was God's will that I should come here; He so ordered it. I will stay no longer. Goodbye."

Gray left the room hurriedly, and no sooner had he gone than the Superior came back again.

"Well, you have seen our brother?" he said.

"Yes, I have seen him," said Lancaster quietly.

"He is stronger than when you saw him last?"

"If you are pleased to call it so, yes."

"Is not that your opinion?" asked the priest.

"He seems to me less a man."

"You mean he cares less for the things of this world—that he approaches nearer the angels."

Lancaster took up his hat.

"At any rate," said the Jesuit, "you will see how perfectly open we have been with you in this matter. You see how utterly untrue are the stories told about monastic life."

"I should be better able to see it, perhaps," answered Lancaster, "if I knew the influences by which he has been surrounded since I saw him last."

"With the purest, holiest influences," replied the Jesuit.

"You know what I mean," said Lancaster. "He is no longer a child; he is approaching his thirtieth year. Has his choice been influenced? Has he lived an open-air life? Has he been free from priestly persuasions, priestly talk about the doom of the unfaithful, and the rest of your stock-in-trade?"

There was a quiet scorn in the young Englishman's voice as he spoke, and he fixed his dark, penetrating eyes on the priest's face. The Jesuit lifted his mild eyes to Lancaster's face and then dropped them quickly.

"We look at things differently," he said somewhat hesitatingly.

"Yes, doubtless we do," replied the other.

"Some daylight will come to you, and then you will know that our brother has been following the leadings of God," he said almost apologetically.

Lancaster did not reply. His heart was bitter, hard. He had hoped more from his interview with Gray than he had dared to confess to himself. He had hoped almost against hope that he would have given up monasticism, and thus have helped him to free from bondage one who hourly became more dear to him.

"At any rate, I thank you for allowing me this interview," he said. "I do not think I need trouble you longer."

The priest watched him as he strode down the drive. There was a sad, plaintive look in his eyes. "I wonder whether it is all

worth while?" he said to himself; "I wonder——But there, it is a sin to doubt, and the Church is wiser than I. Who am I that I should question her decrees?"

Meanwhile, Lancaster drew near to the gate of the convent in which he believed Sister Constance was immured.

He determined to go up boldly and ask to see the Mother Superior. He did not see what good such a course could result in, but when he thought of his meeting in the garden he was not master of himself. He could be cautious when Jack Gray was concerned, but all was different when he remembered his love.

When he rang the bell, a woman, in a dress that seemed a kind of compromise between that of a nun and a servant, opened the door.

The woman showed no surprise on seeing him, but waited, with a smile on her face, for him to speak.

"Can I see the Mother Superior?" he asked.

"What name, sir?" she asked, with a strong Irish accent.

"No name; simply a gentleman on important business."

"Will you come this way, sir?"

Lancaster followed the woman into an apartment evidently used as a waiting-room.

"I'll go and ask the Reverend Mother," she said.

A few minutes later she returned. "Will you come to the Reverend Mother's room?" she said.

Lancaster did as he was bid, eagerly noting the objects by which he was surrounded, as he kept at the heels of the woman. Everywhere was perfect stillness, not a sound of any sort broke the deep silence. No one would have guessed that the house was full of human beings.

"I wonder if Constance is near me?" thought Lancaster, as he walked along the dim corridor.

Presently his guide stopped, and, opening the door of a room, motioned him to enter. He expected to see an aged woman, but instead, seated at a table, was Father Ritzoom.

The Jesuit rose with a smile. "You did not think we should meet so soon, Mr. Lancaster?" he said.

Not a muscle of the young man's face moved. The very sight of the keen, searching eyes, and the thick, strong lips of the priest, steadied his nerves and put him on his guard.

"The unexpected often happens," he replied.

"Do you not think you are a rash man to come here?" he said meaningly.

"No," replied Lancaster quietly.

"No?" repeated Ritzoom; "well, perhaps not; the police regulations are fairly good, even in a Catholic country."

Lancaster could not help being slightly surprised. He did not think that Ritzoom could possibly know of the arrangement he had made with the superintendent of police that morning.

"These fellows have their agents everywhere," he thought to himself; aloud he said, "Yes, you see they are a public body."

"Are they?" returned the priest. "Yes, well, I suppose they are." He hesitated a second, then he continued quietly, "Do you know I expected you?"

"Indeed."

"And to that fact you owe your admission here to-day."

"How fortunate I am."

"Perhaps yes, perhaps no. But what can I do to serve you? You see, I do not resent that unexpected blow you gave me a few hours ago."

"You can introduce me to the Mother Superior?" said Lancaster.

"No, you cannot see the Mother Superior."

The priest spoke sharply, almost rudely. For a moment Lancaster felt like being angry, but he reflected that Ritzoom would have considerable power in the convent, and that he was very anxious to obtain information.

"Besides you will do no good by seeing the Reverend Mother," he added.

"Perhaps I am the best judge of that," replied Lancaster.

"Doubtless you think so; but consider a moment. What good did you do by seeing Father Shannon just now! What did it advantage you to see Brother Gray?"

Lancaster gave no start of surprise. For a moment he was taken aback at the priest's knowledge, but he was outwardly cool and collected.

"No," replied the young Englishman. "I did not think of the influences by which Jack has been surrounded since I left him."

"What do you mean by influences? He is perfectly free."

Lancaster smiled, "Oh, perfectly," he repeated; "the doors are not locked, his hands and feet are left unchained. But I was thinking about——" he hesitated.

"About what?" asked Ritzoom.

"His will."

"You mean that we have enslaved his will?"

Lancaster was silent.

"His will is under the guidance of Heaven," said Ritzoom.

"He told me that he had spent these last two years in learning one lesson," said Lancaster.

"Yes, what?"

"In subjugating his will to that of his Superior. To have no desires of his own. In a word, to learn to obey."

"Just so. Well, what then?"

"Only that I had for the moment forgotten it. I had gone to speak to him as a man, and not as a minor part of a great piece of machinery. That is why my visit was useless."

"Perhaps you feel now that your whole mission was a failure?" suggested Ritzoom, looking keenly at Lancaster and passing the tips of his fingers over his blue, smooth-shaven chin.

"No."

"Come now," said the priest, "the game is played out now; we can both be frank."

"You have been urging that virtue since I first saw you. Would it not be well to give me an example?"

"Ask me any question and I will answer you," responded Ritzoom. "Presently I shall expect you to return the compliment."

"Where is Miss Gertrude Winthrop?" asked Lancaster.

"She is in her cell praying for forgiveness for the sin of speaking to you. She loathes the action she has taken, and has this day been beseeching me to use whatever means I have in my power to hasten the day when she can take her vows."

Lancaster looked at the Jesuit steadily and saw the mocking smile on his lips, detected the sneer in his voice as he spoke. He had no doubt, however, but that he told the truth.

"And where is Sister Constance?"

The question came out sharply, suddenly, and Lancaster saw that Ritzoom shuffled in his chair. He noticed, moreover, that he hesitated before speaking.

"You have no right to ask that question," said the priest. "The sister has taken solemn vows, and should be dead to the world. By your action you have——but I will not enlarge on that. She is where you will never see her."

Lancaster kept his eyes steadily upon the priest.

"What do you mean by that?" he said.

"I mean that it is a sin for you to speak of her in that way," replied Ritzoom; "she has taken upon her——"

"Yes, yes, I understand all that," interrupted Lancaster impatiently. "You told me you would answer my question. You say that Sister Constance is where I shall never see her. Where is she?"

A flush of anger rose to the priest's face. It was strange to him to meet with a man whom he could not master. He was accustomed to implicit obedience, often servility. Many of the brethren regarded him as a sort of demi-god; this young man apparently defied him.

"I mean," he said, keeping his eyes steadily on Lancaster, "that she is no longer in the convent."

For a moment the young man was staggered. "You mean that?" he stammered presently. "Where is she taken?"

"That is not for you to know," replied the priest.

He had told a lie, and he knew it. Sister Constance was at that moment in her cell, sobbing out her heart and praying wildly that she might again see the man she loved. Even Ritzoom hesitated in telling this lie. It was not often that he acted in this way; but he excused himself by calling to mind the examples of great men.

"Even Newman said a man was justified in deception if thereby he could serve the cause of God," he said to himself; "while Prunes, as well as St. Alfonso de Liguori both taught the same. No, it was necessary and it was right."

"Is there anything else you wish to know?" asked Ritzoom.

"No," said Lancaster; "that is, I desire to ask no other questions."

"I have had an interview with the sister," went on Ritzoom. "She told me—and this not as a penitent to her father confessor—that——"

"No," said Lancaster, "I do not wish to hear what she told you."

"No?" said Ritzoom, with a curious smile on his lips.

"No," repeated Lancaster. "You see," he added, "we Protestants attach a peculiar meaning to the word sacrilege."

Ritzoom started as though a wasp had stung him; then, quietly mastering himself, he said—

"Very good; I have answered your questions, have I not?"

"You have replied to them."

"Well, now it is my turn to ask, and your turn to answer. That was the arrangement. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, that is so."

"Up to now you have been—well, let us call it unfortunate."

"Very unfortunate."

“You have pitted yourself against a system manned by individuals who possess ideals, a keen sense of duty—in short, conscience.”

Lancaster was silent.

“Therefore you have failed. Will you tell me your plans for the future?” and Ritzoom gave a low, mocking laugh.

“Yes, I will tell you,” replied Lancaster slowly.

CHAPTER XVII

A STRANGE light came into Father Ritzoom's eyes; Lancaster, he thought, was revealing a new phase of his character.

"I am waiting," he said presently.

"So am I," replied Lancaster.

Ritzoom looked at him questioningly.

"You are fond of details," continued Lancaster; "I am waiting for your questions."

"Oh, yes," laughed Ritzoom. "Well, let us begin at the beginning. What are your plans concerning Gray?"

"I have none except this. I shall watch his career closely, and as occasion occurs I shall try and break the spell you have cast upon him."

"I think I have told you it is useless to kick against the pricks."

"You have. I shall do nothing until he is free from monastic influences. When he is ordained priest and lives in the world again—well, things will be different."

Ritzoom smiled mockingly, "You think you will have a better chance then, I suppose?"

Lancaster nodded his head gravely.

"That is interesting," went on Ritzoom. "And Sister Theresa?" he queried.

"Her future will depend upon Gray's."

"I see. Do you expect success, may I ask?"

"Some Spaniards once told me that an Englishman never does anything without expecting success."

"The Spaniards are mostly fools," said Ritzoom.

"They are mostly Papists, and Spain is the home of the Jesuits. There is a popular impression that Ignatius Loyola was a Spaniard," was Lancaster's retort.

Ritzoom laughed. Evidently he was enjoying himself vastly.

"And Sister Constance," he said presently; "do you feel disposed to tell me your plans concerning her?"

"Yes," replied Lancaster. "I shall find her, wherever she is. I shall set her at liberty, and——"

"And then?" Ritzoom spoke more quickly than was his wont.

"I shall make her my wife," replied the young man quietly.

The priest was evidently astonished at the cool way in which Lancaster spoke.

"And her vows," he said, somewhat weakly, "the solemn vows she made to the Church—to God?"

"It seems to me you have yet to learn how Englishmen regard such vows as yours. We regard them as of no more weight than those of a poor, distracted fellow who vows to commit murder or suicide."

"Is that the Protestant view, may I ask?"

"It is my view."

"This frankness is delightful," laughed the Jesuit presently. "Do you know, Mr. Lancaster, I would not have missed meeting you for a great deal? Some one has described life as a series of sensations. It is, therefore, our object to get as many pleasant sensations as possible. Allow me to thank you for so much experience in this direction."

"A new experience, may I ask?"

"Quite new."

"And yet I have simply been frank. I expect, however, that we regard this virtue, which you have preached so often, differently."

"You think so. But to follow your excellent example, do you not see that by this very frankness you have, to use your excellent English colloquialism, been cutting your own throat?"

"No."

"No? How interesting! I remember, when we first met, that we quoted some excellent British proverbs. Let me add another. 'To be forewarned is to be forearmed.' "

"True. But in what way have I forewarned you?"

"You have told me exactly what you mean to do."

"And thereby I shall not alter your course of conduct one iota."

"That is true," said the Jesuit, as if musing. At the same time a curious smile played around his lips. "Then it seems as

though there must be war to the knife between us?" he added.

"It may appear so to you, perhaps," said Lancaster; "I do not look at it in that way."

"No? Will you continue to be frank, and tell me how you look at it?"

"War usually means enmity. I have no such feeling towards you."

"That's right. Still, I do not quite understand."

"I do not believe in your system, that is all. I daresay I am exceedingly selfish in the matter, perhaps sordid. While it did not affect me and mine I took no particular interest in it. During the last few days, however, I find that it does affect—those I care for. In so far, therefore, as it does affect them——" Lancaster shrugged his shoulders, but did not finish the sentence.

"While I?" queried Ritzoom, "where do I come in?"

"To change the figure somewhat, you are a knight in this game of chess which your Church is playing."

"But why a knight?" laughed Ritzoom.

"A knight is not moved in straight lines."

"You are delightfully frank," said Ritzoom, the colour again rising to his pale cheeks.

"That, of course, I take as a compliment," said Lancaster; "some time I hope to be able to return it."

Lancaster rose from his chair and took his hat; Ritzoom, on the contrary, played with the pen he held in his hand and seemed to be cogitating deeply. Presently he seemed to have made up his mind about something.

"I can afford to be generous," he said; "the victor in a battle always can. Let me say, however, that I do not look upon you as an enemy, that I do not resent—well—some of the compliments you have paid me. More, I—well—have a very strong admiration for your coolness, your foresight, your courage. I wish I could look upon you as a brother of our Order; you would have taken a high place with us. However, it cannot be, and since we cannot be friends—well—in spite of what you say, we must be enemies. At least, however, we can be honourable enemies. Will you shake hands?"

Lancaster hesitated.

"Yes," he said at length. "It is not you who are against me, but your Order."

He held out his hand, which Ritzoom held in his strong grasp.

"I am glad you understand," he said. "Remember that to the faithful Catholic his Church is everything; that to the true Jesuit everything must bend to his Order. The latter is one of the holiest forces of the former, while the former is the manifestation of God upon earth, the expression of His divine will, whose head is the Pope. Do you not see this?"

"No," replied Lancaster; "in addition to common morality, the Roman system is to me a meaningless ceremonial, while the Pope——"

"While the Pope is what?"

"A mere master of ceremonies."

"May God give you grace!" said Ritzoom.

"Do not mistake me," said Lancaster. "I believe your priests and nuns are mostly sincere. To you all these peculiar dogmas and sacraments are divine."

"And to you?" queried Ritzoom.

"Most of them are only childish superstitions."

The Jesuit looked at the young Englishman steadily. He could not understand him, and yet he admired his independence, his self-reliance. Why was it, he wondered, that the Catholic Church had no attractions for him? There must be some sufficient reason. It was not because he was coarse, sensual, or even irreligious. If he would accept the faith, there would be no more trouble in the matter. He would obey his priest in such a matter without question. But would not that obedience of necessity destroy the independence, the self-reliance, which was the basis of the young man's character? Moreover, were not these qualities the secret of Protestant England's greatness?

"Forgive me," said Lancaster; "I have again been betrayed into talking about religion. I was foolish. Religion is not a matter to be talked about, it is to be lived. To me, moreover, it is a personal matter, concerning which no one has a right to interfere; with Romanists I suppose it is more a matter of proxy. Well, we must each go our own way. In fact, I must go at once, for if I don't report myself soon, inquiries will be made concerning me," and he laughed quietly.

Ritzoom understood his meaning, but he took no apparent notice.

"Very well," he said; "goodbye; but before you go let me add this warning. The path you intend to walk is beset with danger, and you will never succeed—never."

"No?" said Lancaster quietly, but the Jesuit noticed the look of quiet resolution in the young man's eyes.

"No, never. Gray will become a priest, and through him the work of the Church will extend. Miss Gertrude Winthrop will become a nun; as for the other, you will never see her, never hear of her again."

Lancaster did not reply, but his lip trembled slightly.

"You do not believe this?" said Ritzoom.

"No," said Lancaster. "If she lives, and I live ten years, the girl you call Sister Constance will be my wife."

The priest watched him as he strode away from the convent. "The English are a strong race," he said; "they seem to do everything they set themselves out to accomplish. Of course, I shall see to it that he never succeeds; it may be, too, that I shall find it necessary to take harsh steps with him; all the same, it is a pleasure to fight with such a man. It does one's heart good to meet with such a fellow after dealing with our priests, whose great virtue is that they learn to obey their superiors. There is more individuality in that fellow's little finger than in——"

He stamped his foot, as if impatient with himself, and then went back to the room which he had just left. He found the Mother Superior waiting for him.

"You heard?" he said.

The Reverend Mother nodded significantly. "It was necessary, in order for me to be able to deal with my rebellious children," she said.

"Yes, of course."

"The novice will give me no trouble," she went on. "She already repents her sin. Discipline, prayer, and the virtue of that blessed relic of St. Theresa——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Ritzoom, "she is all right; but Sister Constance——"

"I did not understand your reference to Sister Constance," said the Mother Superior meaningly.

"I simply anticipated matters," said the priest. "She must be taken away. She will not be safe here."

"But what danger can there be? I have arranged for every precaution to be taken."

"Which would be useless with such a man as Lancaster. If she remains here, she will be set at liberty, I tell you. I understand the look in his eyes; I have measured my man. He is able to accomplish almost anything."

"Well, we have convents all over the world. Where will you send her?"

The priest smiled. "No names must be mentioned," he said meaningly. "Words spoken have a way of being repeated."

"Doubtless you are right," said the Abbess; "and as you say, Mr. Lancaster looks a very determined man. These heretics often are; but then, so are you."

"Yes, but we have no hold on him, to use an English colloquialism. He cares nothing for the Church's promises nor her threats."

"No?" queried the Abbess thoughtfully; "and that, I suppose, is the characteristic of English Protestants?"

"Yes," said Ritzoom.

"Then we must trust to reason and the grace of God in converting England."

"Yes, and to the Ritualists," replied Ritzoom.

"The Ritualists?"

"Yes, we owe nine-tenths of the conversions to Rome, to the Ritualists. They are the John the Baptists of our cause. Without them we could do nothing."

The Abbess nodded her head thoughtfully.

Meanwhile Lancaster made his way towards the nearest town. Arrived there, after having called at the police station, he went to the railway station, and soon after was on his way to Dublin. For a long time he sat almost motionless. He was alone in the carriage, and having caught an express train, he was able to think quietly and without interruption. For a time everything seemed confused and unreal. Only a few days before he had come to Ireland, heart whole, but lacking in earnestness. He had a curious sort of interest in his mission, and up to the time when he visited the convent garden he had had a certain enjoyment in the work he had undertaken. Well, he had failed, completely and utterly failed. Jack Gray would take vows, Gertrude Winthrop would be a nun. He had not the slightest doubt about it. More than that, they would take them willingly, they were eager to enter the life from which he had come to save them. Doubtless they still loved each other, doubtless they would pass their lives without entering into that joy intended for them by their Creator; but he could not help it. They had entered into that condition of mind and heart which defied all ordinary laws. Their Church had claimed them, their Church had woven a net around them which not only held them fast, but made them afraid to seek their liberty.

This desire to free these two had been his chief motive in coming to Ireland; now, however, his interest in them had become a secondary matter. He had given his heart to a woman of whom he knew nothing; he loved a woman whom, according to the faith of the Romanists, it was a sin to love. He thought of his meetings with her, he called to mind his strange wooing. In some respects it seemed like a dream, in others it was terribly real. He knew that a fire had been kindled in his heart which would never die out, he had a consciousness that he would never know rest or peace until he held Sister Constance in his arms again. He had no doubt about her love for him; that wild, passionate cry—the expression of a soul that had found its affinity—those broken words, those burning kisses, told him that her life had gone out to him, that, like him, she would never be at peace until they were again together.

He knew that the Church regarded her love as a sin; he was sure, moreover, that everything would be done to drive from her heart what her Order regarded as being the temptation of the devil. Once he had talked with a woman who had spent some years in a convent, but who had escaped from it, and she had told him that she had been subjected to cruel torture in order that

what the Mother Superior called her pride and her passion, might be destroyed. Doubtless the faithful were conscientious in doing this. They believed that love for the opposite sex was, in a woman who had entered the holy life, a deadly sin; they held, too, that anything like independence of spirit must be destroyed, and thus as a religious duty they used what the Church called "discipline" to exorcise the devil.

He knew, too, that this young girl whom he had held in his arms, and for whom he would have given his life, would doubtless be subjected to all those terrible sufferings common in religious Orders. The woman with whom he had spoken had told him that she had had to lick the floor, and had also been commanded to lie on the ground while the other nuns walked over her. And this the Church had commanded, not in the spirit of cruelty, but in love. Doubtless the whole system was a relic of barbarism; but Roman devotees were sincere, and believed they were doing God service in being faithful to it.

He thought of Constance suffering in pain and darkness, while all the time the terrible threats which the Church had at her command drove her to madness.

To him the Catholic hell was a figment of a diseased imagination, while the commands of a priest were no more than the threats of a puling child; but to her it was different. She had been reared in the atmosphere of the cloister, she had been fed on the dogmas of the Church, her nature had largely been moulded by the influences of an enclosed Order.

As these thoughts pressed themselves upon him the hard crust of his nature became more and more broken. In the presence of Ritzoom he was cool, satirical, and apparently passionless; but alone with his thoughts in the railway carriage all was different. He rose from his seat and began to pace the carriage.

"Yes, I'll find her," he said passionately, between his set teeth, "I'll find her, wherever she is; and I'll set her free. I can see my course plainly. It's a duel between Ritzoom and myself, between the dogmas and rules of a Church, and one man. But how am I to commence?"

The difficulty of the position stunned him for a moment, and he sat down, like one weak and helpless, on the seat from which he had risen.

"Am I not going away from my work?" he thought. "Ought I not to remain in Ireland? ought I not to watch the district night and day?"

Again he sat as motionless as a statue, while his eyes were fixed and stony; but he saw nothing of the scenery through which they were passing, he was not conscious of his surroundings.

"No," he said presently, "I can do nothing here at present, nothing. I should simply play into their hands. I must go back to London, I must think out this matter from the very bottom. I must not act wildly. I must be careful, systematic. But I must waste no time. I must remember that she is suffering, that she is——"

He started up again, his eyes flashing fiercely.

"I must remember," he went on presently, "that these people are to a large extent pure in life; that they truly believe in their insane dogmas; that they are conscientious; that they believe they are pleasing God, not only by stultifying their own natures, but by submitting others to discipline. Yes, I must try and understand their position. All the same, as surely as God is in heaven, I'll beat them. I'll find her; I'll set her at liberty; I'll make her my wife."

A look of fierce joy swept over his face as he made the resolution. After all, he was not beaten yet. He was alive, he was free, he retained a clear brain, a strong will, and he had learnt the secret of life—he had learnt to love.

Half an hour later, when arrived at Dublin, he despatched a telegram to Carelton. This is what he wrote:—

"*Shall arrive at Euston 8.45 to-morrow night.*"

"Nothing seemed impossible to Lancaster then. He felt his strength to be the strength of ten."

CHAPTER XVIII

WELL, Carelton, I've failed. Ignominiously failed. I've been beaten at every point."

This was Lancaster's greeting as, about ten o'clock, Carelton entered his room.

"I am not surprised," replied the other quietly.

"No?" queried Lancaster.

"I discovered the day after you left, that Ritzoom had gone over to Ireland by the same boat. Somehow he must have found out our arrangements and then set to work to thwart them."

"Exactly."

"Well, it can't be helped. I am terribly sorry; but of this I am sure; if it were possible to have induced them to come back to life, you would have succeeded."

"I don't know. I've made a terrible mess of it. I can see now how I might have acted differently. I was over confident; I did not realise the forces against which I was working."

"I thought you had posted yourself?"

"Yes, I thought so, too; but I failed to grasp the depth of the Jesuit's mind, his love for his Order, his absolute faithfulness, and his fear of the strong hand of the Church. I looked at everything from the standpoint of a man who believed in the right of private judgment, and who was ignorant of the thousand sophistries interwoven in the Jesuit system."

"Just so; well, tell us your experiences."

Lancaster took a box of cigars from a cupboard and laid them on the table before Carelton.

"Light up, old man," he said quietly, and then for a few minutes he puffed away steadily, while Carelton watched him without speaking a word.

"I hardly know how to begin," said Lancaster presently; "upon my word, I do not. The atmosphere of monasticism seems to be all around me. I am all the time fancying there are people listening at the doors; I cannot get rid of the influence of a system which, to me, is founded on distrust. During these last few days nearly everybody I have met have lived their lives by rule, and nearly all have doubted the sincerity of other people. The Catholic faith seems to be a belief in a system, while Jesuitism, to the rank and file, is the working out of a detailed programme. Sin is disobedience of, or a failure in carrying out, a set of rules. It is a sin not to perform this little act, it is a deadly sin not to perform that, while it is a virtue to find out the weakness of somebody else and report it. But there, I cannot analyse it. Doubtless the people are sincere—that is, a large proportion of them; doubtless, too, they think they are gaining Paradise by implicit credulity, and by so suppressing all natural desires that they learn to act their prescribed part as naturally as each bit of machinery in a cotton factory is made to fulfil its functions. You've seen a weaving factory, Carelton; you've watched how each little part of a complex system of cogs, and wheels, and looms, does its work. That's like monasticism. It is just as ingenious; it is just as automatic. A shuttle flashes along its course because it is made to. It has no will, no knowledge; it simply does its work. Jesuitism is a huge piece of machinery, very complex, very ingenious; men and women are parts of it, and the genius of the business is that it so destroys the will, that men and women do their part without any more purpose of their own than a wheel has, when it is moved by another wheel to which it is attached."

"But machinery is kept going by a great motive force."

"So is Jesuitism. It is faith in the Church and fear of its terrors. Of course, when any man or woman loses either of these the thing goes wrong. Consequently, the first care in training a novice is to convince him that he is nothing, but that his Order, his Church, are everything."

"Just so; that may all be interesting enough, but I asked you to tell me your experiences."

"So you did, and I have gone on another track; and yet what I have said may help you to understand my story."

Thereupon Lancaster told his experience in detail, omitting nothing save his meeting with Constance and the incidents which resulted therefrom. When he had finished the clock was striking twelve, and Carelton, who had never uttered a word during the recital, drew a deep sigh.

"I am thankful you are home, alive and well," he said presently.

"It has not turned out to be such an easy affair as we imagined," replied Lancaster.

"Ritzoom is a wonderful fellow."

"Do you know, I cannot help liking him."

"Liking him?"

"Anyhow, admiring him. The man's power of foresight is prodigious. Nothing escapes him; he seems prepared for every exigency. He's a man of the Napoleon Bonaparte type; but for one trait in his character, he would be irresistible."

"And that?"

"Well, he has a temper. His training has not killed it; thus at times he loses his caution."

"It is a wonder that such a man can be a Jesuit."

"No, not when you think of the matter carefully. You see, first of all, he has been taught to believe from a child in the Catholic dogmas. After that all becomes plain."

"But does it not seem strange that such a man is willing to become an automaton?"

"He is no automaton. You see, in every system there must be ruling minds, ruling forces. Ritzoom is one of them. Jesuitism offers him a splendid field for his genius. To a strong man every set of rules can be interpreted to suit his will and desires. As a priest he is endowed with tremendous powers—that is, these powers are supposed to be his by the faithful. What follows? While the weak, the commonplace men and women become machines, they who are sufficiently strong bend rules to suit their wills, while they make it appear that they are carrying everything out to the letter. Barring his vows to celibacy, Ritzoom lives a comparatively free life. He and such as he guide the business, they deal with large issues, they are engaged on great enterprises."

"Just so; well, what are you going to do, Lancaster?"

"What would you do?"

"Nothing. It is terribly hard to make the confession, but it seems to me that nothing can be done."

Lancaster was silent.

"Don't you think so?" queried Carelton.

"No. I don't give up hope."

"How is that?"

"Well, I remember that Jack Gray is still a man. I remember that he did not become a novice as a lad. And so——" Lancaster shrugged his shoulders meaningly.

"I see. And Gertrude Winthrop?"

"Gertrude Winthrop still loves Jack."

"Well?"

"The game's not yet played out. Men are sometimes greater than vows."

It was after one o'clock when Carelton left Lancaster's house. For more than an hour after the younger man had told his story, they had been discussing the affair, but no word had been spoken concerning Sister Constance.

"You have done all that a man could do," said Carelton, as he stood on the doorstep. "Looking at it now, I see that you started on a hopeless quest. It was madness on my part to ask you to undertake the affair."

"You did not ask me. I offered my services. Besides, I am glad I went; the business has been an education. I have learnt the rules of the game, and, if I mistake not, there'll be some startling developments yet."

"Yes?"

"Some time you'll know," said Lancaster. "Good-night, old man."

Carelton had not gone a dozen yards from the house when a man left the shadow of one of the trees which grew in the square where Lancaster lived.

"Mr. Lancaster?" he said.

The young man started, he recognised the voice.

"Come in," he said quietly.

The man, who was enveloped in a long black ulster, came cautiously towards him. A few seconds later he had entered the house and the door was carefully closed.

"Come this way," continued Lancaster, going into the room he had just left. Without a word the man followed, evidently with much misgiving and fear.

"Sit down, Relly," he said. "Ah, it's been raining; take off that ulster, it is very wet!"

Relly obeyed almost mechanically, and revealed the garb of a Jesuit priest. Lancaster saw that he was trembling and that his face was pale.

"You look cold and ill," said Lancaster, poking the fire. "My housekeeper has gone to bed, but I can get you some refreshment."

"No, no," said the young man. "I am quite well, quite well, and I could not eat anything yet. I want to talk with you first."

"It is very late," suggested Lancaster.

"It is, I know it; but I have been waiting a long time."

"Waiting a long time?"

"Yes. I watched for your coming, and I was on the point of seeking admission when that gentleman came, so I waited until he was gone."

"I see," said Lancaster quietly. "How long have you been in England then?"

"Oh, I hardly know. It has been terrible. I have lived like an escaped convict since I came here. I have not dared to go out through the day, and I've no clothes but these. Can you help me, Mr. Lancaster?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I've run away, and I've been hiding."

"Run away? Hiding?"

"Yes; I hinted at it when I saw you last. I'm not fitted for a priest; I know it. Ritzoom found out that I'd been helping you, and I was sent away on a trifling mission. Well, after I'd left the monastery, I don't know how it was, but the centres of my belief seemed shaken—utterly shaken. I not only doubted my own vocation, but I—I doubted the Catholic dogmas. I do now, and I dared not go back. I wanted to be free, and so I came to London. I was sure you would soon come home, so I watched and waited."

"How did you know I lived here?"

"I found out through Ritzoom before I had seen you."

"And what are you going to do now?"

"I hardly know. I came to you for advice."

Lancaster could not help pitying the fellow. Every word, every action was marked with indecision. Evidently he had not been accustomed to think for himself. He had left a mode of existence in which all his actions were duly and plainly marked out, and now he seemed utterly incapable of thinking and acting independently.

"Am I to understand, then, that you've given up the Catholic faith?"

"I don't know; I only know that it all seems very unreal; it does not grip me like it did. But I am sure that I am utterly unfitted to be a priest, and I am afraid to go back to them. Help me, will you?"

The fellow was utterly miserable; perhaps because he was totally unfitted to do life's work and fight life's battles.

"When did you have your last meal?"

"I—I don't know; not for a good many hours, I think."

"I'll find my way into the kitchen and get you something," said Lancaster.

"No, no, it doesn't matter. Don't trouble!"

"Sit down quietly," said Lancaster. "I daresay I can discover something. After you've eaten we'll talk, but not until."

Half an hour later Relly looked better. He seemed less fearful, less watchful. He was again dominated by the Englishman's stronger personality, and the fact that he was expected to speak his mind freely and without reserve, unloosed his tongue. As he sat in Lancaster's study he had not to think of the will of his superiors, he was not so much a part of a great man-made system, as a living being who had a right to think and speak, untrammelled by a list of rules.

And yet Lancaster was uncertain of him. "Once a priest, always a priest," he thought; and yet Relly's evident sincerity tempted him to speak freely.

"You know why I went to Ireland?" he asked, after some conversation.

"Yes. Father Ritzoom told me just before he sent me away. What his purpose was I don't know, but he spoke to me, as I thought, freely."

"I have utterly failed."

Relly smiled meaningly. "I knew you would," he said.

"Yes?" queried Lancaster, fixing his eyes steadily upon him.

"Don't mistake me," cried the young fellow. "I knew nothing, and—and I did my best; but—but you do not know Father Ritzoom. It is almost impossible to succeed in anything when he is against you; and, excuse me, but you courted defeat."

"How?"

"You went openly. You should have gone on the assumption that every one would deceive you,—if he could. You see, Father Ritzoom had fathomed your designs, and thus was in a position to check your every move. Besides, it is almost impossible to do anything when you act first hand."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you need to learn Father Ritzoom's methods of dealing with people. To-day I dared not go out, and I found Alexander Dumas' 'Count of Monte Cristo' in the room. Dumas' books are on the 'Index,' but to-day I felt as though I dared read one. Have you read the book?"

"Years ago, yes; but what of that?"

"Do you remember where Monte Cristo talks with Madame de Villefort on the science of poisons?"

"Yes; well?"

"Well, he tells how the Abbé Addelmonte poured distillation of arsenic on a cabbage. He gave the cabbage to a rabbit. The

rabbit died. The Abbé threw a part of the rabbit on a dust heap; a hen was there pecking for food. She ate a part of the rabbit and died. A vulture carried off the hen and dined on it, and a little while after, being affected by the poison, fell into the sea. A pike ate a part of the vulture, and the next day was caught and placed on the dinner-table of a gentleman. The gentleman ate and died. His body was examined, and the doctor said that he died of tumour on the liver."

"Dumas was a master of romance," replied Lancaster; "but, as was pointed out afterwards, all this chain of events depended on accident. Anyhow, what are you aiming at?"

"This. If Ritzoom wanted to kill a man, he would take a similar course, except that nothing would depend on accident. If he so desired he would get you out of his way, only he would do it in such a way that nothing could be traced to him."

"I see."

"More than that. If you wish to match yourself against him successfully, you must adopt the same method. In order to have got Gray back to the world again, you should have conceived a scheme whereby it should have been to Ritzoom's interest to have got him out, and then you, as a Protestant, should have kept yourself out of sight altogether."

"I see."

"And even then you should have been prepared for a dozen contingencies, and have calculated upon being deceived all along the line."

Lancaster kept his eyes on Relly's face. He was trying to read his thoughts.

"As I told you," went on Relly, "Ritzoom is one of the guiding spirits of our Order. I, and such as I, know nothing of his plans. The people he employs to do his work know nothing of his intentions. We simply do what we are told to do—no more, no less. We never act on our own initiative. Our line of conduct is marked out plainly. We obey blindly and without question—that is all. Possibly, probably, our work has no seeming connection with his purposes. In most cases they are apparently connected with something else, something very simple and unimportant. But he knows his mind, and I have never known him defeated."

"What you say is very interesting," remarked Lancaster quietly.

"I have never spoken like this to any one else," said Relly, "but somehow I can talk freely with you."

"Relly," said Lancaster suddenly, "can I trust you?"

"Trust me?"

"Yes. I cannot work on the lines of universal suspicion. I do not believe in the system. Treat a man as a scoundrel, and the tendency is for him to become a scoundrel. Suspect a man, and he'll deceive you; trust to his honour, and he'll be true to you. A few weeks ago I did not believe this. I do now. May I trust you?"

"In what way?"

"If I tell you something, will you keep a secret? If I trust you to do something for me, will you be true to me?"

There was a curious light in Relly's eyes.

"I do not know," he said, "I am not sure of myself. Take off these clothes and keep me away from the influences of my Order, yes; for, mark you, I should like to serve you; but if Ritzoom gets hold of me—then God help you and me too!"

He gave a peculiar move to his shoulders, which in spite of himself betrayed an undecided nature.

"It is this way," he went on. "At present I seem to be free, I feel stronger and more confident. I am altogether in doubt about what I implicitly believed; but you cannot breathe the atmosphere of a Jesuit monastery for long years without the influences of the Order entering into every fibre of your being. I may doubt as much as I will now; but I know this—If ever Ritzoom gets hold of me, while my mind may rebel, at heart I shall be a Jesuit priest still."

"And you are honest with me now?" said Lancaster; "mark, I shall implicitly believe in your answer."

"Yes, I am honest with you now."

"I believe you are. Well, I am going to trust you further; I am going to tell you some of my plans."

"Don't; I am afraid."

"Well, I will not be afraid. I believe in you; I look upon you as a gentleman who scorns a lie, scorns deceit in any fashion."

Relly's eyes flashed.

Lancaster spoke to the young man a long time, he told him a great deal of what was in his mind, he gave him an outline of what he wished him to do. When he had finished, Relly seemed completely mastered by the other's personality.

"You have told me a great deal," he said presently, "but you have not told me all. I am glad you have not. I will try and serve you faithfully, and I think that in a few days I can accomplish what you desire. But do not depend on me too much."

"I trust you fully," said Lancaster. "I will lend you some clothes, and, for a few days at all events, you shall make this house your home. As for those clothes you wear, my housekeeper shall know nothing of them."

He showed Relly to a room, and then, although morning was far advanced, he sat down again to think.

The next day Ritzoom received the following telegram—"*R. in London. Spent last night with L. Await instructions.*"

Ritzoom gave a low, pleased laugh as he wrote his answer.

CHAPTER XIX

"It is adopting a method which I don't like," said Lancaster to Relly, "but it seems necessary."

"I dare not go back to Ireland without it," was Relly's reply. "Even with the best disguise imaginable I am sure Ritzoom will recognise us."

"Don't be so sure," said Lancaster. "At any rate, we'll put the matter to a test. The man I know at Soho will——But there is our cab. We shall have to be fairly quick, too. To-day is Saturday, so we can catch the 4.10 from Euston this afternoon, the best train for the week, and arrive at Dublin at 2.10 to-morrow morning."

A few minutes later they were ushered into a shabby room of a shabby house in Soho. When the owner appeared Lancaster asked for a few minutes' private conversation in another room, which was granted. Meanwhile Relly, who was nervous and apprehensive of danger, waited impatiently for his return. Presently a man, who looked like a German shopkeeper out on a holiday, appeared.

"Mr. Lancaster and Mr. Isaacs are sorry to have kept you so long, sir," he said, with a strong German accent, "but will you step this way?"

Relly followed the man without a word, and was immediately shown into a room fitted up with all the stock-in-trade of a disguiser of men.

"I think, sir," said Mr. Isaacs, who was evidently a Jew who had been educated in Germany, "that you will appear most satisfactory as an Irish Methodist preacher, or a Presbyterian preacher, or something of that sort."

"But why make me associated with Ireland in any way?" asked Relly.

"Simply because you talk like an Irishman, walk like an Irishman, and act like an Irishman," replied Mr. Isaacs. "Don't you think so, Jacobs?" he continued, turning to the man who had just shown Relly in.

"I think so, certainly," was the reply.

"Very well," said Relly nervously. "But where is Mr. Lancaster?"

"He is just putting on a few finishing touches," said Jacobs. "He will be ready as soon as you are."

A few minutes later Relly was metamorphosed into a Nonconformist minister of a semi-pronounced type. When he looked at the glass he could scarcely persuade himself that it was his own reflection that he saw there. Moreover, the change of garb not only made him appear a different man, he felt a different man.

"I don't believe Mr. Lancaster will know me," he said with a laugh.

"Yes, I should know you anywhere," said the man who had been called Jacobs, and who had been talking freely during the time Mr. Isaacs had been attending to Relly. "But how do I look, eh?"

"Are you Mr. Lancaster?" cried Relly in astonishment. "Surely, no!"

"I think we shall be able to appear in a certain neighbourhood without detection," replied the other quietly.

Lancaster's disguise was almost perfect. None but his closest acquaintances would have traced the slightest resemblance to the man they had known as Norman Lancaster.

"And now I think we are ready," he continued, making for the door.

"Pardon me, not that way," said the Jew. "I never think it wise to allow my customers to go out the same way they came in. There is another way out, and it leads into another thoroughfare. It may be necessary," he added meaningly.

A few minutes later the two were together in a cab bound for Euston.

"I feel quite safe," said Relly, "quite safe. And yet it seems like putting one's head into a lion's mouth to go back to Ireland."

Lancaster did not reply; he was thinking out his plans. He realised that Relly was not capable of acting independently in any matter; nevertheless, he fancied he could not do without him. The truth was he did not believe that Sister Constance had been removed from the convent, and until that fact was settled it was perfectly useless adopting any different course of action. He had noticed Ritzoom's hesitation when he had asked for information concerning Sister Constance, and although the priest thought he had deceived him entirely, Lancaster's suspicions that he had told a lie were of the strongest nature. He had found, in talking with Relly, that the young priest could discover whether this were so. It was with great difficulty that he had persuaded him to return to Ireland, but the promise of a disguise, and many assurances of safety, had at length succeeded.

When they reached Euston they found they had a considerable time to wait, and as the ticket-office was not open they walked together around the station, Lancaster unfolding his plans, Relly listening furtively, constantly casting anxious glances

around meanwhile.

Presently he caught Lancaster's arm nervously. "Let us get away," he whispered, "anywhere—into a train, a waiting-room."

"Why?" asked Lancaster.

"Look," he cried; "yonder is a sister belonging to the Convent of the Sacred Heart. She knows me."

"She'll not know you in the garb of a Presbyterian minister, with side whiskers," replied Lancaster. "Where is this convent?"

Relly told him.

"And to what Order does it belong?"

"The same as the one—you know," replied Relly, trembling with fear.

"That is interesting," said Lancaster. "Let me get nearer to her."

"Oh, I dare not. I am afraid."

"Nonsense," and Lancaster walked with a careless gait towards the sister.

"I wish to meet the express train from Chester," said the nun to a porter; "it is due at 3.30. Which is the platform at which it arrives?"

The porter told her and the nun walked away.

"There, you've seen her," said Relly. "Let us go away. Look! the ticket-office is open now."

"Plenty of time, plenty of time," said Lancaster. "The express from Chester is twenty minutes late already, but there's plenty of time. It may be a foolish whim of mine, but I have a strong desire to meet the express from Chester."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you presently. It's only an off-chance, but I'll not throw it away."

He followed the sister to the arrival platform and waited impatiently for the train to arrive.

"We shall miss our own if we are not quick," said Relly fearfully.

Lancaster laughed. "You are forgetting your education," he said.

"How is that?"

"I thought you were taught to obey without question."

"Oh, but I feel so different," said the young man; "and I am so terribly fearful."

"Why, if Father Shannon himself were to meet you, he would pass you by. You have the look of a pronounced heretic."

"Don't mention names," said Relly fearfully.

"It was foolish, I admit. I forgot for the moment. But look! there it is, coming in, and we have fifteen minutes to spare."

A minute later there was such a bustle as can only be seen at the arrival platform of a great London terminus. Even Relly forgot his fears as he watched.

"Holy Mother!" he cried at length.

"What is it? Ah! I see; the nun has found her friends."

"But can't you see?"

"What do you mean?"

"That woman is Sister Ursula, from the convent of Our Mother of Good Counsel!"

"What?"

"And the other is Sister Mary."

"My God! They belong to the convent where——"

"Yes."

"They have some one with them. Who is she?"

"I don't know. She has taken solemn vows; she is closely veiled. Sister Ursula and Sister Mary are much trusted in the convent. They travel a great deal."

Lancaster had ceased to be the prosperous, good-humoured German shopkeeper. His actions were quick and decided, his eyes flashed eagerly.

He went to a cabby and engaged him.

"Where to, sir?" asked the man.

"You see those nuns?"

"Yes, sir," said the cabby. "They're like bicycles, sir, they are a-increasin' every year."

"Very well. They are getting into a cab; do you see?"

"Yes, and a jolly load there'll be in thet ole four-wheeler. I don't envy Bill his feer, neither."

"When they start I wish you to follow them."

"Thet'll be easy, sir."

"When they stop you let me know; but keep at a reasonable distance."

"A'right, sir."

Lancaster beckoned to Relly. "Get in here," he said, as the young man came up.

"But—but the tickets for Dublin——"

"We shall not go to Dublin to-day."

Relly got into the cab. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"That depends on your friend the sister of the Sacred Heart," replied Lancaster.

"You do not know her, do you?"

"No, but I wish to know who that veiled nun is."

"It will be impossible for you to find out; she is not allowed to show her face."

"No, but I believe I have seen it," thought Lancaster.

The hansom in which they sat rolled on behind the lumbering four-wheeler, Lancaster keeping a sharp look-out, for he was fearful of losing sight of it. After about an hour's driving they stopped a short distance from a large building surrounded by a garden.

"They're a-gettin' at, sir," said the cabby in low tones.

"Is this the convent of the Sacred Heart?" asked Lancaster of Relly.

The young man shook his head.

"Do you know anything about it?"

"No."

Lancaster watched while the four women alighted, and he noticed that the woman Relly had called Sister Ursula held the veiled nun by the arm.

"What does that mean?" he asked of his companion.

"It is not certain," he replied, "but probably she is a refractory sister, and is being removed from one convent to another."

"You say that Sister Ursula and Sister Mary are often travelling?"

"Yes, they are often employed to deal with refractory nuns."

The party entered the grounds of the building. The doors were closed and the women were hidden from their sight.

"Drive slowly on," said Lancaster to the cabby. The young man scrutinised the place closely as they passed, but his scrutiny revealed nothing of importance. Evidently the building had been an old family mansion, and, as far as he could see, it gave no evidence of being used as a religious institution. No church was near, and none of the usual appurtenances of a religious house were visible.

"How far, sir?" asked the cabby.

"A hundred yards," replied Lancaster.

When they stopped, a corner of the road had been reached which hid the house from their view.

"Wait here until I come back," he said to the driver. Then to Relly, loud enough for the driver to hear—"I shall be back in ten minutes."

"A bobby in privit cloes, or I'm a Dutchman!" was the cabby's mental soliloquy. "I wonder what his lay is."

When Lancaster was alone he took careful note of his surroundings. They were now beyond the busy part of London; indeed, there was but a scattered population, and but few signs of life. A few new houses were being built in the near distance, but the workmen had gone. He saw no one of whom he could ask questions.

He carefully examined the house into which the nuns had gone, and, as far as he could see, there was no other entrance but the one at which the cab had stopped. Night was approaching rapidly and the sky threatened rain.

"They dismissed the cab," mused the young man; "I imagine, therefore, that there can be no intention of leaving to-night. Still, one can never be sure."

For a few seconds he thought rapidly, making all sorts of calculations and surmises; then he evidently made up his mind what to do. Going to the doorway through which the nuns had passed, he tried to gain admission. Impossible, however; the door was evidently bolted from within.

"There must be some intercourse with the outer world, even if it is a religious house," he thought. "Tradesmen must enter; the poor creatures can't live without food. Ah, here's a bell."

He pulled at it eagerly and heard a distant clanging. A little later the bolts shot back; a middle-aged woman appeared.

"Is Mr. Schneider in?" he asked, with a strong German accent.

"Mr. who?"

"Mr. Schneider."

"No one by that name lives here."

He expressed great surprise. "Can you tell me where Mr. Schneider does live?" he asked.

"I never heard the name."

"Are you sure? Pardon me for my seeming rudeness, but Mr. Schneider is an old resident here somewhere, and lives in a

big house. This is the only big house I can see, so I felt certain I had found his residence."

"No, I never heard the name."

"But have you lived here long?"

"No, not long."

"I am sure you will excuse my boldness. It is very important that I should see him, and the directions I had given me and the description of the house exactly corresponds with this."

"I don't know any one by that name. I never heard of it," said the woman sharply.

"Of course you are the lady of this house, you are not a servant?" said Lancaster, bowing.

"No; that is, I am the—the—housekeeper."

The woman was evidently softened by his remark.

"Oh, the housekeeper. I see, madam; that explains. Perhaps your employer is a widower—a bachelor. He would be able to tell me where Mr. Schneider lives. He is such a well-known man, you see. A large jeweller, and a sheriff of the city of London," and Lancaster drew himself up proudly as though he delighted in being the friend of such a man.

"No, my employer is not—that is, they have been travelling, and are very tired. They can see no one to-night."

"Would you mind taking in my card, 'Mr. Jacobs, from Berlin.' I am sure he would see me."

"It is no use," said the woman. "There is no gentleman living here. My employer is a lady; she never sees any one."

"Ah, pardon me," said Lancaster, bowing. "I see I am mistaken. Perhaps, however, you can direct me to the nearest post-office?"

"No, I do not know of any post-office."

The woman closed the door, and Lancaster heard the bolts shoot.

"No thoroughfare," he said to himself. "However, I don't think my visit has been altogether in vain. There is but little doubt that this is a religious house of some sort, and that the fact is kept tolerably quiet."

He made his way back to the cab.

"You know this neighbourhood?" he said to the cabby.

"Not much, sir. Yer see, it's aatside the four-mile rydeus, an' I don't know nothink much about this pawt."

"Well, drive this gentleman to the nearest post-office, and then, when he has done his work, come back here for me."

"Yessir."

Lancaster handed Relly a slip of paper on which he had been scribbling.

"This must be telegraphed immediately," he said quietly.

Relly took it without a word, and the cab rolled away.

"If it is Constance, she will never be allowed to stay here," thought the young man. "It'll be but a stopping-place to some other place. I don't like employing detectives, but it seems necessary under existing circumstances, I must be certain about the matter."

The rain began to fall heavily, but the young man did not mind. He walked up and down the road thinking deeply.

"She would never have been removed without reason," he thought. "What was that reason? These convents are beyond the pale of the law. No one has the right to enter them. Ritzoom must have had sufficient reason for telling me that she had been removed. He knows that if she remained there I should communicate with her by one means or another. Then the fact that Relly recognised those two nuns as belonging to the convent is suspicious. Something tells me it is she."

The minutes passed slowly by. The night was cold, but Lancaster heeded it not; his blood was almost at fever heat, although outwardly he was cool and watchful.

He heard the sound of wheels—evidently the cab was returning. He hastened to meet it, but kept the entrance of the mysterious house within view.

"You have sent it?"

"Yes."

"I shall stay here for an hour or so. Perhaps you do not care to stop with me?"

"Yes, yes, I'll stay with you."

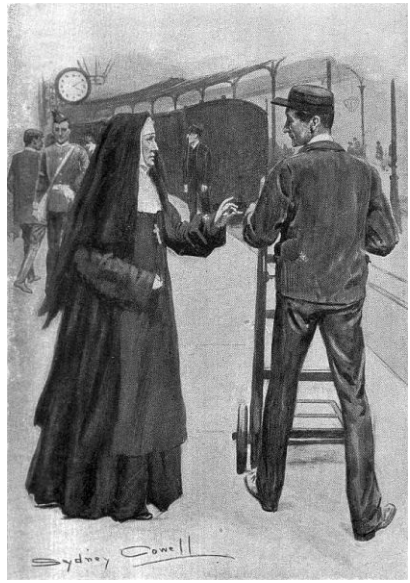
"Very well."

He paid the cabby and dismissed him.

The man looked at the money and smiled. "Cawn't I tyke yer anywheres else, sir?" he asked.

"I don't know at present. If you like to come back here on spec. in two hours, you can."

"I'll be here, sir." And he drove to the nearest public-house, while Lancaster paced slowly around the garden of the lonely house, watching and listening all the time.



" 'I wish to meet the express from Chester,' said the sister of the Sacred Heart."

CHAPTER XX

LANCASTER did not speak a word to Relly during the time they patrolled the roads around the lonely house. The latter instinctively felt that he was unable to understand the other's feelings; moreover, the old feeling of dependence and of dog-like obedience possessed him. True, the terrors of the Church had, for the time, departed; yet, because he was of a weak, parasitic nature, he desired to obey to the letter any wish which Lancaster might express. What little personality he had ever been capable of possessing had been lost to him during his years of training, and now, if he were guided by no strong hand, he would become like a frail bark on stormy waters. In a way he felt this, and he clung to the man with whom he had so strangely been brought into contact as if he were his only hope. He dreaded the thought of going back to his old monastic life, and yet if Lancaster were not by his side he knew not what would become of him. He had but too lately left the monastery to feel the loss of the quiet and rest which he had so often enjoyed; besides, he had been much excited by what he had told him. Thus, while he was apparently incapable of rendering any service, he walked by Lancaster's side much as a faithful dog might follow at the heels of his master. Later he felt differently; he discovered that the power of his old life was not dead; but now he knew no will but Lancaster's.

Presently the young Englishman heard the sound of horses' hoofs, and a little later the noise of wheels. He moved in the direction from which it came, and then listened again. The noise stopped suddenly. Lancaster gave no sign of surprise, neither did he make any sound when, a few minutes later, two dark forms drew near him.

"Mr. Lancaster?"

"Yes. Leicester Square?"

"That is so."

"I wish to speak to these gentlemen alone," he said to Relly; "I shall be with you again in a few minutes."

"Your telegram was vague, naturally," said one of the strangers; "luckily, however, we were able to come."

"What I wish you to do is very simple," replied Lancaster.

The men waited without a word.

"First, I wish to know all that it is possible for you to find out about that house. I want you to find out how many people live there, and who they are."

The men nodded.

"Of course, without attracting attention."

"Of course."

"I should like it to be done at once. Say within the next three hours."

"That should be easy."

"Next, I wish none of the inmates to come out of the house without being acquainted of the fact."

"That also should be easy; but there is a question which comes natural."

"And that?"

"How long is the shadowing to continue?"

"Until further orders."

"Very good, sir. Where do we make our report?"

"Here. I will be back at eleven o'clock."

"Very good, sir. May I ask another question?"

"Certainly."

"Do you keep on those togs and whiskers?"

"No," replied Lancaster, and there was a note of surprise in his answer.

"Oh, I've seen you before, Mr. Lancaster; and, although the light from this gas-lamp isn't very good, well—I needn't say any more. Still, I thought I had better ask you. It's always well to know just where you are. Eleven o'clock, sir?"

"Yes. Good-night."

The conversation lasted but a very few minutes, and none of them spoke in tones above a murmur.

Lancaster went back to Relly. "We will walk towards the city," he said quietly. "It is very wet, and you are cold."

Without a word Relly walked by his side along the muddy road. There are few districts which appear more lonely and forsaken than a London suburb which is being newly built. The lamp-posts are few, the roads are unmade, and the few folks

who live there have a subdued air, as though they were there on sufferance. In the summer-time everything is more cheerful, but in the winter or early spring the roads are as deserted as those in an agricultural district.

The two young men walked a considerable distance without meeting any one. Lights shone here and there from the newly built houses, but they could hear no sound save that of their own footsteps as they splashed their way through the mud. Presently, however, the lights became more numerous.

"We are nearing the main road," said Lancaster.

"I'm very glad," replied Relly.

"Why?"

"It'll be more cheerful. Besides, I shall be glad to get away from that house. It will be a convent of some sort."

"You think so?"

"I am almost sure. It'll be one of Ritzoom's places."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing more than that. I know nothing for certain, save that he is interested in multiplying convents."

Lancaster was silent.

"It is a lonely place, too."

"It was a few years ago. The house would be quite in the country then. Even when it is surrounded by villas it will be private. That large garden, hedged in by high walls, keeps it from being overlooked."

"Hark! there is a cab coming."

"Yes. I expect it will be the one which took us."

Lancaster was right in his conjecture, and a few minutes later they were driving rapidly towards the city. Arrived at his house, the young man let himself in, and proceeded immediately to his bedroom.

"You will want to get out of those clothes," he said to Relly, "and Mr. Isaacs has sent back those you wore this morning."

A few minutes later they met in Lancaster's study, Relly looking awkward and fearful, the other cool and self-possessed, but evidently alert and ready for action.

"You will be all right for the night, Relly," said the young man. "No one will call, I expect, and there are plenty of books. Or, perhaps you are tired and wish to go to bed."

"But are you going out?"

"Yes. Is there anything I can do for you before I go?"

"No. Only I wish you weren't going. I—I—but it is no matter. Still I—I——" He spoke incoherently, and then ceased altogether, like one afraid to proceed.

"What is it?" asked Lancaster kindly.

"Oh, nothing; only they will search for me. They will not let me rest in peace. They never do," he continued, after a pause. "They will know I am with you, and I shall be dogged everywhere."

"How can they know you are with me?"

Relly smiled piteously. "There is no police espionage in Europe so perfect as that of the Church. Ritzoom has his informers everywhere."

"But England is not a Catholic country. It is not governed by Catholic laws."

"I know, I know. The Church is working night and day to bring English laws into conformity with those of the Church. The Pope wants to make it like Spain."

"Yes, yes, I suppose so; but he will never do it. Therefore the Church has no legal claim on you. No man can lawfully sign away, or vow away, his personal liberty. Therefore, your Church has no claim upon you."

"Oh, but you do not know, you do not know," said Relly piteously. "With you I feel safe, I feel strong. The fact that you are so perfectly free from all the bonds and vows which have held me so long, makes me feel as though I, too, can act independently; but when you are gone all will be different. The influence of the Church is interwoven into every fibre of my being."

"Oh, you'll soon get over that kind of feeling," said Lancaster cheerfully, although, as he looked at Relly's face, he doubted his words. "Besides, I think I shall need your help. It is true we have not gone to Ireland, but I imagine your knowledge will be invaluable to me during the next few days."

"Our Church boasts that a priest rarely leaves his Church," went on the young man, as though Lancaster had not spoken. "It is used as an argument in favour of the Catholic faith. We know better than that, however. Hundreds would leave if they dared; but they are afraid. The fear of the Church gets hold of us, and it is only the strong men who break away. 'Once a priest, always a priest,' is an old saying. That becomes ten times stronger when the priest happens to belong to one of the orders. In the course of years we lose our individuality, we lose power to act independently of our Church. When I was in London with Father Ritzoom, just before I first saw you, he took me to that waxwork place in Baker Street. When there I saw the figure of a man who had been in prison for many, many years. When he was at length set at liberty he prayed to be taken

back to his cell again. The busy world frightened him and he longed for solitary confinement. His prison life had become second nature to him. There are many monks and nuns like that. The spirit of their order has so possessed them that they could not live again in the world. It seems strange to you, but it is natural enough. I have not reached that stage yet. I am young, but the spell of monasticism is strong, terribly strong."

"Do you mean to say that you will go back?"

"No, no, not that. I am afraid, I dread the thought of meeting with—but there, it does not matter. You will not be away long, will you?"

"I don't know; I expect not. But you are safe. No one has right to enter here without a magistrate's warrant, and no one can obtain that, as far as I know. I will give my housekeeper orders to admit no one. Do you see?"

Relly did not reply, but tried to interest himself in a book which Lancaster had told him he would find interesting.

At eleven o'clock Lancaster found himself at the spot where, a few hours before, he had parted from the men he had engaged from a private detective agency. No one was there, so he slowly made his way to the doorway through which he had seen the nuns pass. He had scarcely reached it when a man touched his arm.

"My mate will be here directly, sir," he said. "He's been busy ever since you left. I've been shadowing the place."

"Well?"

"Not a sound."

"No one has left the house, then?"

"I can swear to it, sir."

"Very good. You have discovered nothing about the place, I suppose?"

"No, sir. My mate took on that part of the business. You may bet your boots that he knows all about it before now. He's a reg'lar sleuth-hound is Peters. He likes that sort of work; my strength runs on different lines. There, that's Peters coming this way."

Lancaster went to meet the man eagerly. A great deal depended on his report, more than he was fain to confess to himself.

"I'm ready, sir," said the detective, as he came up.

"I'm very glad," said Lancaster; "there's an open spot yonder where no one can hear us. It is not likely that we shall be disturbed either."

"Exactly what I was going to suggest," said the man who led the way. "But before I make any report I wish to know exactly how we stand. If I understand the business, what you wanted me to find out is just this: How many people live in that house? What are they? What do they do? Have they any visitors? If so, who are they? How long have the present parties been living there? Is that right, sir?"

"Exactly," replied the other. "I wish also to know how the windows are arranged, and what parts of the house are occupied."

"Just so, sir. Of course I don't know your purpose in wanting information, but that doesn't matter; it's not my business. Well, I'm ready. Of course I would rather have given you a written report with a plan of the house, but I haven't had time, and I don't profess to do impossible things."

"Just so; go on."

"The present parties, sir, have lived in the place eight months—at least, some of 'em have. At this moment there are twelve women within those walls. Four of 'em have arrived to-day. They came between five and six o'clock."

"Four?"

"Yes, four. One of 'em has been there before, several times; the others are strangers."

"Just so."

"They pretend to be nuns of some sort; whether they are I've not been able to decide definitely. I *have* known women pretend to be nuns in order to carry out purposes of their own. Twig, sir?"

"Quite."

"Still, I think these are genuine religious women, because it don't stand to reason that women should live eight months in a house as nuns, and at the same time be something else, without making some mistake, or betraying themselves in some way. Besides, priests visit the place very often."

"Roman Catholic priests?"

"I twig your meaning, sir. Many of these chaps who call themselves Anglicans, try to ape the Catholic chaps so much that you can hardly tell one from the other. But these are Roman Catholics."

"How do you know?"

"Well, sir, that would take a long time to tell, and I shall be willing to present a detailed report at the proper time, but I don't think it would be wise just now."

"Just so. Go on."

"These women, sir, have their set times for prayer and meditation, just like they have in some of the regular establishments.

I am not quite certain yet, but I believe this place is a sort of branch institution of some big convent—a sort of half-way house, or something of that sort."

"Are all the inmates nuns?"

"All except one. She is a sort of servant. I don't exactly know her position. A middle-aged woman, sir."

"I see. And what time do they rise, and when do they go to bed?"

"They rise, I think, at half-past five, and they go to bed about ten. To-night they had a performance, which I think they called a compline, and then they went to bed. The place is in the dark now, sir."

"And have you found out the position of the dormitories?"

"Yes, I have. At present the house seems very much bigger than there seems any necessity for. It's a long, rambling sort of a place, as you've no doubt seen. Well, one end of it is used as the living and sleeping portion, the other for domestic purposes."

"All on the ground floor?"

"All on the ground floor except a big room upstairs, which they've got fitted up as an oratory."

"Then all the nuns sleep on the ground floor?"

"As a general thing, but to-night there's to be an exception?"

"Ah, how?"

The detective looked at Lancaster eagerly, but could detect no particular expression on his face, the night being too dark. He had been trying to understand his employer's motives, and felt sure, by the eagerness of his tones in asking the last question, that he had obtained a clue.

"Well, sir, I fancy there's one of them in disgrace, or has been disobedient to rule or something. Anyhow, she's to sleep in the room next to the oratory, a room that is said to be haunted."

Lancaster looked at the man wonderingly. To him it was a marvel that he should have obtained so much information.

"You have aroused no suspicion in getting to know all this?" he asked.

"Well, sir, I had a harder job than I ought to have had. The truth is, a Mr. Jacobs, from Berlin, who came asking for a Mr. Schneider, somewhat startled one of the ladies inside. If Mr. Jacobs had stayed away, or if I had known he'd called, I should have managed with less difficulty. Still, a man doesn't follow my line of life for twenty years without learning to manage women."

"Of course, it would be impossible to get in at the doorway there?"

"Dangerous, sir. I don't know what's the custom in religious houses, but there's a biggish dog close to that doorway."

"Chained?"

"Yes, chained; but I have known big dogs break their chains, and when they are not muzzled they are ugly brutes."

"Does the fellow divine what is in my mind, I wonder?" thought Lancaster.

"I don't know either whether it's a custom for these places to have telephones fixed, but I saw what looked uncommonly like a telephone wire fastened to that house."

The young man was silent for a few seconds.

"You've gone all around the wall?" he said at length.

"Yes."

"Any broken places?"

"Well, there's one where a good climber could mount."

"Show it me."

The two walked away together until they reached a place where a part of the wall had fallen down. From this point, too, the house was more plainly visible.

"I see a light in one of the upstair rooms," said Lancaster.

"That's the oratory," said the detective. "They keep candles burning there all the time. The haunted room is next to it."

"But there's a light in that as well."

"So there is," said the detective. "Possibly there's some communication between the two. Any little crevice would let in the light."

Lancaster was silent. He was thinking of what the man had told him.

"I think that is all," said Peters, presently. "Is there anything else I can do, sir?"

Lancaster longed to take the man further into his confidence, but he could not. He had determined to enter the lonely house that night and see if the veiled nun were the woman he loved, but he could not tell the detective. He realised the difficulties that were in his way; he knew, moreover, that Peters could render him valuable service, but he could not acquaint him with the desires of his heart.

"No, I think that is all," he said quietly. "You have rendered me a great service. You are a wondrously clever fellow, Peters."

"Then I can get back home, sir?"

"Yes—that is, I told you that I wished to be acquainted if any one left the place. I wish them followed, too."

"That is understood," said Peters, with a certain amount of pride. "But I believe my man was appointed for that work. He's no originality, hasn't Richards, but for such jobs as that you'll find him hard to beat."

"Here's something on account," said Lancaster, putting a piece of gold into the man's hand.

The detective walked away with a smile on his face; he knew more of what was passing in his employer's mind than he thought. Perhaps that was why he seemed to take no notice of the fact that the young man stayed near the lonely house.

When he had gone Lancaster went back to the broken place in the wall, and looked long and steadily at the room, from which he saw a dim light shining. He could not see plainly, for the branches of a great oak somewhat hid the building. Still, no leaves had as yet grown, and as his eyes got more accustomed to the darkness, the outlines and dimensions of the building became clearer.

Presently he seemed to have made up his mind. He climbed over the wall with the agility of an athlete, and a minute later stood at the foot of the tree which grew opposite the oratory window.

Without hesitation he caught one of the lower branches and commenced climbing.

CHAPTER XXI

LANCASTER had not been climbing more than a few seconds before he reached the level of the oratory window. From this height, too, he could see the window belonging to the haunted room, where the refractory nun was supposed to be immured. For some minutes he looked intently but could see nothing. The apartment was in semi-darkness, in spite of the fact that some rays of light reached it, possibly from the oratory. After a time, however, the outline of the room became more plain. As far as he could judge, it was almost, if not entirely, unfurnished, neither did it appear to be occupied.

"No one is there," he said to himself, and his heart became heavy at the thought.

He was about to descend again, when he heard what seemed to him a sob. From whence it came he could not even guess; but that it was a sob he felt sure. Immediately he felt his blood tingling through his veins, but he remained cool and collected, and listened for a repetition of the sound.

Yes, there it was again, a sob, a woman's sob, partially repressed, but nevertheless plainly audible in the silence of the night. Moreover, it was not far away, although even yet he was not able to locate it.

A wild hope filled his breast. It was probably Constance, and he might set her at liberty that very night. Up to now only a vague hope had possessed him; he fancied he might be able to make some valuable discovery, and perhaps make plans for future action. Now, however, everything seemed to become possible; only women were in the house, and if he could get an interview with Constance, he would persuade her to come with him, happen what might. The law did not trouble him one whit, if even the authorities were inclined to use it. Neither did he believe they would. They could have no legal power over the nuns; and even if they were tempted to prosecute him for entering their grounds, they would refrain from doing so. It would not redound to their honour if it were known that they kept a sister against her will. The laws of the Church were not identical with the laws of the country in such matters, as they were in Spain, and even if they were, he would make the attempt.

And so he listened breathlessly, while the wind moaned dismally through the leafless branches of the trees around the garden.

His heart gave a sudden leap. Passing the window of the haunted room he saw a dark form. He had no superstitious fears; he felt sure that the room was inhabited, that the detective's information, from whatever quarter he had obtained it, was correct. The refractory nun was only a few feet from him, and that nun was, he believed, the woman he loved. Still the difficulties of the situation seemed insurmountable. The tree on which he stood was some distance from the house, and it would not help him to reach the room. The ledge of the window, moreover, was about fourteen feet from the ground, and he had no ladder, neither did he know where to get one. He must be careful not to make a noise; he remembered the dog which was fastened close to the entrance gates, and even although it could not get to him, it could arouse the rest of the nuns. Probably, too, the fact of the detective seeking for information, in addition to his own visit, had aroused suspicion. Indeed, it would be almost sure to do so, no matter how skilled Peters might be.

He showed no signs of indecision, however. He noiselessly descended from the tree and then crept to the wall. A minute later he was mounting by the side of the wall. A water-pipe, which connected the eaves with the gutter beneath, made this possible. The climb was somewhat difficult, still he mounted without hesitation. In a few seconds his face was on a level with the window.

"Sister Constance."

The woman who had been wandering wearily around the room stopped for a second, and then pursued her aimless journey. Evidently, if she had heard him, the sound reached her but indistinctly. Lancaster knew that if anything were done it must be done quickly. His foothold upon the staples which fastened the pipe to the wall was very uncertain, while there was but little by which he could hold fast.

"Constance!"

The woman stopped again. Lancaster could see her form more plainly now, but her face was hidden from him. He judged, however, that she was frightened, and her fear might lead her to call for help.

"Constance!"

The woman looked towards the window. It was her face! True, the light was dim, and nothing could be seen clearly; but the young man had no doubt.

"Don't be frightened, Constance," he said, as loudly as he dared. "It is I. Don't you remember me? The convent garden, when Father Ritzoom came! I have come to help you."

The woman only caught a few words, but she heard enough to know who he was. She lifted up her hands as if in mute supplication, and then waved them as if to tell him to go away.

"Lift up the window," said Lancaster. "I must speak to you. I will."

Again she heard him. For a moment she seemed to doubt, and then she lifted the window.

"Go away," she said hoarsely. "I dare not speak to you. I must not," she added, weakly.

"I have come to set you at liberty," replied the young man.

"Oh, no! oh, no! You cannot. How?"

Lancaster felt that his fingers were relaxing their hold. He could not remain there any longer.

"Stay quietly," he said; "I will return in a few minutes. Make no sound, and do not be afraid. It is I, Norman Lancaster."

The nun gave a start as he uttered his name. It was the first time she had ever heard it, and, in spite of herself, it gave her strength. Sin or no sin, he had begun to gain the old influence over her, and she could not say him nay.

Lancaster lowered himself slowly and carefully. His heart beat rapidly, but he did not lose his presence of mind. Hope, moreover, made him strong and steady in his purpose.

The nun watched him as he went away among the trees. Her eyes were wide open with terror and astonishment, but her heart grew warm and light.

"Norman Lancaster," she repeated; "I know his name now. I shall never forget it—never, never."

She made no sound, while her heart seemed to be still. She did not know where she was; enough that he knew. Since leaving Ireland she had scarcely been conscious of her existence. She had a shadowy remembrance of crossing the sea, and of riding in trains, and through busy streets, but nothing more. Had any one told her that she was in France or Belgium, she would have believed without question. Neither had she cared much—one place was nearly the same as another to her. All hope had gone from her heart, all joy from her life. But now the man who had changed everything, and whom she had given up all hope of ever seeing again, had spoken to her, she forgot her sorrows, and a strange joy possessed her. She did not think of the difficulty in getting to her. She had absolute faith in the power of the man who had so changed her world. And so she waited while all sorts of wild visions passed before her eyes. Presently fear grew upon her. Fear for him, fear for herself. Might he not have to meet danger in reaching her, might not the Superior of the house come to her? If so, all would be undone. She knew that in the presence of priests or of her Superior all her will-power went. She became enmeshed in a hundred influences, each of which held her fast. Then she feared even to think, or to desire for escape. She became filled with a kind of despairing willingness to die to this life, in order that she might have the Catholics' heaven hereafter.

Even while she stood waiting for Lancaster to return, and while the dim possibility of escape from convent life possessed her, she felt sure that she would be eternally damned if she were untrue to her vows. The fact had been made terribly real to her through the years. It was an article of her faith. Not that she held the faith so much as the faith held her—held her in chains of steel.

Presently she saw a dark form creeping noiselessly among the trees. At first she feared that it might be some one else, but presently a kind of intuition told her that it was the man who exercised such a strange charm over her.

An exquisite thrill passed through her frame. She heard his voice speaking to her in low tones, and again she felt stronger, more daring.

Lancaster had found a ladder lying by the half-finished houses which were being built in the near distance. This he had picked up as though it were a feather, and had brought it to the house. Noiselessly he placed it against the wall, and climbed to the window.

"Constance!"

"Yes," she said involuntarily.

"I have come to set you free."

He spoke quietly, but there was a strange huskiness in his voice.

"Free?"

"Yes, you remember. I told Ritzoom I should."

He was unwise in mentioning the priest's name. It aroused her fears, it brought back old memories.

"No, no. It can never be—never, never!"

"But I will. You know what I told you in the convent garden. I cannot live without you. Come, now, I can carry you down the ladder."

She could not realise what he meant. It was all so sudden. A few minutes before she had told herself that she must drag out her days wearily within convent walls. Definite, sudden action was strange to her. Her life had always been mapped out for her. No, no—she must have time to think.

"Not now," she said; "not to-night. I dare not; I am afraid."

"I will take care of you," whispered Lancaster. "I can take you away quite safely. I will let no one harm you—no one. You are in England now. No one will dare molest you."

"No, no," she cried plaintively, and yet her heart pleaded against her words.

Lancaster put out his hand and caught hers. His was warm and strong—the hand of a man who could dare anything; hers was cold, shrinking. The moment he held her fast, however, the exquisite joy she had felt in the convent garden surged through her; it was heaven to hear his voice, to feel his touch.

"Let me tell you what I wanted to tell you that night," said Lancaster. "I do not speak lightly, thoughtlessly. I am not a boy; I am ten years older than you. For years I have wandered around the world, listlessly, wearily, but hoping to find some interest in life. Women I cared not for, and never did I expect to love any one; but I love you, Constance—I love you! If you will not come with me, my life will be utterly worthless, utterly wretched! Come with me, my love!"

He spoke very quietly, but every word reached the nun's ears.

"Oh, Holy Mother, help me!" she sobbed.

"You do love me?" said the young man, "You did not tell me what was false that night?"

"Yes, yes," she cried piteously, "it was all false—all false! I cannot, must not, love you; I dare not! Oh, I dare not—I dare not! I have made my vows; I vowed to God, to the Holy Virgin, to the saints, that I would be the bride of Christ. Oh, I am dead to the world! You must not tempt me. I do not love you—I do not, I do not! You are an enemy to the Church, an enemy to my soul!" But she held his hand tighter at every word she spoke.

It was her nun's life speaking, and not her heart; she spoke like an automaton. The words she uttered were not hers, and Lancaster knew it.

"You do love me!" he cried fiercely—"you do love me! You hate the life into which you have been dragged. All the forms and ceremonies and mumblings of your order are hateful to you. You are weary, weary of them, and you love me!"

He lifted the window higher. The night was dark and cloudy, but he could see her face.

"I cannot leave you now!" he cried fiercely. "You are mine; God has given you to me. All your past shall only be but as a sad dream. I will take you away, and in three days you shall be my wife."

"Your wife?"

"Yes, my wife; and God have mercy upon the man who tries to separate us!"

To him the word brought fresh resolve, renewed energy, but to her it sounded like blasphemy. In her utter lack of knowledge concerning the ways of the world she had not connected marriage with the love which had been kindled in her heart. The very thought of marriage to a nun who has taken solemn vows was laden with temptation, and threatened perdition.

"No," she said. "Oh, go away! I did not think of this; I am the bride of Christ! I have taken my wedding vows. God would curse me for ever if I became the bride of another! And you are a heretic, a Protestant, an atheist!"

"I am not," said Lancaster—"I am not an atheist. I never believed in God as I believe in Him now. He has led me to you; He has brought us together. If I lost you I believe I should be driven to atheism; but I will not lose you. God has willed that we should be man and wife. We are man and wife in spirit, and whom God has joined together, let no man put asunder."

The quiet yet passionate earnestness with which he spoke influenced the nun even more than the words themselves. Little by little her fears were passing away, and even when she bade him begone she knew that she should call him back if he obeyed her. In her new-found courage she leant further out of the window, until her face was near Lancaster's.

"You will not send me away?" he pleaded.

"No, no, you must not go." It was her woman's heart which spoke now.

"And you love me?"

"Yes, yes," she sobbed. "I love you! I love you!"

"Then come with me, away from all this. I can carry you down the ladder and take you to liberty."

"In these clothes? To-night—now?"

She was willing to face the terrors of the Church, to brave everything, in order to be with him, but her woman's nature revealed itself here. Oft-times the most terrible issues become of less importance to a daughter of Eve than mere trifling matters.

Lancaster drew her towards him and kissed her. All the passion of his heart went out in the kiss, and the woman was no longer a nun.

"You will come, my beautiful maid?"

"Yes, yes."

"Now?"

"Yes; take me quickly."

"Come, then!" He took her in his arms, and the ladder creaked as he took the first step downward. "Mine at last! Mine at last!" cried the young man passionately, and he held her tightly to him. Nothing seemed impossible to him then. He felt his strength to be the strength of ten, his arms were like bands of steel. The fact that she had willingly come with him, braving the anger of a Church in which she believed so implicitly, an anger which threatened eternal torture, intensified the love he bore her; and the realisation that her love for him was stronger than all the influence of her past life, made the dark, dreary night as

beautiful as the bowers of Eden.

"You are not afraid? No one will harm you?" she whispered.

"No; no one shall harm us," he cried.

She laid her head on his shoulder and sobbed out her joy. All her past seemed forgotten; before her stretched liberty, love, heaven. If hell were the result of her action she would suffer it; at that moment she feared it not. No dream of terror troubled her then. Everything paled into nothing when she thought of her love.

Lancaster carried her slowly and carefully down the staves of the ladder. When he had descended four steps he heard the savage snarl of a dog in the near distance. He looked anxiously in the direction from which the sound had come, and in spite of himself he was filled with a vague apprehension. His grasp on the nun's form tightened, and he prepared to move more rapidly, but before his foot touched the next stave he felt that the ladder was rudely shaken. The next moment he fell heavily to the ground, still holding Sister Constance tightly in his arms. He knew that he was hurt badly, but he did not mean to be thwarted. Before he could rise to his feet, however, he felt a stunning blow on his head, and then everything became dark.

CHAPTER XXII

When Lancaster woke to consciousness he was lying in a London hospital. His head was bandaged and ached badly. For some time he realised nothing else. He was unable to tell why he was there, neither could he call to memory any of the events of the past. Everything was hazy, unreal. He could see, however, that he was in a hospital of some sort, but the fact meant very little to him.

"I am very tired," he murmured, "very tired. Why is it?"

A nurse came to his side. "What did you say?" she asked.

He looked up at her and gazed steadily into her face.

"I am very tired," he said dreamily. "But it does not matter. Nothing matters."

He did not know why he said this, but he knew that everything seemed very blurred, very unreal. His heart, moreover, felt as heavy as lead.

"Yes, you are very tired. Go to sleep again."

"Yes," he replied. "I will go to sleep again."

He closed his eyes and slept soundly for several hours. He neither moaned nor moved, and the doctor who came to his side smiled with satisfaction.

"It has been a bad case, nurse," he said, "but we shall pull him through."

"Yes, he sleeps like a child now."

"He had a terrible blow on his head, but it was a successful operation. Call me when he wakes again, nurse," and the doctor went away.

When Lancaster woke again the clouds had gone and memory returned. His head still ached, but his brain was clear. Like lightning the scenes through which he had passed flashed through his mind.

He did not move in his bed, for while his brain was clear his body seemed languid, almost inert. For a few minutes he lay thinking quietly, then he moved his left leg. The action caused him a sharp pain. From that time the whole man was aroused.

The nurse came to his side again.

"You are better?" she said with a smile.

"Yes, I am better," he replied. "Would you mind telling me where I am and who brought me here?"

"I will directly, but the doctor wishes to see you first."

"That's right;" and Norman Lancaster felt more like his old self.

"You are better," said the doctor cheerfully, as he came up.

"Yes, I think I am all right except for a headache, and my left leg. What's been the matter with me?"

"Well, your skull was broken and your leg badly twisted and sprained. You've naturally been very feverish, too."

Lancaster thought a few seconds quietly. The doctor spoke as though he did not know who he was, and he wondered if he, through his hours of unconsciousness, had in any way revealed what had happened. With the English gentleman's characteristic reserve and hatred of a scene, he prepared to put his questions carefully.

"It seems you met with an accident," said the doctor quietly. "How you came by it we don't know, and who you are we don't know."

"I see."

"I think you are quite well enough to tell me?" he suggested, with a touch of curiosity in his voice.

"I suppose I've told you a lot of things if I've been delirious?" he queried.

"No, nothing."

"That's right. And how did I come here, doctor? Where is this hospital? How long have I been ill?"

"You remember nothing yourself?"

"About coming here? No."

"But you remember your accident—or whatever it was—don't you? You see," he went on, much to Lancaster's satisfaction, "you were found by some workmen on the side of a newly-made road, some distance from Southgate. You were perfectly unconscious, and neither money nor papers were found on you. In fact, we have had no clue to your identity, although we have advertised concerning you."

"When was I found?"

"Last Sunday morning."

"And what is it to-day?"

"Sunday. This is Sunday evening."

"Then it's a week since my accident."

"Yes. Some workmen were strolling along the road about half-past nine o'clock. They communicated with the police, and you were brought here without delay."

"Where do you say they found me?"

"Not far from Southgate, and about half a mile from Palmer's Green Station."

Lancaster reflected. The spot must have been at least two miles from the house to which Sister Constance had been taken.

"Father Ritzoom!" thought Lancaster. "He had me taken some distance away so as not to connect me with that place. He knew I should tell nothing."

"The assumption has been that you must have been attacked by thieves. We have advertised the affair in the neighbourhood, giving a full description of you; but, as I said, there have been no inquiries. Perhaps you would like to tell me about it?"

"I can tell you but little. All I know is that I was attacked suddenly, thrown down, and struck heavily on the head. When I awoke to consciousness I found myself here."

"Strange," said the doctor.

"Very," replied Lancaster.

"We have been naturally curious as to who you are," said the doctor.

"I have a deadly hatred of being made public property," said the young man. "In these days of newspaper competition one can do nothing without some blessed newspaper man chronicling one's doings. Let it be understood that I am John Brown or Thomas Jones, or what you like. As soon as I am well enough the hospital shall be amply refunded for all the trouble and expenditure I have caused. My name can be of no interest to the general public, so suppose we agree to allow it to remain in the dark."

The doctor coughed.

"I am neither an escaped convict, a member of Parliament, nor a popular author," continued Lancaster, with a smile. "I have never forged a cheque nor attacked Christianity in a decadent novel! In short, I don't wish to be advertised."

"But the brutes who nearly killed you?"

"I tell you I saw no one."

"No doubt the authorities will wish to know—well—what preceded the accident."

"Just so; but then a man is allowed to keep some things to himself, even in a free country."

"You wish to tell nothing, then?"

"I have nothing to tell. I am only an ordinary English gentleman. I was struck down by persons I never saw, and, like the man in the Scriptures, was robbed and left for dead. You have acted the part of the good Samaritan. My name would mean nothing to you nor to the authorities. I could say nothing which would lead to the conviction of the fellows who cracked my head and twisted my leg. Still, obscure as my name is, I have a perfect horror of seeing it in the papers."

The doctor coughed again.

"I should like to know *your* name, however," continued Lancaster. "Not for publication, but to be held in grateful remembrance."

The doctor went away soon afterwards, feeling more than ever curious about his patient; but, being a gentleman, he respected his desire for privacy.

The interview was not without a bad effect, however. It excited Lancaster more than was good for him, and for the next few hours his condition was not nearly so favourable.

As the days passed away, however, he was able to think about the state of his affairs calmly. The doctor had told him all he cared to know, as to what happened after what had been called his "accident," and he was able to connect events with a tolerable degree of certainty. That Ritzoom was at the bottom of everything he did not doubt. He saw his hand in everything. He did not feel angry with the Jesuit; he was quite sure that he had acted conscientiously. As for his methods, they were doubtless those which served his purpose best. He was glad his name had not been revealed in the business. As we have hinted, he hated scenes, and preferred that nothing more should be said about the matter. So strong was this feeling, indeed, that he did not communicate even with Relly. He imagined that some advantage would be taken of the address which would have to be written on the envelope; and so he decided to refrain from writing until he could post the letter with his own hand. He had given instructions to his housekeeper to treat Relly with every respect; and as his actions were sometimes very erratic, he knew that his absence from home would cause but little anxiety. At least, they would not as far as Mrs. Richards was concerned. Relly might ask foolish questions, and, perhaps, make unwise revelations; but he must risk this. He trusted, moreover, that the priest's Jesuit training would make him cautious and keep him from divulging what had taken place.

With regard to the purpose which lay nearest to his heart, and which he nearly succeeded in fulfilling, he was, of course, somewhat despondent and terribly disappointed. He knew the kind of forces he had against him. Up to now, while he had nearly succeeded in carrying out his plans, he had been defeated. The cup had been dashed from his hands just as it had reached his lips. He remembered the words which Ritzoom had spoken to him, and his heart became heavy.

Not that he had any idea of giving up. The thought never occurred to him. Where Constance was now he did not know; neither had he much hope that the detective would be able to tell him. It was true he might be clever, and "shadowing," as he termed it, was his specialty; but Ritzoom was cleverer, and would have means at his disposal unknown to most people. As for abandoning that upon which he had set his heart, however, it was out of the question. His love for the nun became a stronger and a nobler passion each day; and, with that tenacity of purpose so characteristic of the true Englishman, he pondered over new schemes and sketched out new plans of action. That he should be foiled again and again he did not doubt; and even although he should never succeed, he knew he should never abandon his search while his life lasted.

His recovery was, on the whole, rapid, and two days before he was pronounced fit to leave the hospital he instructed his solicitor to forward two cheques—one to the secretary of the hospital, and another to the doctor for his unremitting attention.

He reached his house one afternoon about five o'clock and rang the bell.

"You look pale, Mr. Lancaster," said Mrs. Richards, as he entered.

"Yes, I think I do," he replied quietly; "but I am very well."

The housekeeper said no more. She knew he disliked many remarks about his personal appearance.

"Is Mr. Relly in?" he asked.

"No, Mr. Lancaster. He left the day after you went away."

"Indeed. Did he leave any message?"

"No, only that you would know why he went."

"Just so," replied the young man quietly. He hesitated a second and then added, "Did he see any visitors?"

"I think he let in some one himself," replied Mrs. Richards. "I am not sure, but I thought I heard another man's voice in the room. Of course, I did not come in. You told me that he was to have entire liberty."

"Exactly. I think I should like some tea, Mrs. Richards. And, by the way, will you send Mary with this telegram?"

He sat down as he spoke and scribbled a few words on a form. "I think that is all for the present, Mrs. Richards. Oh, by the way, no one has called, I suppose?"

"Mr. Carelton called, but no one else of importance. Mr. Carelton has been three times. He was here the day before yesterday, and said he would probably drop in to-night."

"Thank you, Mrs. Richards."

He might not have been away a day, from the way he spoke. Certainly Mrs. Richards had no suspicion that he had been near the gates of death.

"It is always well to have an understanding with one's housekeeper," he said to himself, as he sat down before the cheerful fire. "Let her understand that you do not intend acquainting her with your goings-out and your comings-in, and that, unless there be special orders to the contrary, she must always be ready for you, and everything goes smoothly. It saves oceans of bother, too."

He turned to the pile of letters which lay heaped on his desk, and examined them one by one. In half an hour, when the servant had spread a well-prepared tea for him, he had read them all.

"Not a line from Relly," he murmured. "I suppose I know what that means. The poor beggar is safe enough by this time, I expect. He will be enveloped in the black robe in more ways than one. Perhaps he's right, 'Once a priest, always a priest.' Still ——"

"Tea's ready, sir."

"Thank you, Mary. It looks very nice, too. Let me see, how long have you been here, Mary?"

"Four months, sir."

"And you are quite happy here?"

"Yes, sir—very, sir."

"That's right. Mrs. Richards speaks very well of you. She thinks you are a very good girl, and I'm glad to hear it. I think that is all."

The girl left the room, delighted that her master should speak so kindly to her. Her desire to get married was not nearly so strong at that moment as it had been for several days past. As she informed Mrs. Richards afterwards, she had a good place, and it was a pleasure to wait on such a kind gentleman. Most people have yet to learn that praise will do more to mend the world than fault-finding.

Lancaster had a good tea, and then sat down before the fire again. He lit a cigar and sat back in his chair with an air of comfort.

"A cigar tastes good after such a long privation," he said to himself; and then his mind flashed to the scene with Father

Ritzoom in the Irish monastery.

For a long time he sat quietly smoking and thinking. Presently the maid-servant entered again, bringing a card.

"Show him in," said Lancaster.

A few seconds later Mr. Peters, of the private detective agency, entered.

"Sit down, Mr. Peters," said Lancaster quietly, handing the box of cigars to him. He was disposed to be friendly.

"I'm afraid my mate made a mess of that business," was the detective's first remark.

"I'm sorry for that."

The detective eyed him keenly; he did not expect that his news would be taken so quietly.

"He shadowed the wrong party."

"Indeed! How?"

"Well, on the Monday afternoon a carriage came and took away the nuns. My mate, according to instructions, followed it. The women went to Paddington and took train for Bristol; my mate went, too. From there they went into Somerset, and the whole three went to a convent about five miles from the town of Bendarton."

"Well?"

"I am afraid he shadowed the wrong nuns."

"Why?"

"Because, on getting a closer view of them at Bendarton, he found them to be all old women."

"He is quite sure of that?"

"There ain't a keener chap to detect a disguise in England than my mate. I'll stake my reputation that all those women are old. You were interested in the young nun what was put in the haunted chamber next to the oratory?"

Lancaster did not speak.

"It would be better if you'd told me what you wanted to do; you wouldn't have had that nasty blow on the head, then. I fancy, too, you'd a-got what you wanted. Still, it was your affair."

Lancaster nodded his head, but made no other reply.

"Well, that nun what was in the chamber next to the oratory have been took away."

"Where?"

"That's where we made a mess of it. There's another entrance to the house—a sort of private door, almost out of sight. She was took out of that door."

"You are sure of that?"

"I'm quite sure. I don't deny but that we've bungled the job. At the same time, and I tell you so plainly, we hadn't got a fair start. You didn't tell me that you wanted that young nun watched; you didn't tell me you tried to get an interview with her. Truth is, you didn't trust me fully, and in that way we was both what you may call 'andicapped. If you'd a-told me what you wanted to do, you'd never have gone to that 'ospital."

"Very likely what you say is true," said Lancaster. "Still, I did what I thought best."

"And I say it ain't professional. Off, or on, is my ticket. Not that we oughtn't to 'ave known about that other door. But there," and Mr. Peters shrugged his shoulders as he blew a cloud of smoke from his mouth. "Of course, I know'd you was took to the 'ospital," he continued presently, "and, of course, I didn't let on. I saw that you didn't want no publicity; but what I do say, sir, is this: There's a clever 'ead running that show. The place is connected with Jesoots, and you've got to get up feerly early if you're going to get over *them*."

"Quite true," said Lancaster quietly.

"Is there anything more I can do?" said Mr. Peters, after a good deal of conversation.

"Yes," said Lancaster, "there is. I am afraid the search will end in nothing, but I want you to discover where the sister who was in the room next to the oratory has been taken."

The detective took out his note-book.

"Number one," he said, as he made a note.

"Then I wish you to find out all you can about the head of that institution. He is generally known as Father Ritzoom. I wish to know his comings and goings, his schemes and his actions."

"Number two," said the detective, making another note. "But let me remark, sir, that the second job is harder than the first. He's deeper than the pool of Siloam, he is, and I suppose that the bottom of that pool is well on to the other side of the globe. He's a Jesoot, sir, and all Jesoots are encircled in mystery."

"Still, you can try."

"Oh, yes, and I'll have a good try, too. Is that all?"

"Yes, I think it's all, except, of course, I shall require to be posted up as often as possible as to the progress you are making."

"Exactly, sir! that's natural." The detective took his hat and walked to the door. "You are sure there's nothing else, sir?"

"Stay, there is. When you came to me that Saturday night you saw a man with me."

"I did, sir; I twigged him."

"I should be glad to know what's become of him;" and he gave all the particulars he cared to tell concerning Relly.

"Very well, sir, that's number three. I'll do my best, sir, my very best. Of course, the business will take time and brains and money; but before I go, sir, I'd like to ask a favour."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Don't you go trying to do no detective work on your own 'ook, sir. Detective work needs special training; and excuse me, sir, but gentlemen generally make it harder for professional men."

Lancaster smiled, "I'll bear what you say in mind," he said.

"Of course, if I find out where this—this young—lady is, I'm to acquaint you right away?"

"Right away."

"I see, sir," said the man quietly.

"I expect no results," thought Lancaster, when Peters had gone; "still, it may be necessary. All the same——"

The servant entered again, bringing another card. Lancaster took it and read the words inscribed thereon, while a curious smile played around his lips. This was what he read—

"The Rev. Anthony Ritzoom, S.F."

CHAPTER XXIII

When Father Ritzoom entered Lancaster noted that he wore the strict clerical attire, as though he wished to emphasise the fact that he was a Jesuit priest. If possible, too, he seemed more watchful than usual; at the same time he wore a suave smile, as though he intended his visit to be conciliatory. The young man fixed his eyes on him steadily, and throughout the whole of their interview betrayed no emotion, and seemed to regard the Jesuit's visit as an ordinary event. Notwithstanding all this, however, he unconsciously arrayed himself for battle. Every nerve was highly strung, every faculty was awake, and yet his hand was steady; his face betrayed no interest beyond what was ordinary. He waited for Ritzoom to speak, and for once that gentleman seemed at a loss how to begin.

"You are somewhat surprised to see me, I expect?" said the priest at length.

"No, not all."

"I thought you might be, seeing we parted under somewhat peculiar circumstances. Still, I suppose it is the characteristic of the English gentleman, of a certain type at least, never to be surprised."

The priest hesitated and looked at Lancaster out of the corners of his eyes, but the young man made no sign save to bow his head gravely.

"The French are so different, are they not?"

"We are supposed to be different, I believe."

"Oh, very different; but that is beside the question. I thought I would call to thank you for the kind hospitality you gave to Relly, and to express the hope that you are completely recovered from your accident."

"Thank you; you are very kind," replied Lancaster, quietly. "I am quite well."

"I am very glad. You will not be surprised to hear that Relly has returned to his work again?"

"No, I am not surprised."

"I took the liberty of calling while you were away. Relly, poor fellow, was glad that his holiday was at an end. Nevertheless, he was very grateful to you for your evident desire to make his stay in London pleasant. By the way, he has not gone back to Ireland."

"No?"

"No. I thought a complete change of scene would be good for him. He had got frightfully rusty with his French, too, so he will spend some considerable time on the Continent. Our order, as you doubtless know, is exceedingly strong in France."

"I have heard so."

"Yes. Back in the time of Louis XIII. and Louis XIV. the Church ruled France through Richelieu and Mazarin. Even after Mazarin died, the confessor of Louis XIV. practically shaped the King's life and government. Things are different now," and the priest paused.

"Yes, they are different now," replied Lancaster, after some seconds of silence.

"The dominant feature of France, since that country was defeated by the Germans, is militarism," went on Ritzoom. "In a sense the Army rules the nation."

Lancaster waited for him to continue.

"And the Jesuits rule the Army. The Church still governs the country, only in a different way."

"The condition of France must be a source of great pride to you, I imagine," responded the young man.

"In a sense, yes—in another, no. France has not recovered from its Revolution yet. But things are mending."

"And Relly has gone to help in this work, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, he is a small cog of a very small wheel."

Lancaster was silent.

"I thought you would like to know this," said Ritzoom. "You were very kind to the poor fellow, and gave him a home while in London. He had to leave during your enforced absence, and I thought it was due to you to know what had become of him."

"Thank you; you are very kind."

"Forgive my freedom," went on Ritzoom presently, "but I can always talk better when I'm smoking. You don't mind my having a cigar, do you?"

"Not at all."

The priest felt in his pockets, and then, with a look of mock despair, he turned to Lancaster. "I haven't a solitary weed," he

said.

Lancaster passed a box of cigars to him.

"Ah, that is good of you. I know your cigars of old. They are a rare brand. I don't know that I ever smoked any which I enjoyed more."

"What's the meaning of all this?" thought Lancaster. "Why all this beating about the bush? The fellow hasn't said what he wants to say yet." Aloud he said, "Yes, I pride myself that they are a fairly good brand."

Ritzoom lit the cigar with a steady hand, and then smoked a few seconds in silence.

"He's coming to it now," thought Lancaster.

"It's a pity that you and I are not—what shall I call it?—fighting under the same banner," he said presently.

He knew that the remark was not diplomatic; he knew that he was not making good headway with the conversation. He was annoyed with himself that such was the case. In spite of everything he felt he had not gained the mastery over the young Englishman. To-night he was more than usually unsuccessful. There was a quiet reserve power which the priest could neither overcome nor gauge. His priestly authority had no weight, his position was a mere trifle. Once or twice during their meetings he thought he had gained a decided advantage, but to-night his weapons seemed useless. Lancaster was quiet, reserved, courteous, watchful.

"You may be right, you may be wrong," replied the young man, in answer to Ritzoom's advances.

"It is a pity," said Ritzoom. "Take your experiences of a fortnight ago as an example. If, instead of acting in opposition to my will, if you had been entirely frank, all might have been different."

"Indeed?"

The priest lifted his eyes to Lancaster's, but quickly dropped them. The steady gaze of the young man was disconcerting.

"The Church has power of granting dispensations."

"I suppose so."

"A sister who has taken simple vows can, if she will place her case before her superiors, gain release from them, provided her reasons be sufficiently strong."

"Consequently?"

"I might have helped you."

"How?"

"I have some influence in Rome. I could have saved you from the necessity of carrying ladders and climbing walls."

"I do not understand."

"And yet I have spoken plainly."

"No. You told me that even your Pope had not the power to nullify solemn vows."

"Ah! Solemn vows."

"Which you told me that Sister Constance had taken."

Ritzoom's memory had played him false. He did not remember that he had told Lancaster this, and he had made a false move. He was not in the slightest degree disconcerted, however.

"There must be a slight mistake somewhere," he said, as he shrugged his shoulders.

"Doubtless."

"Still, it is a pity you did not heed the warning I gave you when we last met."

"Why?"

"Well, for your own sake partly, but more for the sake of that poor, simple girl."

Lancaster was silent.

"It was a nasty fall you had, and it may prove fatal in her case."

Lancaster's heart felt heavy and cold. He had pondered many weary hours over the probable condition of Constance, and the man's words were terrible in their import.

"I have hopes that she will live through it all," said Ritzoom presently; "but there is little doubt but that she will be a cripple for life."

He spoke the words curtly, cruelly, and yet in such a careless, matter-of-fact way, that Lancaster's rage almost got the better of him. Still the young man mastered himself and spoke no word.

"Not that it matters," went on the priest presently.

"No?" queried Lancaster. His voice was husky with suppressed passion.

"No. With us the body is nothing, the soul is everything. I trust that the mortification of the flesh may save the poor creature's soul from perdition. Indeed, there are evidences of it. She bitterly repents of her sin."

"What sin?"

"The sin of loving you, of yielding to your temptation."

Again Lancaster kept back the angry words which sprang to his lips.

"I came to tell you this," said the priest, "and I trust I have broken it to you kindly. I thought it better you should know that she is no longer a well-formed, beautiful girl, but a cripple. It may help you to overcome your feelings towards her."

"You have often advocated frankness," said Lancaster. "Would you mind telling me plainly what you wish me to infer from that?"

"I will be brutally frank," said Ritzoom. "Doubtless to the young English Protestant, with plenty of money, plenty of time, and an eagerness for new playthings, there is something romantic in making love to a pretty nun. Had she been old and ugly, you would never have given her a second thought. Well, I tell you now that she is no longer pretty, and even if she lives she will be a helpless cripple."

Lancaster bit his lip till the blood almost came.

"Whether you have made another mistake in saying this I do not know," he said quietly. "This I *do* know—you altogether mistake the young English Protestant. If you think that the fact of your victim's misfortunes has altered my feelings towards her, you are altogether mistaken. I suppose your Order is built on a system of mutual distrust, and that you suspect every one of bad motives. Anyhow, you make a grave mistake in thinking that the news you impart will alter my purposes in the slightest degree. It so happens that I am not a boy, neither am I a fast man about town."

Ritzoom looked at the young man in genuine astonishment.

"You mean to say," he said quickly, "that you love the helpless cripple as much as you loved the well-formed, beautiful girl?"

"I mean that love which is worth the name does not find its food in a pretty face or a beautiful form," said the young man. "Perhaps your conception of love is little removed from mere physical passion; well, it's not mine. I do not regard you as my confessor, as you well know, but I will tell you this—if your bloodhounds have made her what you say she is, then the element of pity is added to love. But there—doubtless you cannot understand a feeling of this nature."

Ritzoom was quiet for a few seconds. "Then you—you are not altered in your purposes?" he said at length.

"I do not see what my purposes can matter to you," replied the young man.

"By that you mean we are still enemies?"

"It is difficult to be anything else either to a man, or a system, which subjects the holiest things of life to its interests," replied Lancaster.

"I need hardly remind you that we act for our Church, and our Church is God's expressed will on earth," said the priest.

"When you came in to-night, I made up my mind that I would not discuss your religion with you," said Lancaster. "Doubtless I am prejudiced against you, but if I discuss anything it must be founded on truth. This I will admit—I believe you are conscientious."

"Thank you," said the priest rising. "I came to-night to tell you what I have told you, and to give you a warning. I suppose we must be enemies. You have chosen that it should be so, not I. Still, you may be interested to know the kind of people you have to deal with."

"I think I know pretty well."

"You paid me a tribute just now," went on Ritzoom, without heeding the other's words. "You said you believed I was conscientious."

"So was Philip of Spain; so was Pope Pius IV.; so, for that matter, was Catherine de Medici," said Lancaster.

"Thank you. Yes, we are conscientious! we believe the soul to be everything, the body to be nothing."

"In theory."

"Therefore, we allow nothing to stand in the way of our accomplishing our purposes."

"You have told me that before."

"Some people can't realise a truth except by its constant repetition," replied the priest. "Well, we shall guard our lamb more carefully in the future. The shepherd will have a keener look-out for the wolf, and—*he will have no mercy on the wolf*."

"Thank you."

"You have discovered something of our power; something, but only a very little. I have enough interest in you, Mr. Lancaster, to tell you that the Church will not deal lightly with the man who will drag one of her children to perdition."

Lancaster laughed quietly. "This is not Spain," he said.

"No, it is England. English laws do not support those of the Church, but they do allow the Church to defend herself. Take warning, Mr. Lancaster, take warning."

"Meanwhile——"

"Meanwhile that foolish girl will have time for repentance. She will be surrounded by holy influences. Possibly you have made it necessary for her to suffer, but the Church 'loveth those whom she chasteneth.' But of this be assured, she will be where you will never see her again."

"Indeed!"

"And my advice is, don't try. There are worse things than broken heads, Mr. Lancaster."

"I quite understand."

"We are loth to use harsh measures, but if ever there is an obstacle in the way of the salvation of a precious soul, *we remove the obstacle*."

"That I have also heard you say before."

"Good-night, Mr. Lancaster, and be wise."

"Remember me kindly to Relly when you write. I have a suspicion that we shall meet again."

"Have you a message for no one else?"

"No, I will deliver all my other messages myself."

"Curse these cold-blooded Englishmen," said the priest when he got outside. "We shall never get them back to the fold, never. One might as well try and grow grapes in Greenland. Even although he never gets his way, I feel that he has defeated me."

He turned from the square in which Lancaster lived and walked on till he reached Gower Street.

"Say what we will," he went on, "but we are losing power. We are. I can see it. Education, a free press, and this personal independence, which is daily growing, are, in spite of all our vaunted progress, killing us! killing us! I like that fellow, too. I always like the man who is my match. I shall be sorry to harm him, but—well, I have warned him."

As for Lancaster, he sat for a long time alone quietly thinking. A new light shone in his eyes. Pity was there, and a suggestion of faith.

"My poor girl!" he repeated again and again. "I hope it is not true; but if it is, she needs my help, my love, more and more."

Then his face would become more stern, more resolute, while oft-times his lips moved as if in prayer.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE years passed away, and, as far as Norman Lancaster was concerned, nothing happened to bring brightness into the sky. The Church had triumphed, apparently, all along the line. Not one thing which he had set himself to do had been accomplished. Everywhere failure had been written across his plans. Gertrude Winthrop had not only taken her solemn vows, but, through influences unknown to him, had been exalted to the position of Mother Superior in the convent where he had seen her as a novice. He had never visited the place since, and, as a consequence, had not witnessed the change which had passed over her. He knew, however, that her relations gloried in her position. In their eyes to be an abbess in a large convent was an exalted position. Lancaster often wondered whether she had killed her love for Jack Gray, or whether in her lonely hours the dreams of what might have been ever came to her. But he knew nothing. Her life was a sealed book; she was dead to the world, and she presided over the lives of three or four dozen women whose business it was to destroy their natural cravings.

As far as Jack Gray was concerned, too, the Church had triumphed. Bearing in mind his University training and his exceptional gifts, a dispensation had been granted in his favour, so that he had been fully ordained as a Jesuit priest in less time than was ordinary. But Lancaster had never seen him since the day they had parted at the college for novices. Incidentally he had heard of his growing powers as an impassioned preacher, but they had never met face to face.

Of Father Ritzoom or of Relly he knew nothing. Neither had crossed his path since the interview I have described in the last chapter. Apparently Ritzoom regarded him as no longer worthy of attention. While he had opposed the priest's will Ritzoom had checked him, thwarted him. Since that night, however, he had left the pathway of his life.

And yet Lancaster had not been idle. Since his parting with the Jesuit priest he had bent his whole energies to finding where Constance was immured, or to discover whether she was living or dead. All in vain, however. Year by year he had spent much time, and a great part of his income, in hunting up information concerning the convents of Europe; but he was always as wise at the beginning of the year as he was at the end. Each convent was like every other to him, for each was practically a closed book. He had also employed the cleverest detectives in London, men whose experience in unravelling mysteries was wide and varied, with the same result. Every pathway they traversed proved a *cul de sac*. Every seeming clue proved unavailing.

No message had been sent to him, not even the faintest whisper had reached him. Whether Constance was dead or alive he had no knowledge. And yet he never gave up hope. In years he was approaching middle age, but his love was as ardent as on the night when he first held her in his arms, and when he declared that no power on earth should part them. The love had become nobler, too; it had become purified, refined. It was a love which made him think less about himself and more about the object of his affections. His great thought was not of his own disappointment and suffering, but of hers. He pictured her as weak, crippled, emaciated, suffering—the object of the petty tyranny and spite which he knew must be the possession of those who had narrowed down their lives to what he felt to be a trivial and paltry set of rules. He thought of her as kneeling on cold stones, of doing penance for imaginary sins, of eating out her heart amidst silence and loneliness. He imagined her confessing her love to a priest, because, if she did not confess, the curse of the Church would be upon her. He pictured her listening to the priests who pronounced penances, and in his heart came a great pity, an absorbing compassion which stimulated him to fresh zeal in the attempt to give her liberty and life.

To some men this might have meant utter cynicism and loss of faith, but upon Lancaster it had a different effect. The abuse of faith did not destroy his belief in Christianity. As the years went by he looked deeper and saw the kernel beneath the husk, and while he hated more and more the narrowing influences of sectarianism, his belief in religion—a religion the central thought of which was the Fatherhood of God—became more strong each day. By and by he came to realise that the hand of Providence was marking out his chequered career, and his love led him away from being a self-centred cynic to being a healthy-minded man, with large interests and a sense of individual responsibility.

But he never ceased searching for Constance, and his thoughts for her, his pity for her, and, more than all, his love for her, taught him to pray.

During all the years, however, he had kept his own counsel, and never, even to his dearest friends, had he breathed a word of the great absorbing love which was, humanly speaking, the master passion of his life.

One evening he sat alone in his room, thinking of the apparent hopelessness of his search and wondering what steps he should next take. Just as when we first made his acquaintance, he had but lately returned from a journey. Then, however, he found but little in life to interest him; now it was full of meaning, full of interest, full of purpose.

He had not sat long when a visitor was announced, and that visitor proved to be, as on the previous occasion, Tom Carelton.

"It is good of you to call," said Lancaster heartily. "I have only just returned from Italy."

"So I heard," replied the other. "I thought I would like a chat with you. Besides, I fancy I have seen something in to-night's paper which may interest you."

"I shall be glad of the chat, anyhow," said Lancaster. "You were always a cheerful fellow. But what's in the paper?"

Carelton opened it and handed it to him.

"There!" he said, pointing to a paragraph.

Lancaster read it. To most men at that time it would have meant but little. It simply announced that Father Clement would preach at the St. Ignatius Catholic Church the following evening, and conduct a mission during the week, to which Protestants were especially invited.

"The Church of St. Ignatius belongs to the Jesuits, does it not?" remarked Lancaster.

"Yes," replied Carelton.

"Do you know Father Clement?"

"I think we both do."

"Why?"

"Look!" and Carelton pointed to another column headed, "Preachers for to-morrow."

Lancaster examined the list under the heading "Roman Catholic," and saw the following announcement: "Church of St. Ignatius.—Preachers: Morning, Rev. A. McCall; evening, Rev. John Gray."

Lancaster looked questioningly into Carelton's face.

"I fancy it will be he," he said.

"Of course, Gray is not an uncommon name," was Lancaster's reply.

"True, but you remember Father Ritzoom's purpose concerning Gray. He was intended to be a missioner to Protestants—to educated Protestants."

"Yes; what then?"

"Well, he commences a mission to-morrow night at the Church of St. Ignatius, which is situated in a fashionable neighbourhood. Then you notice that Protestants are specially invited."

"Yes. Well, you are probably right. Will you go with me?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot. I am fully booked for to-morrow."

Lancaster read the announcement again; it interested him greatly.

"At any rate, it cannot matter now," he said presently; "he's bound body and soul."

"Yes," replied Carelton; "we did our best, but the Jesuits were too strong."

Lancaster sighed, but gave no other reply.

Carelton stayed some time longer, but neither of them referred to the advertisement again.

The next evening Lancaster made his way to the Church of St. Ignatius. He determined to see whether the preacher announced was his old friend. He found the Church of St. Ignatius to be a pretentious building. He quickly discovered that the scheme of the architect had never been properly carried out, and that the intended decorations at the entrance had never been completed; nevertheless, at first sight the church looked large and imposing. He was met at the door by a man who asked him whether he would pay a shilling or sixpence for his seat, and on being asked the difference in the two the official gave the information that the shilling seats were in the front of the church, where a far better sight of the altar could be obtained. Lancaster paid the shilling and entered. He was shown into a pew from which he could command a near view, both of the altar and the pulpit, and there he waited until the service commenced. The congregation was not large—probably the price of admission was prohibitive—but Lancaster noticed that the greater part of the people seemed to be worshippers, and most of them knelt before the altar prior to taking their seats. He did not pay much attention to the people, however; he was anxiously awaiting the advent of the priests, among whom he thought he might see his old friend. Presently he heard a clatter at the western end of the church, and saw the choir take their seats in the gallery close to the organ. Immediately after a door near the altar opened and a procession of priests and singers took place.

He looked with a languid interest at the priests who genuflected before the altar, while boys were swinging censers to and fro. To him all the rising up and sitting down had no meaning, while the smell of the incense reminded him of Pagan rather than of Christian worship. Still, there was a certain stateliness in the ceremonial, but how it in any way helped prayer and praise he could not see.

Presently the priests began to chant prayers, while the responses were given by the choir from the opposite extremity of the church. They were all in Latin, and as the words were spoken very indistinctly, Lancaster, having no book, could scarcely distinguish a word that was uttered. To him, therefore, the prayers were merely incoherent mutterings which echoed from one end of the church to the other. These prayers continued some minutes; Lancaster could not tell how many, but to him they

seemed of interminable length. After some time this part of the service came to an end, after which the boys began to perform their ceremonials before the row of priests who sat on one side of the altar. To a man of Lancaster's cast of mind the performance smacked of a third-rate theatre. Indeed, not far from him sat two young fellows who had evidently come to the church out of curiosity.

"What does it mean?" asked one.

"It's religion," replied the other.

"Religion, eh?" And the first speaker shrugged his shoulders.

"Why, what do you call it?"

"A mighty poor show for the money," was the reply.

As Lancaster looked at the faces of many of the people, however, he knew that to them it meant more. Paltry as it all might be, they attributed some meaning to that which appeared to him meaningless, if not grotesque.

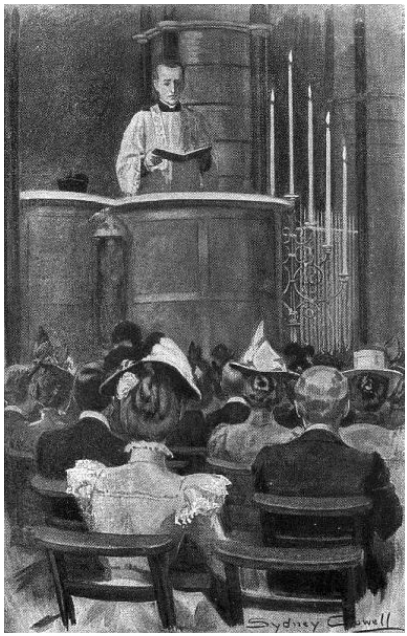
Presently he noticed a stir among the priests, who made various movements before what the young men near him had designated "a very fair candle show" was placed. The one who stood in the centre, and who was evidently the chief priest, allowed himself to be arrayed in an additional garment, which was shaped like an old-fashioned riding-cloak. Something about this personage struck Lancaster. He could see only a part of his face, but what he saw was reminiscent of past days. When this particular part of the ceremonial was over, and they again sat down, he paid particular attention to this personage.

There could be no doubt about it, the man was Father Ritzoom.

"But for him I might have been a happy man," thought Lancaster. But no bitterness filled his heart. He believed then that, subtle, scheming man of the world as Ritzoom undoubtedly was, he was conscientious in what he did. At the same time he realised what terrible tragedies had been committed in the name of conscience, and that because of it millions of lives had been stultified—ruined. He knew that for the sake of this same conscientiousness, there were behind the walls of the convents he had visited, tens of thousands of bruised, bleeding, broken hearts, and that many more lived in perpetual darkness when they might have felt the smiling sunshine of God.

Although he saw Ritzoom, however, the priest had not seen him. It was evidently a part of the priest's programme to appear unconscious of the congregation. And so the ceremonies proceeded. The priests and singers kept rising and sitting down, the boys continued to ring bells and to wave the smoking censers to and fro, while, to him, meaningless mumblings filled the vaulted building.

By and by it was over, however, and Lancaster heaved a sigh of relief. The pulpit was still unoccupied, while the priests and singers sat motionless in the altar seats; then followed a movement in the congregation. Many eyes were turned towards a side door, from which a pale, thin man entered, preceded by a youth bearing certain insignias of the preacher's office. In spite of himself, Lancaster shuddered as he watched the face of the man who slowly climbed the pulpit stairs.



"Thin, emaciated . . . there could be no doubt
that the young preacher was a severe ascetic."

CHAPTER XXV

THE preacher was Lancaster's old friend Jack Gray—not as he had known him ten years before, but Jack Gray after years of monastic life. As Lancaster gazed upon him a feeling of great compassion came into his heart. Standing there in the pulpit, arrayed though he was in gorgeous robes, he could discern the outline of his thin, emaciated form. His face, too, looked almost transparent in its pallor. Whatever might be the habits of many of the fat priests who had been genuflecting before the rows of candles, there could be no doubt but that the young preacher was a severe ascetic. He knew that the Jesuits were not a fasting order, and that most of those who had been engaged in the ceremonial that night, gave no evidence of a self-denying life; but there could be no doubt about Gray. His eyes, too, shone with the light of an enthusiast, his thin hands trembled with suppressed excitement.

His voice was scarcely audible as he asked for the prayers of the congregation on behalf of the souls of certain people who had lately died. This done, however, he crossed himself, and, looking upwards, said with a voice full of emotion, "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." After this he looked upon his congregation—the ordinary well-dressed, well-fed congregation which gathers to church in the fashionable parts of London. No books, no papers of any sort were before him, and he seemed in doubt as to how he should begin. Lancaster saw that the congregation looked intently and eagerly towards him. He was different from the florid, rotund dozen of men who sat at the altar, or who ordinarily preached from that pulpit. On his face was an expression of yearning; his eyes began to flash with a lurid light. In a few seconds a great hush fell upon the entire audience.

"'What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?'"

He uttered the words clearly, distinctly, and then, after waiting a few seconds, repeated them. His voice was light in quality, but far-reaching; it penetrated every crevice of the building.

"What can the world give, my brethren?" he asked, and then in a few graphic words he enumerated the joy and happiness the world could impart. He spoke of the pleasure of riches, of education, of travel, of society, and of animal joy. These, he said, constituted the *world*. After this he described the soul. Here he became less interesting, and simply repeated the Catholic views of the soul life. Indeed, at this point he failed to hold Lancaster's attention, and almost involuntarily his eyes turned towards the altar. He felt his blood rush into his face, for he saw that the eyes of Ritzoom were fixed upon him. Evidently the priest was paying but little attention to the sermon; instead, he was eagerly watching the man with whom he had had varied encounters years before. Lancaster watched and saw a smile creep over the Jesuit's face. It looked as though it were a smile of derision, mockery, victory. The eyes of the two men met only for a second, and then the priest looked steadily on the floor.

Lancaster again turned his face towards the preacher.

"And now let us consider, my brethren, what is meant by a lost soul," said Gray, and again the attention of the congregation became riveted on him. "That of which I shall speak to you is not of my invention nor of my desire," he said. "To the natural man the idea of hell is repugnant, unreasonable. But what of that? I do not speak of the petty reasonings of man, but of the word of God as taught by His infallible Church. Let me picture to you the condition of a lost soul; let me describe such an one leaving its clay tenement and going away into the regions of gloomy fires, of everlasting tortures."

Then followed a lurid word-picture. As a specimen of vivid, wild imagination, expressed in glowing language, it was masterly. As a representation of God, it was terrible blasphemy. He described the loneliness of this sinful soul going into darkness, and yet where the flames of fire, like the coils of a serpent fastened themselves on his quivering flesh. He portrayed this fire feeding on the man's vitals, always, always burning, yet never consuming. He told of his parched, burning tongue, which failed to articulate the words, "Water, water!" and related how that while the man in agony pleaded for mercy, tens of thousands of grinning devils tortured him, and howled while they pierced his flesh with their hellish instruments. He pictured the man wandering across scorching deserts, swimming in boiling lakes, sinking into gloomy abysses, and climbing over burning mountains, trying to find a moment's ease from his agony, yet never finding it.

"Ah, but," cried the preacher, "some of you will be saying, 'This is but for a little while; the man will presently be purified, and carried to Paradise.' Ah! no. I am speaking of the lost soul, and not of those who are privileged to enter purgatorial flames, and who can thus have the advantage of the prayers of the priests and of faithful Catholics. The doom of the lost soul is to suffer for ever and ever. And what does that mean? It means that after millions of years of torture, if the man gets back to the mouth of hell and asks what time it is, the answer will be, 'Eternity just begun.' Nor must you think that the picture I have

portrayed is overdrawn. Nay, it is but the dim outline of what the lost soul suffers; it is but a far-off muttering of the thunderings of the terrible wrath of an offended God.

"And now, my brethren, how can you save your souls from being lost? There is but one way. It is to choose God's only appointed means of salvation; it is to come back to the one true, the Holy Roman Catholic Church. I have made an appeal to Protestants to come to this church to-night. It may be there are—nay, I am sure there are—many non-Catholics here, and it is with you I plead. I know your difficulties; let me, because I love your souls, state them and answer them.

"You tell me that Catholic people are no better, nay, not so pious as Protestant peoples. You tell me that Catholic nations have grown weak, while Protestants have grown strong. You tell me that here in England you have liberty, and justice, and independence; that in all Protestant countries education flourishes, the arts flourish, and science marches forward with stately strides; while in Catholic countries ignorance prevails, education is neglected, while the weight of ignorant authority is placed on the feet of research. Suppose I grant all this, what then? What is all your vaunted progress and learning? It is but for a day, and thus when the breath of the Almighty goes forth it will be consumed like stubble is consumed in a furnace seven times heated. But the soul lives on for ever and for ever and for ever. What will the material prosperity, the mental progress of the nations matter in the light of eternity? Then the cry of untold millions will be, 'What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?'

"Then you come to me and tell me that your reason rejects what I have said. Reason! Reason! What is it? It is but the meaningless chatter of discontented children, but the crackle of dry sticks in a fire! What have I, have you, to do with reason? The Church is above the reason of man—she expresses the reason of the Almighty. What can our poor, paltry minds know of the purposes of the Infinite? It is not for us to reason on matters of the soul, but to obey the voice of God; and God speaks to us in the voice of the Church. 'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.'

"And still you tell me you cannot accept the doctrines of the Church, nor submit yourself to her holy teachings. That you cannot believe in our Holy Father, the Pope, the office of the priests, or the power of the Blessed Virgin. You say that the bread and wine at the Mass is only bread and wine, and not the real blood and body of our Blessed Lord. And do you think that you are the first who have uttered these inanities? There are millions in hell to-night who have uttered them, and are there because they have uttered them; aye, and blessed be God, there are tens of thousands who have seen their foolishness and have been received into the bosom of the Church.

"Do not think that I speak as one who does not know. I do know. I have wandered along the tortuous road of the sceptic, I have pitted my puny reason against that of our Holy Church, I have allowed the love of the world, of friends, and of what is more than friendship, to do battle with the voice of the Church; and I have been led to say, 'Let reason perish, let friendship perish, let everything perish, that the Church may claim me, and that I may save my soul.' I have come to say this; 'If the Church commands me to believe or do what my reason tells me is the veriest drivel which fell from the lips of an irresponsible idiot, I will still obey the Church, knowing that I disobey at the cost of my never-dying soul.'

"Oh, my wandering, erring brethren come back to the fold. Listen not to the thousand devils which tell you that I speak but words of foolishness. Behind my words are the prayers of saints, the footsteps of millions of martyrs, and the ceaseless energy of the one—the only—Church of God. Listen to the pleadings of the Blessed Virgin, of all the saints—nay, see the wounds of our Blessed Lord Himself—they all tell you to come back to the Church and live. For if you do not, you young men and maidens, you unbelievers, you men of the world who will accept nothing except what you say is reasonable, will enter into that region of doom where men have lost their souls."

This was in brief the homily to which Norman Lancaster listened. I cannot convey anything of an idea of the terrible intensity with which it was delivered, or of the electric atmosphere which it created. To the Catholic believers present it came with tremendous force, and sobs were heard from hysterical women all over the church. Lancaster, however, was filled with pain as he heard it. "And this is what they have made of poor Jack, is it?" he thought.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked one of the young men who sat near to Lancaster.

"Before I could believe that I should be an atheist," he replied.

"But the fellow was terribly in earnest."

"So are Mohammedan fanatics that I have seen in Egypt," he replied.

But Lancaster paid but little heed to their words; instead, he watched Gray as he came slowly down the pulpit stairs and walked with hesitating footsteps across the church.

"And Jack thinks he's doing the will of God, and helping to save men's souls," thought Lancaster, and a look of real pity shone from his eyes.

He did not remain till the end of the service. The monotonous mumblings of the priests were unbearable after the tirade he had just heard. No sooner had Jack left the main building of the church than he rose to go. In so doing he again looked towards the altar, and again his eyes met those of Ritzoom. The Jesuit seemed to be preparing to leave with the rest of the priests, but his face was clearly revealed to Lancaster. The Englishman watched like one fascinated. There was tremendous power suggested by that massive head, square-cut features, and full, dark eyes.

"That man does not believe what Jack has been preaching," he thought; "he cannot. To him it is like the antics of the old Pagan priests before the dawn of Christianity."

On leaving the church he was met at the door by men and boys who were trying to sell Catholic literature, but he paid no heed to them. His mind was full of what he had seen and heard. He had gone only a few yards, however, when he saw a man coming from one of the small postern doors of the building. He wore the soutane and biretta common to Jesuit priests, and walked with seeming difficulty.

"I believe it is he," thought Lancaster.

He followed him as he walked along the footpath at the side of the church; and then, when he opened a gate and stepped on the pavement of the street, Lancaster spoke.

"Is that you, Gray?" he said.

The priest turned quickly around and looked at him intently.

"I thought our paths would for ever lie apart," he said. "I thought we had said goodbye for ever."

"The world is small," replied Lancaster.

Gray was silent.

"I was in the church just now. I heard you preach," continued Lancaster.

"Yes, I saw you. You came to criticise, to sneer, I suppose. Well, your blood be upon your own head. I was faithful."

"I am sure you preached what you believed. It was easy to see that."

"And you—did not you believe?"

Lancaster did not speak.

"Did you?" said the priest again. "I saw you there. I hoped you would believe."

"Do you honestly think I could, Gray?"

"With God all things are possible. Tell me, are you still an enemy to the truth, or does the light of God shine?"

"I am no enemy to the truth," replied Lancaster. "That was why I was pained to hear you to-night."

"Pained to hear me? Why?"

"Because you outraged the elementary principles of humanity and of Divine Justice. You caricatured the Almighty; you turned religion into a miserable fetich."

"Silence!" said the priest sternly. "Silence! I command you. I will not listen to blasphemy."

"Unfortunately for you, and fortunately for your hearers, little attention will be paid to your assumed authority," replied Lancaster. "And——I say, forgive me, Jack; I did not mean to speak like this. For the sake of old days I wanted us to speak as friends."

"Old days! I will not remember them. Yes, I will, though. I will rejoice that I did not yield to your temptation. I will rejoice that, by the grace of God, I overcame you in the old days. I will be glad that you were defeated, and I will praise God that we, whose souls you sought to damn, are this day bearing witness for the truth in this modern Babylon. You tried to drag us down to hell, but you could not; you attacked us where our armour was weakest, and, but for the mercy of God and the watchfulness of our Holy Mother the Church, you would have succeeded. But they who were for us were stronger than you who were against us, and thus, in this city, given over to heresy and abomination, this very night your intended victims have witnessed for the truth of our ever-blessed Church."

It was evident that Gray was still under the influence of strong excitement, and his voice rose to tones of passion. Perhaps he did not wish to convey the thought that mastered Lancaster's mind and made his heart beat furiously.

"Very well, I will not dispute your statements," he said. "It would not be kind for me to argue with you just now. You are tired after your work; you need rest."

"Rest!" cried the priest. "Believe me, I do not know the meaning of the word. Rest! I would stay with you all night, talk with you all night, plead with you, pray for you all night, if thereby I could lead you to see that you are standing on the brink of hell."

"I am afraid all would be vain, Gray," replied Lancaster; "all the same, I should like a chat with you soon. I should, indeed. Will you not call and see me some morning when you are not wearied?"

"No, no; I have no time."

"Well, let me call and see you?"

"If you come as a penitent, yes. Oh, I would so gladly welcome you!"

"I would come as a friend, as a college chum of your brother's, as one who wishes you well."

"You cannot wish me well while you are a heretic. Even now you would drag me back to the world, if you could."

"I would have you live the life God would have you live."

"I am. Oh! I am. At least, I trust so."

"And Gertrude Winthrop?"

"Gertrude Winthrop! There is no such person."

"Is she dead?"

"Yes, dead to the world; dead to my heart. She lives only for God and for the Church."

"Is she still in Ireland?"

"Yes. God has forgiven her the sin which you caused her to commit; and so gracious has the Church been, that she is now the Mother Superior of the convent."

"Is she in Ireland now?"

"Yes, she is there now; but I must not stay longer with you. May God be gracious to you and grant you light!"

"Good-night, Jack."

"Good-night."

The priest entered the house by which they were standing, while Lancaster wended his way northward. His eyes burnt with a wild light; his mind was active beyond ordinary.

"After all I have made a discovery," he thought presently. "He did not think he was telling me anything. He has not Ritzoom's cunning and foresight. Nevertheless, his words *cannot* mean anything else. Constance must be in London."

He did not reach his house until very late, and his mind had been very busy as he wandered along the crowded thoroughfares.

CHAPTER XXVI

DID you see Lancaster in the church to-night?" asked Father Ritzoom of Father Gray as the two sat together, about an hour after the latter had parted company with Lancaster.

"Yes, I saw him. I spoke to him after I had left the church."

"Ah!"

"Yes. He seemed desirous of renewing our acquaintance."

"Well?"

"Oh, there was only one course for me to take. I gave him some plain truths."

"In other words, you snubbed him?"

"As much as a man of his stamp can be snubbed. Perhaps an outsider would have said that I was the victim of that experience rather than he. But it does not matter."

"Has he given up his former plans?"

"Lancaster gives up nothing, nothing. But he knows he is further away from accomplishing them than ever."

"Did he tell you so?"

"No. I only judged by his manner."

"Perhaps he only meant to deceive you."

"He is not a man of that stamp. Lancaster belongs to the old school of English gentlemen in that respect. To him every lie is born in hell."

Ritzoom lifted his eyebrows.

"He is beaten all along the line," said the older priest presently. "He came very near carrying off Sister Constance; but even there he failed."

"Yes, I know, I know," and the young priest sighed.

"The fellow has visited almost every one of our convents in Europe during these last few years," continued Ritzoom presently.

"I suppose so; but the woman?"

"She still says her prayers to the Virgin, and, to quote a Protestant saying, 'She finds great joy in counting her beads.' The fellow little suspects that she has been only a mile or two from his own house, while he has been hunting all over Europe."

"He evidently loves her."

"Yes, he is a rare specimen of mankind."

"Consequently he hates our Church."

"Of course. But what of that?"

"His soul will be lost."

"That is his look-out."

Gray sighed.

"You preached a hot sermon to-night," continued Ritzoom, smiling. "If he goes to hell now, he goes with his eyes open."

Gray continued silent.

"Come, come," said the older priest presently; "one would think your effort to-night was a failure, instead of a brilliant success."

"Success!" cried Gray, his eyes flashing. "Success! Nay. Did I not believe in the grace of God, I should regard it as the ghastliest failure of my life. True, I succeeded in frightening believing Catholics; but the handful of Protestants there—oh! I know they laughed at me. To them the doctrine I preached, and upon which our Church insists, is an exploded dogma, a relic of barbarism. A few unthinking women sobbed hysterically, but the men, the strong-minded, thinking men, they regarded my message as lightly as they would regard the story of Blue Beard."

Ritzoom gave a low, amused chuckle, while Gray started to his feet.

"Why is it, why is it?" he cried. "When I was at college *men* listened to me in our debating clubs. Later, when I was a candidate for Parliament, and made political speeches, they listened to me still. I was quoted, talked about, reported in the newspapers. I appealed to their intelligence, to their sense of justice, and to their patriotism; while now it's all women—women. Even the men who come give reason the go-by."

"You told them to," suggested Ritzoom.

"Yes, I did—and I—well, I can speak freely to you, but I felt ashamed of myself as I said what I did. Lancaster pitied me."

"Pitied you—how?"

"Oh, he assumed that tone. He regarded me as a modern scientist regards a savage 'medicine man.' Oh, I tell you it is no use. We may get a few of the Anglican clergy to become priests of our Church, because we promise them powers which are for ever dear to the man who would be a priest; we may convert thoughtless women—of both sexes—who are influenced by the voice of authority and by a showy ceremonial; but the men—the brains, the energy, the backbone of the country—oh! it's terribly disappointing!"

"But the people come to us."

"Just the same as they come to a pantomime, a pageant, or to any faith-healing mumbo-jumbo performance."

"Father Gray! Father Gray!"

"Oh, yes, I know, I know. But I am in that mood, and I must speak out now. There are not three other men in the world to whom I could say this, but you have been my guide, my counsellor for years. I cannot help it, Ritzoom; we cannot make men; we Catholics make devotees—martyrs, perhaps. We can make intellectual automatons by the thousand; but men, strong men, independent men, men who dare probe a thing to the bottom, casting aside the rubbish of life—our very system makes it impossible."

"Well, and what are you going to do?"

"I—oh, I go on. I cannot help it. I believe against my reason, but I believe—the thing has got hold of me. But I am disappointed. I used to have dreams of converting *men*, of moving them, like Savonarola moved them, towards faith and righteousness."

"A dangerous man to use as an example."

"Yes, and all intellectual forces are. Think of Erasmus; he almost made me a Protestant when I read his letters. The intellectual forces of our Church leave us. Think of Döllinger, of Hyacinthe; there is not a preacher of commanding genius in the whole of our Church in England to-day."

"Except yourself."

"I dare not use my brains, I dare not appeal to the intelligence. If I would influence, I must be emotional, and that——" Gray shrugged his shoulders scornfully.

"Years ago," he went on "I courted intellectual difficulties, I delighted in facing problems; now I dread them, I shrink from them. For ever and for ever I hear the voice of the Church saying, 'Thou shalt not.' Oh, I know we deny this to the world! We tell Protestants that we court the freest, the strictest investigation; but do we? do we?"

Ritzoom laughed.

"This miracle-working at Lourdes—what does it resolve itself into when you face it fairly? A mere faith-healing show, which can be matched in a hundred Bethshans all over the country. But the coffers of the Church are enriched by it, and the Pope—well, he accepts the offerings resulting therefrom, and so the thing goes on. There's not a doctor in Europe, who has studied his profession thoroughly, but who knows that every cure can be explained by natural means; but the thing goes on. Then there's the winking Madonna, the Holy Coat, the true Cross, the hundred other things! Reason, intelligence, all goes by the board."

"Of course it does," said Ritzoom. "Faith is above it all."

"Just so; and in so far as you alienate faith from reason you fail to—to convert England."

"I might be at a Protestant League meeting," laughed Ritzoom.

"Yes, yes, but that side of me is upward to-night. To-morrow I shall be a Jesuit again. To-morrow I shall be willing to concur with everything that the Church has done—from the Spanish Inquisition to the Vatican Decrees over which Newman stumbled; but to-night I am in a dangerous mood. I think it is through meeting Lancaster. The devil got hold of me in spite of myself; I envied him his liberty, his freedom from ecclesiastical authority, and his right to love."

"Ah," said Ritzoom, "there lies the crux of the whole business! It is still a woman. My friend, I am a very lenient Father Confessor. I advise you to go to Ireland, see the woman you once loved, spend a few hours with her—and you'll be cured."

"I have never seen her since I became a novice. You have, of course?"

"Often."

"Lately?"

"A few weeks ago."

"What is she like?"

"Go and see her, my friend; go and see her."

"Has she ever spoken to you of me?"

"Go and see her, Gray. A visit to the convent will be as good as a tonic to you. You will need a rest after this mission is over. Go, my friend; go to Ireland!"

"I am afraid; no, I am sure that it would be too much for me."

"It would be your salvation. Go, my friend, go and see your one-time sweetheart!"

The two men presented a strange contrast. The one young, eager, earnest almost to fanaticism. The light of an enthusiast was in his eyes, his body thin almost to emaciation by fasting and vigil. The other strong, robust, self-confident, well fed. Here was not a man who would die for a principle; rather he was a man of the world, a cynic, and yet one who looked good-humouredly on the earnestness of others. His whole appearance suggested that he knew the tricks which produced astonishing results, and judged them accordingly. Where other men saw the hand of God he saw the outcome of clever diplomacy and skilful scheming. Faith he possessed, but it was the faith of a man who believes in what will pay best. As a result he was tolerant of what some would severely condemn. His liberality was not a result of conviction, but from want of it.

"Very well," said Gray presently, "I will go."

"And remember that you are not a monk, and are not called upon to be an ascetic. That sermon of yours to-night would have done very well for a Passionist, or a Franciscan; but it was not the sermon of a Jesuit. A true Jesuit is always diplomatic."

"The fellow spoke truly," he said to himself when Gray had retired. "We make no real headway. We proselytise a few women, and a few men who ought to be women, and we have a lot of fellows on the staff of the newspapers who make a parade of them; but we say nothing of the thousands who lapse, nor of the low standard of intelligence and morals which too often prevails among the so-called faithful. Tsh! we are going back. That was a terrible confession of Gray's. In order to preach sound doctrine he had to let his reason and his critical faculties have the go-by. Well, we must fall back on our old resting-place —the battle is the Lord's, not ours. All the same, the real trend of things—show——But there, what's the use?"

Meanwhile Norman Lancaster sat in his lonely house. The room in which he sat was very little altered since the first time we saw him there. But the man had changed.

"Yes, she is in London," he thought; "but where? And when I find that out, what then? How am I to speak to her? Besides, will she not be more and more bound by this terrible system? Well, I must chance that—and she loves me!"

When he went to bed the light of hope burned in his eyes. The light of joy was there, too, as a consequence; joy, chastened by anxious waiting and suffering and sorrow.

"Yes, God is," he said, as he worked out the problem of his life in the silence of the room.

The following morning he eagerly read a book containing the list of convents in London, belonging to the order to which Constance was attached. A map of the city lay before him.

"If I go to one and ask questions, I warn all the rest," he thought. "Besides, Ritzoom is in the city. Every convent is guarded like a prison, and no outsider can claim the right of entrance. Every road ends in a *cul de sac*." But he never thought of giving up.

During the next week his life was a mystery to his housekeeper; but she was wise enough to keep her own counsel and to ask no question. At the end of the week he told her he was going to Ireland for a few days.

Nothing of importance happened on his journey; nevertheless, he had learnt the art of being watchful and cautious. He had not for years been matching himself against the Jesuits for nothing. He was constantly under the impression that he was being watched; but this is common to men who are engaged in undertakings such as his.

When he reached the gate of the Convent of Our Mother of Good Counsel he could not help casting his mind back over the years. He located the corner of the garden where he had first seen the woman he loved. How strange it all was! He had seen Constance only three times, and never in the daylight; yet the fire which was so suddenly kindled in his heart years before had never ceased burning. Rather each year had increased its intensity, until now, although he had begun to approach middle age, it burned with more fervour than ever.

He sent in his card and asked to see the Reverend Mother Superior, wondering greatly what the result of his visit would be.

"I wonder whether she will see me?" he asked himself. "If she does, will she wear a veil? It's difficult to tell. These convents have such various rules, and so many dispensations are granted."

He was admitted, and presently found himself in a room which was better furnished than was commonly the case in the nunneries he had visited.

He had scarcely seated himself when he heard the rustle of a woman's dress, and a nun entered the room.

"Mr. Norman Lancaster," she said, looking at the card, "I am told you wish to see me."

Her face was only covered by the white band across her forehead, and Lancaster was almost startled by its stony whiteness. The features were drawn, too, as if by pain; but the eyes were bright and looked hard and merciless.

"You remember the name?"

The nun hesitated a second.

"Yes, I remember."

"Things have changed since we met last."

"Yes. Will you be pleased to tell me your business quickly?"

Lancaster looked at her steadily.

"I was wondering whether you felt kindly towards me because of the service I once tried to render you," he said.

"I trust I feel kindly towards all," she said; "but I will not speak of the time you mention. It must be forgotten."

She spoke steadily, but Lancaster knew by the twitching of her mouth that her heart was stirred.

"You had your way," went on Lancaster. "You had your way, but I—I did not get mine."

"Be thankful," replied the woman; "you were the instrument of the Evil One."

"You have become great in your Order," Lancaster went on. "You are the Reverend Mother Superior in the convent where I knew you as a novice. But you are a woman still. Gertrude Winthrop, ever since I last saw you my life has been sad and lonely. You know why?"

"Yes."

"You know where she is now?"

"Yes."

"You have been to see her?"

"No—that is—what leads you to say so?"

"I discovered that you have lately been to London, to a convent there. What convent?"

"I will not tell you."

"You saw her?"

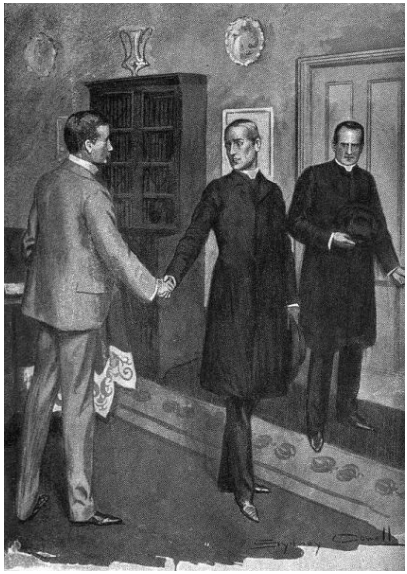
"Yes."

"Tell me how she fares?"

"She is dead."

"No!" Lancaster's face became grey and haggard and drawn in a second.

"Yes. I will say to-day what I would not have said a week ago. She was dying yesterday morning; she must be dead before now."



" 'You do not—cannot understand,' he said."

CHAPTER XXVII

For a moment Lancaster was stunned. The blow had fallen suddenly, and for a moment it made him incapable of action, almost of thought. Still, he made no sign, except that he looked at the woman in a dazed sort of way.

"Be thankful that you have failed," continued the nun. "Had you succeeded you would have damned her soul and your own as well. When she died she would have gone into eternal fires, while you would have been cursed tenfold as the destroyer of her soul. Now she is with the saints in Paradise."

Lancaster took no notice of her harangue.

"Look you, Gertrude Winthrop," he said; "this is not another Jesuit trick, is it? It is not a lie to throw me on a false scent? I know you have been to London. I tried to speak to you there. I failed, that is why I came here. But tell me, is this a hoax?"

"It is no hoax."

Lancaster looked at her steadily and he knew she spoke the truth.

"Tell me all you know," he said sternly, his eyes hard and angry.

This woman was not in the habit of hearing words like these. As Mother Superior she was obeyed without question; many of those with whom she came into contact were almost abject in their humility. She had not long been elevated to her present position, and being but a very young woman even yet, she had a sense of pride when she remembered the height to which she had been suddenly exalted.

She felt indignant, therefore, at Lancaster's tones of command, but one look at his eyes mastered her. She instinctively felt that he was stronger than she, and that all her authority was to him no more than authority of a pantomime king. Without hesitation, therefore, she spoke, and her words were almost humble.

"She desired that I should be sent for," she said, "and—remembering old days, I went."

"Well?"

"I found her dying!"

"Has she had the services of a doctor?"

"She has."

"Was he some quack, some priest, who has a smattering of medical knowledge, or a responsible physician?"

"A responsible physician."

"Tell me his name, where he lives."

"I must not do that."

"Well, tell me what she said to you."

A flush mantled the woman's cheek and a strange light burned in her eyes. She opened her lips to speak, and then checked herself suddenly.

"No," she said, "I dare not; it would be sin—sacrilege."

"She spoke of me?"

The nun was silent, but Lancaster was answered, nevertheless.

"Tell me the doctor's report."

"He said it was only a matter of hours. Indeed, she cannot live to see the priest we have summoned from the Continent. He will travel night and day, but he cannot reach Dover till six o'clock to-morrow night."

"A priest from the Continent?"

"Yes, Father Relly; he was her confessor years ago. She desired to see him, and the Church is always kind, especially kind to the dying."

She spoke the name naturally. Evidently she did not know of Lancaster's former relations with the man.

"But she hopes to live in order that she may see this—this priest?"

"Yes, but it is impossible for her to live so long—the doctor told me this himself. I would not have told you what I have, had I not known that she must be dead before now. This is God's message to you, Norman Lancaster. He is telling you not to do battle with Him again, but to come back to the Church."

Lancaster made no reply. Perhaps he never heard the closing words of the woman's answer.

"And Father Ritzoom?" he said; "has she seen him?"

"No, she would not. He sent for Father Relly before leaving London. He is in Ireland now; he will be here to-morrow—at

any rate, during the next few days."

She did not mean to tell Lancaster so much, but he seemed to drag the words from her in spite of herself. For some time he did not speak, and although the woman watched him closely she could discern no particular expression on his face save that of stern thoughtfulness.

Presently he held out his hand. "Goodbye," he said. "I wish you well. I should never have seen Constance but for you; and my love, hopeless though it is, has made me a better man."

"It is sinful," said the nun, "even as hers was."

He caught the purport of her words, but he seemed to take no note of it. Inwardly he rejoiced, because they told him that Constance had loved him to the last.

"No, my love was not sinful, neither was yours for Jack Gray."

She did not answer him, except that her eyes looked pleadingly into his.

"I saw him a few days ago. I spoke to him," he went on. "I pitied him."

"Why?" The word escaped her in spite of herself.

"He has the stamp of death upon him; he will not live long."

The woman continued to look on him with a stony stare.

"He cannot play fast and loose with his vows," went on Lancaster quietly. "He is trying to be true to his creed, but he cannot."

"Why?" Again she uttered the word, seemingly like an automaton.

"Because he has brains, and his critical faculties are not quite dead."

The woman sighed.

"His heart isn't dead, either."

"Goodbye," said the nun, and without another word they parted, never to meet again in this life. She went to her own room and locked her door. She did not appear for several hours afterwards, and for the next few days the nuns wondered at her kindness, for usually she was harsh and stern; neither could they understand the piteous expression in her eyes.

No sooner had Norman Lancaster left the convent than he jumped into the conveyance that awaited him.

"The nearest railway station, and go like mad," he said to the driver. Then he took "Bradshaw" from his pocket and began to study it. He seemed in no hurry, but he was evidently much interested.

When he reached Dublin it was late at night, but he did not seem in the least tired. He gave his orders to the cabby quietly, and half an hour later he was on the deck of a boat which steamed out from North Wall.

When the vessel got out in the open sea he went down to the saloon and threw himself on the broad bench which had been placed for the convenience of the passengers. Others lay near him, most of whom slept soundly, but Lancaster never closed his eyes. He was thinking quietly; possibly the dread news which the nun had imparted to him filled his mind, but there was no look of despair in his eyes.

He had been lying for an hour or more when one of the servants of the company passed him.

" 'Continental Bradshaw,' " he said.

The man seemed to resent the peremptory order, but he brought the book, nevertheless, and then smiled as he saw the shilling which Lancaster had put in his hand.

"Some gentlemen say a great deal and give nothin'," thought the man. "This one says little, but he's good for a bob for all that."

Lancaster examined the time-table carefully, and presently closed it with a sigh of satisfaction.

When he arrived in London he did not go to his house.

"Holborn Viaduct Station," he said to the cabby; and then, although he had not slept for the night, he looked out on the cold, dreary-looking streets with a smile almost of contentment.

"It is a wonderful thing, this belief in God," he said to himself.

Some hours later he stood on the pier at Dover watching the boat come in. The month was April and the days were lengthening, but the evening was chilly, nevertheless. Looking through a pair of field-glasses, he saw the Customs officer examining the passengers' luggage, and he searched eagerly for the man he wanted. Presently he ceased looking; evidently he was content.

A few minutes later the boat drew up beside the pier, and Lancaster watched while the people struggled to reach the gangway. It is for ever the same. When people are boarding a boat, there is a struggle as to who shall get on first, and there is always the same struggle to be the first to land.

"Relly, how are you?" Lancaster spoke as though he had parted from the man the day before.

"Mr.—Mr. Lancaster!" gasped the priest to whom he spoke.

"Yes, come with me."

He led him to the door of the railway carriage.

"Excuse me, I am travelling third-class," objected the priest.

"I have secured first-class tickets," said Lancaster. "Get in; it is all right."

Relly did as he was told. Evidently Lancaster had not lost his old power over him.

Lancaster called the guard to him. "Will the train be crowded?" he said.

"Middling, sir."

"Only middling; that's right. I wish to reserve this carriage."

"How many are you, sir?" asked the guard, looking in.

"Two."

"Can't be done, sir."

"Yes, it can," said Lancaster, holding a golden coin between his thumb and forefinger.

"I'll do my best, sir."

A few minutes later the boat express had started for London. Lancaster was alone in the carriage with Relly, and the guard had pocketed the sovereign.

The two men talked earnestly together; the priest excitedly protesting, Lancaster speaking quietly, but decidedly. Before they had reached Herne Hill it was evident that the layman had conquered the priest, and that the latter had acceded to the wishes of the other.

"Your orders were to go straight to the convent?" said Lancaster, after the tickets had been collected at Herne Hill.

"Yes."

"No one is expecting you at any particular time?"

"No."

"You received a telegram?"

"Yes."

"There could be no objection to my seeing it?"

"N—o, I suppose not," and he took it from his pocket.

Lancaster read it.

"*Come to Sacred Heart, London, immediately. Dying confession, urgent, or too late.*—RITZOOM."

"That is all, I suppose?" queried Lancaster.

"That is all; but we may meet Ritzoom any minute, then——" and the eyes of the priest dropped feebly.

"No, we shall not meet him."

"Why?"

"He is in Ireland."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, quite."

Relly gave a sigh of relief.

Presently they reached Lancaster's house. It was quite dark, and although Lancaster looked around suspiciously, there was no sign of any one watching.

"This must be done at once," he said. "God grant we may not be too late as it is."

Relly began to protest feebly.

"I thought we had settled all that business," said the other quietly. "Why waste words?"

"Come this way," continued Lancaster, and he went to his bedroom, followed by Relly.

A few minutes later they again sat in the Englishman's study. The one quiet, reticent, but apparently determined and fearless; the other fearful, excited, and apprehensive.

"This is of the devil, I tell you," said the priest. "No good can come of it. We shall both suffer the torments of the damned because of it."

Lancaster laughed quietly, but he was nevertheless terribly anxious.

"Oh, you laugh. You are a Protestant; you do not believe in the sacred offices of the priesthood."

"Neither do you."

"How dare you!"

"Neither do you. You try to believe that you believe; but all the soul is gone out of your faith. It is only education, habit, that holds you fast. Now, tell me."

"No, I will not. I will not. Oh! I dare not, Mr. Lancaster."

"I will do all the daring."

"But I shall have to suffer."

"No; I will undertake all the suffering."

"But you cannot. Give it up, I say."

"No, I shall not give it up. If all the Popes that ever lived at the Vatican were here, if all the Cardinals who elected them were here by their side, and if unitedly they poured out all the curses which your Church has stored up in its vocabulary, it would make no difference to me."

"Then I *will* not tell you."

"Yes, you will."

Relly was silent.

"I am waiting," said Lancaster quietly.

"It is no use, I tell you. It is impossible. The fraud would be detected in five minutes—less."

"No, it will not be detected. Man," and he took hold of Relly's arm with a grip of steel, "nothing shall stop me, nothing. Surely you know me by this. All these fears of yours are merely wind, the superstitions of Paganism, the hobgoblins of children. Tell me."

Again the priest was mastered, but he continued to protest feebly. "I cannot, I cannot," he said.

"You will bless me some day because I have persisted," said Lancaster, "and I will bless you. I am asking life of you, man, life! life! I am determined, desperate! I shall soon become dangerous. Tell me quickly, for time flies. If your hesitation results in making me too late—good God! man, do not trifle with me!"

Relly began to speak at first confusedly and stammeringly, but presently to more purpose. Lancaster constantly stopped him and asked questions. Each of these was to the point, penetrating and important.

"Can you remember it all?" asked the priest when he had finished.

"Remember?" said Lancaster, "remember? You will know some day!"

"But you will be able to make them believe that you are—that is——"

"I am able to do anything," said Lancaster. His voice was husky, he was pale to the lips, and his eyes burnt with a strange light. "Anything!" he repeated.

"I believe you can," said Relly. "You are cleverer than Ritzoom himself. I believe you could make even him afraid."

"God grant we may not be too late," was the answer. "If we are——" He did not speak the thoughts in his mind, but the priest shuddered as he caught his expression.

"Now, then, you will stay here," continued Lancaster. "Mind, you must not leave the house till you hear from me again."

"No," replied Relly with a shiver; "I will not leave this room till you come back."

Lancaster looked at him steadily and seemed satisfied.

Some time later a man dressed as a Jesuit priest came up to the gates of a building called The Convent of the Sacred Heart. He was clean-shaven, after the order of Roman Catholic clergymen, and wore his clerical attire like one who for many years had been accustomed to the garb. He did not, however, carry himself like an Englishman. He had a habit of shrugging his shoulders in a way peculiar to Italians. When he spoke, moreover, his accent was suggestive of an Englishman who had lived for many years on the Continent. He was evidently acquainted with the ways of convents, and he entered like one having authority. He spoke to the portress at the lodge as one who was in the habit of being obeyed, and presently, when he stood in the presence of the Reverend Mother Superior, he immediately commanded her attention.

"It has been a matter of night and day travelling," he said. "I trust I am not too late."

"I am afraid you are, father."

"She is not dead?" His voice was husky and he seemed deeply moved.

"I am not sure; the sister said a good while since that it was only a matter of minutes. But all is well. She has received the sacred rites of the Church."

"But I am come to hear her confession. Take me to her," and he handed her some papers.

"I will take you to her, but she has been unconscious for many hours."

The man spoke no word, but by a gesture bade the Mother Superior take him to the cell where the nun lay dying.

He followed the abbess along a corridor with footsteps as noiseless as her own, neither of them speaking.

Presently a nun met them.

"Have you come from Sister Constance?" asked the Mother Superior.

The sister replied that she had.

"Is she still alive?"

"Just alive, Reverend Mother."

"Is she conscious?"

"No, she is just as she has been for hours; but there is a smile on her lips as though she expected some one."

"God is good," said the priest. "He has kept her alive that I may hear her confession and grant her peace."

There was an evident note of conviction in his voice, and the woman believed him implicitly.

"She was told that you were sent for," said the Mother Superior.

A minute later they stood at the door of a room. Without hesitating a second the priest opened it and looked eagerly

around.

By the side of a narrow bed knelt two nuns, who were evidently praying; on the bed lay the form of a woman.

A minute later the man and the dying woman were alone in the narrow cell.

CHAPTER XXVIII

I AM glad I was able to come with you," said Ritzoom to Father Gray, as side by side the two men made their way to the Convent of Our Lady of Good Counsel.

"Yes; and it is good of you to come," said Gray with a sigh. "I could scarcely have dared to come alone."

"Why?"

"In spite of what you say, it will be a terrible ordeal. It will be resurrecting the past; it will bring back the days when I was young and ambitious, and when she was beautiful."

Ritzoom laughed as though he enjoyed the situation.

"You are young still," he said presently.

"In years, yes; but I feel so old, so very, very old. Look! my hair is quite grey."

"While I, who am fifteen years, aye, twenty years, your senior, have scarcely a grey hair," replied Ritzoom pleasantly. "It is good to have implicit faith and a contented mind."

"You have never been in love," said Gray. "You were kept free from such temptations in your youth. You have always been safe in the bosom of the Church. From your boyhood you understood your vocation and learnt to live for it."

"Yes," replied Ritzoom quietly. "I have been saved from making a fool of myself in that direction."

"A fool of yourself?"

"Yes. I've been a priest for many years, but I have kept my eyes open. I have heard hundreds of confessions from married men and women, with the result that I am thoroughly converted to a belief in single blessedness."

"But the marriage sacrament?"

"Oh, it's necessary. The world is full of fools, and fools will marry. This is providential; the race would die out else. As far as comfort goes, however, even were I not sworn to celibacy, I should, for the sake of comfort, keep away from the marriage altar."

"Why?"

"Because women change so."

"How change?"

"Oh, when they are young they are gay, companionable, fascinating; but when they are married they grow sour and querulous—to their husbands."

"You are a cynic."

"Every man who has studied women is. Supposing you had not taken the step you have taken; suppose you had wedded —well, you would either be an embittered, disappointed man, or you would have called philosophy to your aid, and said in your heart, 'Well, I am disillusioned, the whole thing is a miserable failure, but I may as well take life as comfortable as possible.' Then you would have, perhaps, become interested in politics. You would be a great club man, and spend as little time in the society of your wife as possible. Be thankful, my dear fellow, that you are an avowed celibate."

Evidently Ritzoom had some purpose in speaking like this, for he watched Gray's face closely, and with a questioning smile.

"Then why was marriage instituted?"

"First, in order to continue the race; and, secondly, as a means of discipline for men;" and again the priest laughed.

Gray's face showed that he was thinking deeply on what the older man had said. Presently, however, he heaved a sigh as though he had grave doubts.

"I little thought I should come back like this years ago," he said presently.

"The unexpected always happens," replied Ritzoom. "Let us go and see Father Shannon first."

Gray made no reply, and the two men walked to the institution where Gray had spent two years and had learned the lessons which fashioned his life in after years.

"It seems as though I were coming here for the first time," said Gray, as they stood at the door and looked around. "That which has happened since might only be a dream."

"But it is not a dream."

"No," said Gray with a movement that looked like a shudder; "my God! it is not."

"Be thankful," said Ritzoom. "Ah, here comes some one."

A few minutes later they were alone with Father Shannon. The old priest looked but little altered since the time Gray had

been a novice. His hair was rather more tinged with white, and his form a trifle more bent, otherwise he was the same kind-looking, inoffensive man. His eyes were still mild and his manner hesitating, as it had been for many years.

"You do not alter," said Ritzoom.

"No, I do not alter much," replied Father Shannon with a sigh. "I grow older. I am not so active as I was, but otherwise I feel just the same."

"That's right."

"Nothing happens to alter me, you know," went on the old priest. "One year is just the same as another—spring, summer, autumn, winter. Each spring we look for the bursting of the buds, and each autumn we see the leaves fall. In the summer it is hot, and in the winter it is cold—and—that is all."

"Well, what then, as long as you are happy?"

"Oh, nothing. It's all a matter of habit. Life is simply a habit in a monastery, and so—everything comes easy."

Gray looked at the old priest with great interest. Years before he had regarded him with awe; he had looked upon him as a man speaking with the voice of God. Now that he had become a priest himself he saw Father Shannon's humanness. He was only an ordinary, simple-minded old man. He was the result of a system, and he could not help feeling how little and how narrow his life was.

"And you, Brother Gray," said the old man turning to the young priest, "you have not disappointed our hopes. It is but little we hear of the world here, but we have seen accounts of your triumphs. You have become a great preacher, and crowds flock to hear you."

"Yes," replied Gray, with a sigh.

"Well, such a life has its temptations and its drawbacks. You must be sorely tempted to be proud and vainglorious. Here we are saved from all such trials; here the man is nothing."

"No," acquiesced Gray.

"Still, the Church needs defenders, eloquent missioners. Do you know I have been looking for news that you have engaged some big hall somewhere, and have given a series of lectures on the *rationale* of Catholicism. I know but little of the intellectual life of England, but such a work is surely necessary." Gray thought of what he had said in the sermon to which Lancaster had listened, but he said nothing. "I used to have dreams myself of such an enterprise," went on Father Shannon, "but I was unfitted for it. I never could meet difficulties, and it is so much easier to live an undoubting life. After all, the great thing for Protestants is just to accept the Church, then everything follows."

And so the old man meandered on. He had no enthusiasms, and he knew nothing of the thoughts which were seething in the minds of men.

"Do you know anything of that young man—Lancaster, I think you called him—who visited you here years ago?" he asked presently.

"Yes, I saw him a few days ago. He came to hear me preach."

"Ah, that is well. It must have been a great opportunity for him. Has God granted him grace?"

"He is still a Protestant," replied Gray, with a sigh.

"Ah, it is very sad. He was a sore temptation to you years ago; but God gave you grace. The Church has also been very kind to you and blessed the decision you made. You are free from the vanities of the world."

Gray did not answer, while Ritzoom watched the two men with an amused smile.

"It gives us great joy that England is being converted," went on Father Shannon.

"England converted?"

"Yes; our papers are full of accounts of conversions to our faith. It is pleasant reading. Of course, our enemies say that we magnify conversions and minimise the perverts, but that is impossible."

Again Ritzoom smiled at the old man's words.

"What made me think of that Mr. Lancaster was the fact that he called on the Reverend Mother at Our Lady of Good Counsel yesterday," went on the old man quietly.

"What?" cried the two men in the same breath.

"Oh, yes; it is quite true. I was rather surprised that she saw him, remembering what took place years ago; but doubtless she acted wisely. She revealed to him the fact that the spirit is stronger than the flesh."

After this the two paid but little attention to the old man's prosy talk, and a little later they were on their way to the convent.

"Why should Lancaster go there?" asked Gray excitedly, when they had left Father Shannon.

"I'm thinking," replied Ritzoom.

"But can you think to any purpose?"

The older man was some time before he replied. "He must have found out that she has been in London," he said at length.

"Who in London?"

"The Reverend Mother."

"Ah!"

"You did not know?"

"No. I knew nothing. But you knew?"

"It's my business to know everything. In your conversation with Lancaster, you gave no hint that Sister Constance was in London?"

"No," replied Gray, and he thought he was speaking truly.

"Ah, well, it does not matter."

"No."

Ritzoom shut his lips with a snap, and he spoke no further on the question.

"We can ask the—the Mother Superior presently?" remarked Gray.

"No, we must ask her nothing."

"Why?"

"One gets to know so little by asking."

As they neared the convent Gray evidently became much excited, and Ritzoom watched him furtively, without the other thinking that he was an object of attention.

A few minutes later Gray met Gertrude Winthrop. They had parted as lovers who had quarrelled; and met, long years after, he as a priest and she as a nun. When they lived in the world he was buoyant, eager, enthusiastic, while she was gay and witty and beautiful. Then they both had the roses of youth and health on their cheeks; now, although they were still young in years, they were old at heart. The man was disillusioned, his sky was clouded, his vision was dimmed. Faith he had, but it was not reasoning faith, based upon conviction; rather it was a blind acceptance of certain dogmas on the authority of what often seemed shadowy and unreal. The woman, too, was changed from the whole-hearted, high-spirited girl he had known and loved. Her eyes were hard, her face looked soured. Her skin was as white as bone, and her thin lips were drawn as if with pain. She was like the old Gertrude Winthrop, and yet an impassable gulf seemed to lie between the girl he had known and the nun who stood before him. The difference he saw was not so much to be described as felt. Her world seemed narrower, her sky was lower, her vision was limited. Her every movement betokened the influence of her Order. When she spoke her voice seemed to have a metallic edge to it. It was the same woman, only that a great part of her was dead. Her features were still fine, but they seemed rather to suggest a statue than a living woman. The eyes were not those of a woman who feared and thought and dared and loved; they belonged rather to a woman who *had* lived, but who now simply existed.

All this came like a shock to him, and presently he felt as though a cold hand were laid upon his heart. True, she stood before him in the flesh, but she was only a corpse of what she had been. Some of the nuns he had met during the time he had been a priest were fat, contented, cheerful women who accepted their destiny with patient resignation, and were negatively happy in living the life they believed best pleasing to God. Others, again, were enthusiastic for their faith, eager to make converts, and who believed that they saw visions of God. But Gertrude Winthrop was different. That she was a devoted Catholic none could doubt, but she was one who lived entirely by rule and order. It seemed to him that a great part of her nature had been starved to death, while the other part had been hardened and stereotyped. In short, she was no longer a woman, but a machine.

Once he longed to kiss her lips when he saw them, and his heart burnt with a great love as he looked into her eyes. And the love, he knew, was pure, and free from all coarseness of thought. But now he would not kiss those lips, even if he knew it were not sin; and his heart, instead of glowing and throbbing with love, became cold and dead. The change was not so much in him as in her. Gertrude Winthrop, as he had known her, had ceased to be.

And was the nun better, purer, nobler than the woman? Were her thoughts, her life, more Christ-like? As a Jesuit priest, he dared not face the question.

The two priests and the Mother Superior talked together, but there was no reality in their words. Gray was cured of his passion. Gertrude Winthrop would never be a source of temptation to him again. He would never think of her now as the maiden he longed to marry; he was a priest, and she was a nun—and that was all.

Ritzoom watched them closely. He seemed to study them just as a physician might study an interesting case. He had known the nun as a woman, he had known the priest as a man. He had understood their natures then, and had anticipated the result of the monastic system upon their lives. He knew that the system operated differently on different characters; but he had not been mistaken in his estimate as to how it would affect them.

Presently the Mother Superior left the room for a few minutes, and then, fastening his keen, penetrating eyes on the younger man, he spoke to him.

"Well?" he said, smiling. "And how now?"

Gray wiped away the cold moisture which gathered on his forehead.

"My God!" he said presently.

"Did I not tell you?" queried Ritzoom.

"Yes, yes, you told me; but——"

"But what, my friend?"

"She is dead—and—and so am I!"

Ritzoom laughed quietly. "The Church is powerful as she is wise."

"Yes," replied Gray, his face set and stony. He was picturing what the woman Gertrude Winthrop might have been had she remained a woman, and had become the mother of happy, romping children.

"You will be able to give your whole heart to your work now?" continued Ritzoom.

"Yes, all the heart I've got," replied the young priest; and then he looked out of the window, but he saw nothing of the beauteous landscape, where tree and flower were bursting into the life of early spring.

"You get but few visitors, I suppose?" queried Ritzoom, when the Mother Superior returned.

A pink tinge coloured the woman's cheek.

"Very few," she replied, looking on the floor; but she knew that Ritzoom's eyes were upon her.

"I had one yesterday," she went on presently.

Neither of the men spoke, although Ritzoom continued to look at her.

"You know him, I think—Mr. Norman Lancaster."

"Indeed," and then Ritzoom waited.

"He would still destroy our Sister Constance's soul, if he could."

"That is very sad."

"But she is out of danger now? You have not heard if she is dead, have you?"

"No."

"Nor whether Father Relly reached her in time to hear her confession?"

"No."

"I suppose it was natural that she should want to see him. But I was sorry to hear it. It showed that—that she still remembered. I was sorry afterwards that I told him that he was sent for. I was foolish to grant him an interview at all, I am afraid. Still, it can do no harm now. Do you think so? He quite accepted the fact that she was dead; but it makes him hate the Church more."

"He is a very pronounced unbeliever?"

"Yes; and he has such a strong personality. He makes you say more than you intended. But I had to be polite to him for the sake of—his salvation."

"Doubtless you were wise. It is best to speak freely to such men. I was always very frank with him when I had to do with him years ago."

"Yes, I felt that, and I was afraid afterwards that I told him too much. But still, nothing can harm now. She is safe. The Church has guarded her own faithfully. Would—would you like some refreshment?"

"No, thank you. And that reminds me I have an engagement. I must be going now. You may hear from me again. All is going well with you here, I trust?"

"Oh, yes."

A few minutes later they were outside the convent walls.

"The woman is dead, she is dead," repeated Gray, like one in a dream, as he walked by Ritzoom's side.

"No, she is not," said Ritzoom testily; "I wish she were. She would not be such a fool then."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we must go back to England, to London, as though the Furies were behind us!"

"What?"

"Just that."

"But why?"

"Because Lancaster has got too much out of her. He is a cleverer fellow than I gave him credit for."

"I do not understand."

"But I do. Can't you see the purport of his conversation with her? I have made a fool of myself, Gray."

"How?"

"In sending for Relly."

"But it cannot matter. Nothing can possibly happen; she is dead before this. Besides——"

"The impossible is always happening. You do not know Lancaster. As for women——" And Ritzoom lapsed into silence.

A few hours later both were on the deck of a steamer bound from Dublin to Holyhead, and Ritzoom had an anxious look in his eyes.

CHAPTER XXIX

SISTER CONSTANCE was dying. The doctor who visited her said that her life was only a matter of hours, and she had received the last rites of the Church. It was a surprise to all that she lingered so long. For the last twelve months she had grown weaker and weaker. She, who had been beauteous in her perfect health, had wasted away almost to a shadow. She suffered no pain, and the doctors could not discover any disease. She seemed to die because she had no interest in living.

For years her life had been regarded as most exemplary, and the Mother Superior spoke of her as one of the most obedient, the most saintly nuns in the convent. She was never known to laugh, but that was not expected among the "religious," and mirthfulness was not encouraged. Rather it was an evidence of the carnal mind. Sometimes she smiled, but the smile was wan and weary.

Until a few days before the doctor had given the death sentence, no light of hope had shone in her eyes. Day by day the same look of patient, resigned hopelessness was revealed in her every movement. Some of the younger nuns thought that she was dying of a broken heart. But she revealed nothing; her despair was mute; her trouble, if she had any, was locked up in her own breast.

Possibly her health had been broken down by severe penance. For some time after she had attempted escape in the north of London, the Church was very stern with her, and stringent means were used to subdue her rebellious spirit. This continued for months, but since that time her life had been comparatively free from pain, and the Mother Superior had treated her with special kindness.

Nevertheless, her life faded away, like flowers fade when summer is gone, until she became as weak and helpless as a babe. When all hope of her recovery had gone, however, a new light had come into her eyes—a light of hope and expectancy. When she was told that she would die, she had only expressed one wish, and that was to see Father Relly, and the Mother Superior had persuaded Father Ritzoom to telegraph without delay. Relly was entirely unknown in the convent, but preparations to receive him without delay were made, nevertheless. He was a priest, and he had been summoned to hear the last confession of a dying sister.

Thus it was that, when the priest came in the way we have described, he was immediately shown into the dying nun's cell, and every one had departed, for a dying confession is especially sacred.

When the priest was left alone with the nun he looked long and steadily at her, and his eyes shone with the light of fierce anger mingled with pity. He was still a young man, perhaps thirty-seven years of age. His face was dark and cleanly shaven but his actions were not those of a priest, nevertheless.

He knelt down by the nun's side and took her thin, wasted hands in his. She moved slightly and her lips trembled.

"Constance!" he whispered, "Constance!"

"What?" It was only a faint whisper, but he heard it.

"I am come at last."

"But you are not Father Relly?"

"No; don't you know me?"

The touch of his hands, the sound of his voice seemed to revive her. A faint tinge of colour mounted her pale cheeks; her eyes became brighter.

"I waited so long, so very long, and the days were weary, weary, weary," she said, like one dreaming. "I had no heart to disobey. I was told that he was dead, and still I loved him. The priests all told me it was sin, but I felt no sin. It wasn't sin, was it?"

"No, my darling, my queen, it was not sin. God spoke to your heart."

"What do you mean? Who dares to speak to me like that? No one but—but—and he is dead."

"No, no, not dead, I am——Don't you know me, Constance? Don't you remember those meetings in the convent garden? Don't you remember when we kissed each other?"

"Yes, yes; I shall never forget—never. They say it is a sin, but I shall never forget—never."

"And that night when I carried you down the ladder, and——"

"Yes, yes; it is beautiful to dream of it—beautiful I know I am dreaming now—that presently all will become blank again. But oh, I love to dream—to dream! Then my king always comes back to me strong and well. When I awake he is lying in the cold grave."

"But, Constance, my beloved, you are awake now, and I am come back, and I will take you away from here, and we will be together, you and I, and you shall be my wife."

"They told me I was going to die," she said, smiling, "and they told me I must confess everything before I passed away. But there was only one priest to whom I could talk about my secret. I told him years ago, just before I saw *him*, that which I have told no other confessor, so——But you are not a priest; I know I am only dreaming. I think I shall not wake again till I wake in Paradise."

"But you are awake, my beautiful."

"No, I am not beautiful now. I was once; he told me. He said my voice was sweet, too, sweet as the singing of birds, as the rippling of running waters. I know it was not true; but he believed it, and I was glad. I rejoiced in being beautiful for him. It was all sinful, they said. But it was not; and they were very cruel to keep us apart."

She was beginning to be excited now. An influence was at work which was arousing her from her lethargy. She seemed to dwell half-way between the world of shadows and the world of reality.

"It was cruel, it was cruel," said the man; "but I am come back to you."

"It will all pass away presently, and then all will be as nothing again. Norman is dead. I never heard his name but once—Norman Lancaster—but I have not forgotten it. He is dead, but you speak like him. It is all a dream, but your voice is very beautiful because it is like his voice."

"It is his voice; I am he. I have searched for you ever since—ever since. I have been all over Europe. I have tried every means in my power to find you, and I have come to you at last. I feared I might be too late. I am Norman Lancaster, and I love you still, love you more and more. Look up again! I am come back to you."

"What?"

The nun's eyes shone with a brighter light; the dreamy look departed. Reason, will, struggled into being; she was awaking from her sleep of death.

"It is I, Norman Lancaster! Cannot you feel, my beloved? I hold your hands; I speak to you. I am not a dream; I am real, my beautiful. I am come to you. I love you more and more—more and more."

"No, no, it cannot be; Norman is dead. And yet—yes, I feel your hands. I—I hear your voice. You are real—and you love me still?"

"Yes, yes."

"But I am in a convent, and you—you are dressed like a priest!"

"Only to gain admission. Listen! I met Father Relly; I borrowed his garb; I shaved my face; but I am your lover, your husband that will be."

The colour deepened on her cheeks; her nerves tingled with life new born.

"It cannot be," she said in a louder voice; "it is too good—too good. It would be heaven here—heaven here."

"It is true. Don't you know I kissed you once? May I kiss you again, my love, my wife?"

"Norman! Norman!"

"Yes, Norman."

He pressed his mouth on the woman's lips and kissed her passionately. All the years of pent-up sorrow, of weary waiting, of racking anxiety, of disappointed hopes, of bitter despair, were in that kiss—aye, and all the love of which he dared not speak, all the raging fires of a mighty passion, and the determination to snatch her even from the cruel maw of death, went out in that kiss.

"My love! my beautiful! my wife!" he said; "you shall not die! I have prayed that you shall not die! God has sent me that you may not die! There! There!"

"No, no," she panted, "I shall not die! No, I shall not die! I shall live! Yes, you are come for me! You love me; you are not dead!"

She freed her hands from his and wreathed her arms round his neck. Then she looked into the face and drew it close to hers.

"Yes, you *are* he—you *are* he. You *have* come to me—you *have* come to me—and I shall live!"

By an effort that would have been regarded as impossible an hour before, she lifted her face to his and kissed him passionately.

"My love, my love, my king!" she cried. "Yes, I am awake, I am alive, I am not dreaming, I am holding you! You are here, brought back from the dead!"

Hopelessness, gnawing despair, had nearly killed her, but love, love with hope, revived the spark of life within her. God had given her new life through the man on whom she bestowed her heart.

"O God, I thank Thee!" sobbed Lancaster. "Oh, I thank Thee! Thou art not dead! Thou dost not forget me. And Thou wilt help me, because Thou hast saved her for me. And I will serve Thee, I will, I will!"

She lay panting upon the scanty pillow, her eyes burning with joy, and as Lancaster looked on her a great pity filled his

heart, even while his heart burned with a mightier love than he had ever felt before. She was so thin, so white, so weak. The new-found strength was passing away, the blood was receding from her cheeks.

A great dread came into his heart, and with it a desire for action.

"I must take you away from here," he cried.

"Yes, yes, but not yet, not yet. I am so happy, so happy! Let me live in the blissful present. My Norman is here—my husband!"

"Thank God! But I have brought with me a strong restorative. I prepared it myself. I have studied medicine. It will give you strength."

"No, no; not now. I do not need it. You have given me strength. God loves me—He is not angry—He will forgive me. Won't He, Norman?"

"There is nothing to forgive. You are pure, my queen, as pure as the driven snow."

"Yes, I used to think it was a sin to love you; but it is not. I know it now. God told me days ago. Yes, yes—oh, I am so happy!"

And still she lay smiling, her face as pale as death, but her eyes still shining with a steady light.

"Am I beautiful still, Norman? I am afraid I have grown old and wan. And my arms are so thin!"

"More beautiful than ever, my love; but let me give you this cordial. It will give you strength."

"Do you wish it? Oh, then I will take it. I will live for you now. God tells me that, and I will love God more in loving you."

He poured a few drops of liquid from a phial and placed them to her lips. It was a strong and potent restorative. In a few seconds the blood came back to her cheeks.

"I do not need it, Norman," she said, smiling. "I am quite strong, I shall not die; but you wish it—that is enough."

Nevertheless, what he had given her aroused her to a new sense of life. She became fearful for him, she realised the difficulties by which they were surrounded.

"You will have to go out, and then you will have to leave me," she said piteously. "I cannot live without you."

"I will do all. Trust me, do not be afraid," he said, like one who had no doubts concerning his own powers. "I must leave you for a little while. You believe in me, don't you?"

"Yes, yes, I believe in you." And she smiled into his strong, confident face.

"Are you strong enough to hear my plans?" he asked. "You will need to know them, that you may be able to help me. I would not trouble you now, only you can never be really mine till I take you away from here."

"Yes, I am strong; I can listen."

He whispered in her ear what he would have her do, and she, with new life throbbing within her breast at every breath she drew, listened to his words.

"Do you understand?" he said at length.

"Yes, yes, I understand. I can do anything now. Oh, to live, to be free, to be with you! Yes, yes, I will do all you tell me."

It was pathetic to see her. She was so weak, so thin, and yet her lover's presence made her feel that nothing was impossible.

"And now I must leave you for a little while," he said presently; "only for a little while."

"You are sure you will come back to me, Norman?"

"Yes, my beloved, very soon."

"Kiss me again, will you?—and tell—tell me again what you told me—that night in the convent garden."

He kissed her tenderly. "You surely do not need that I should tell you that I love you?" he said. "Why, life has, but for the love of God, been only a mockery without you. You know I love you, my queen, don't you?"

"Yes, yes, I know, I know; only I like to hear you telling me so. There, I will wait now, and I will be happy while you are away. Do not fear for me, Norman. Do not think I shall be ill while you are gone. You must not trouble about me one little bit. I shall be well, while you are thinking for me."

The true woman shone out in spite of long years of living death. Her love made her anxious that Lancaster should not worry concerning her. Even at that moment she thought less of herself than of him.

"And you will let no one harm you?"

"No one. And you will be happy? I shall be gone but a little while, and you believe I will do what I have told you?"

"Oh, yes; you can do anything." Her confidence in him was beyond question.

A few minutes later he stood in the corridor. He could see no one, and all was silent. Evidently the nuns had obeyed him to the letter. He walked along the corridor towards the door of the Mother Superior's apartments. His steps echoed each time his feet touched the uncarpeted floor.

Presently the two sisters who had knelt by Constance's bedside appeared.

"Is she gone?" they questioned, more by look than word.

"No," he answered, "she has revived somewhat, and was able to speak to me. But I must see her again. Meanwhile she

must be left in perfect quietness. Ah, here is the Reverend Mother."

He spoke In low, quick tones, but his voice had no tremor.

"It is necessary that I leave the convent for a time, perhaps for an hour," he said; and then he told what he wished done for him.

The Mother Superior listened carefully and asked no questions.

"It shall be as you say, Father Relly," she made answer.

"And there is no need for any one to watch by her," he continued. "I am a doctor as well as a priest, and I know. She will not die to-night. I am sure of that. I go to get her a powerful restorative; it will give her strength to make her confession."

"Do you mean to say that she will live?" asked the Mother Superior.

He shook his head. "You cannot keep her long," he said; "she will soon have left you. But she will be far happier. All is well."

The nuns crossed themselves. He did not use the language common to the priests on such occasions; but they never doubted him. He had been living for years in Italy, they thought, and had learnt foreign ways.

"You need rest," he said; "take it. Do not trouble about me. I shall soon be back; she needs all the strength I can give her to make her confession, and she needs much consolation before she leaves you. You quite understand what I have told you?"

"The Father seems a wonderful man," said the Abbess when he had gone. "A wonderful man. No wonder our Sister desired him. He is wise, too. Go to rest, my daughters; you need sleep after your vigils, and I will sleep, too. I am no good through the day if I do not sleep soundly through the night."

The Mother Superior spoke truly. She was a good woman, and honest. She believed in her Church with an undoubting faith, and she fulfilled her duties as Abbess with praiseworthy diligence. But she had not so far conquered the flesh as to be able to do without her sleep.

She yawned as she went to her room, while the Sisters whose duty it was to kneel and pray by Constance went gladly to their rest.

They opened the door of her cell as they passed along and looked in. The face of Constance was pale to the lips, and her eyes had an unearthly light in them. She lay as still as though she were dead.

The nuns passed on, and soon after silence reigned.

Meanwhile Lancaster went to the portress at the lodge and gave her instructions. The woman was half asleep and scarcely understood what he said. She was an Irishwoman, and revealed the fact in her speech.

"Leave the gate unlocked? All right, your reverence. Yes, I understand."

Two hours after Lancaster entered again. The arrangements he had made with the Mother Superior enabled him to do this without difficulty.

He had obtained the key of a side entrance, and the door was not far from the cell where Sister Constance lay. Under his Jesuit's gown he evidently carried a bundle of some sort; but the corridor was dimly lighted, and it was entirely deserted.

He entered the cell of sister Constance with a fast-beating heart.

"Norman?" she said, as he entered.

"Yes; all is well. Can you bear it—now—immediately? Tell me, my love?"

"Yes—oh, I feel stronger—so strong, Norman!"

Again he gave her a few drops of the liquid he had brought, and again the colour came to her cheeks.

"I have brought a long cloak—very long. It will cover you from head to foot."

He placed the long cloak over a great part of the bedclothes, and then wrapped it round her.

"Can you place your arms round my neck?" he asked.

"Yes, Norman, yes." She seemed to delight in lingering on the name. "Can you carry me?"

He lifted her in his arms as though she were a feather. Indeed, she was scarcely heavier than a child.

"Yes," he said with fierce joy, "I can carry you. God be praised! I have come to you in time."

He pulled the hood of the cloak round her head and so arranged the folds that she was completely enveloped.

"You are sure you are strong enough?" he asked tenderly.

"Quite sure, Norman. Will it be long before I am free?"

"Not long, not long. God help the man who tries to stop me!" he said under his breath.

With noiseless steps he carried her along the corridor and out of the door by which he had entered.

In spite of her many wrappings she felt the cold night air.

"Are we outside? Am I free?" she asked.

"Outside the convent, but not outside the lodge gates. Courage, my love, do not be afraid!"

"I am not afraid," she whispered; "I am not afraid, but I thought I breathed liberty."

Silently he locked the door. So far he had succeeded. Even if his work were discovered he could not be followed except through the front entrance, and in order to do that the Mother Superior would have to be awakened, for she always had the

keys brought to her. This he knew would take time.

For the first time he felt afraid. He remembered how that once before he had nearly effected the escape of the woman he loved, and how at the last moment all his plans were frustrated. He looked eagerly around and listened. All was silent. At that moment he was a dangerous man.

With swift, silent footsteps he carried Constance towards the gates. Every fibre of his being quivered with the joy of holding her in his arms, and with a great determination to carry her into liberty.

"Are we outside yet? Am I free yet?" she whispered again.

"Nearly, my love. You are sure I am not hurting you?"

"No, Norman, no—and I am so very happy."

The sound of her voice gave him strength and courage, and he strode on with long determined strides. When he reached the gates all was silent and all was in darkness. It would seem as though the portress had retired for the night.

He placed his hand on the fastening of the barrier that stood between him and liberty. It did not yield to his touch, and a great fear came into his heart that the woman had forgotten his behests. He tried again; yes, the gate was locked, and the woman in his arms was even now at the gates of death, only dragged back by the hope he had given her.

What was that?

His heart gave a great leap of joy. The portress, barely understanding, and yet anxious to obey him who was, she believed, a holy priest, had locked the gate, but left the key in the lock.

A minute later he stood outside, the gate was again locked and the key thrown into the garden.

"Are we free, Norman? Am I outside?"

"Yes, my love; thank God you are free!"

"And no one can rob you from me now?"

"No, no one. Thank God!" he ejaculated fervently.

"I am happy. O Holy Mother, I *am* happy!" she whispered. She heaved a deep sigh, and then her arms relaxed, and Lancaster could not feel her heart beat.

With set teeth and eyes that told of a terrible fear he carried her to a carriage which stood in the near distance.

"Home!" he said to the driver, and the carriage moved away into the darkness of night, but in the direction of the lights of the great city.

CHAPTER XXX

NORMAN LANCASTER was sitting again in the room he called his den. He was not reading, nor doing work of any sort; he looked rather like a man who was waiting and expecting. His every sense seemed on the alert. Every few minutes he would rise and go to a door near the room in which he sat and listened, and then come back again with a joyous look in his eyes. Now and then he would exchange whispers with those within the room, asking them eager questions and listening anxiously for the answer. In spite of his fears, however, he was manifestly happy; it was impossible to mistake the fact. Although he had suffered much from loss of sleep and long vigils, he looked ten years younger than he had looked a week before. Sometimes he laughed like a boy, and then again an expression of infinite tenderness would creep over his face, followed by a look of fierce determination.

Presently a knock came to the door. He went to the window and looked out.

"The doctor," he said.

He went and let him in himself; he was too impatient to wait for a servant.

"I thought I would drop in again, Lancaster. I know how anxious you are."

"That is right, Whyte. I am very glad you have come."

Dr. Whyte was a friend of Lancaster's, and had heard as much of his story as Lancaster thought wise to tell. The doctor, moreover, was by religion a Presbyterian, and as a consequence was much in sympathy with what his friend had done.

"Shall I go in with you, Whyte?"

"Not yet; she must not be excited too much. But if it is safe you shall see her."

Lancaster waited outside while the doctor visited his patient. In a few minutes the latter returned.

"Well?" asked Lancaster eagerly.

"Possess your soul in patience, my friend; all is well."

"She will get better?"

The doctor possessed all the caution characteristic of a Scotchman.

"Unless something unforeseen happens, she will be able to get up in a week—at least, that is my opinion," he added slowly.

"Get up? What do you mean?"

"It is, of course, uncertain, but I think she will be able to walk about. She has been near death, but she seems to have been saved as if by a miracle."

"Thank God she has!" cried Lancaster fervently.

"You may go in just for a minute," added the doctor.

Lancaster entered the room quietly. He knelt by the bed there, just as a Catholic devotee might kneel before the figure of the Virgin Mary.

Sister Constance lay as weak as a child, perfectly happy.

"I shall soon be strong, Norman," she whispered.

The young man spoke no word, but held the thin hand which lay on the counterpane.

"You will not be far from me?" she whispered.

"No; I will be always near you. I will let no harm happen to you; I will watch night and day. Now I must go and you must sleep."

"Must I? I am so happy, Norman."

He left the room, and the nurse and his housekeeper entered. He entered his den again. "Thank God! Thank God!" he repeated over and over many times.

Presently the door-bell rang. Again he went to the window and looked out.

"I expected as much," he thought. "Well, better so, better so."

A few seconds later a servant entered bearing two cards.

"Show them in," he said, without looking at the slips of paper, and then he stood still and waited while Father Ritzoom and Jack Gray entered.

"Will you be seated?" said Lancaster quietly.

"Thank you," and the two men sat down.

"Our visit is not unexpected, I imagine?" remarked Ritzoom.

Lancaster made no reply.

"We have come on a serious errand," continued Ritzoom. "Perhaps you can guess what it is?"

"Riddles were never my strong point."

"I suppose you know you have been engaged in a dangerous business?"

Lancaster shrugged his shoulders.

"English law is not fair to Catholics; still, you have put yourself within its clutches."

"Indeed? Well, what then?"

"Why, we shall take advantage of the law, unless——"

"Well, take it."

"You defy us, then?"

Lancaster nodded his head. "Have a cigar?" he continued presently.

"No," said Ritzoom, and then he hesitated; "not just now," he added.

"And you, Jack?" asked Lancaster.

"No, thank you; I do not smoke."

"I should be sorry to take extreme measures," said Ritzoom, presently, "very sorry. Still, for a man to enter a convent, and through lies and fraud to take away——"

"A woman you had nearly killed, and who was given up by your doctor," interposed Lancaster.

"Will she live?" asked Ritzoom, his curiosity for the moment overcoming his evident chagrin.

Lancaster hesitated a moment before replying.

"Hope is very powerful," he said.

"Then she is not dead?"

But Lancaster spoke no word.

"You and I have had a long fight, Mr. Lancaster," said the priest, furtively watching the Englishman.

Lancaster laughed.

"Yes, we have had a long fight. I suppose you think it is ended?"

"I have not given it a thought."

"Oh, I'll give you credit for being a clever fellow, and you've not given up easily."

"No, I never give up."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Still, I did give you credit for possessing a conscience."

"A remarkable concession on your part."

"That woman has taken solemn vows."

Lancaster laughed again.

"You seem merry, Mr. Lancaster. But a solemn vow is a very sacred thing."

Lancaster shrugged his shoulders. "Everything depends," he said. "No one has the right to vow away love, liberty, everything that makes life worth living. Even if they have, it should never be binding when they have found out their mistake. But there, I did not mean to say as much as that. Go on."

"I take it that you are determined?"

Lancaster was silent.

"You will condemn a woman to eternal damnation in order to gratify your sinful passion?"

Lancaster's eyes hardened.

"You happen to be in my house, and you wear the garb of a priest, or——"

"What?" asked Ritzoom.

"Oh, it does not matter; go on."

"Yes, I will go on. You think the game is ended, but it is not."

"No, it is not; but it will be soon."

"You say that an Englishman never gives up. Neither does a Catholic. We follow a soul even to the brink of hell—to save it."

"It is very kind of you to warn me. I will only say one thing, Father Ritzoom—I have said it before, but I will repeat it—I believe you are conscientious in all this. Well, be pleased to credit me with the same virtue."

"I shall be grieved indeed to hear the curse of the Church pronounced, not only on her, but on her soul's destroyer."

Lancaster yawned. "I thought you knew me better than to trot out that," he said quietly.

The priest's eyes flashed angrily, but he mastered himself. "I say I should be sorry for this to happen," said Ritzoom. "I have tried to save her soul, I have tried to appeal to you to relinquish her to the Church. You will not. But you will at least allow

me to free her from the bonds of the Church, and thus save her from eternal fires."

Lancaster looked at him questioningly.

"Remember, whatever you may think about these matters, she has been trained a nun, and can never rid herself from her beliefs. Well, suppose she lives, and you marry her, she will be for ever haunted by the fear that she will be eternally lost. Well, I should like to save her from that."

"I do not understand."

"Of course you do not. No Protestant does understand. But the Church is very merciful. I have discovered, in spite of what I thought, that Sister Constance can be freed from her vows. There is a contingency of which I was ignorant. I have powers to free her, so that, on condition she remains a Catholic, she may be your wife."

"Well, free her."

"Gladly, my friend. Take me to her, and I will speak to her, and pronounce——"

"No," replied Lancaster grimly. "No. You are quite at liberty to pronounce all your mumbo-jumbo here or elsewhere. But you do not see her until she is my wife."

"Then you prefer that——"

"I prefer what you please. You told me once that you sheltered the lambs from the wolves; now I—well, I return the compliment."

Ritzoom looked at him long and steadily. He had played his cards, and he had not played them well—he was aware of that. The man before him had proved victor. He had boasted to himself of his own strength and foresight and skill, but the Englishman was his master. Looking at him, he saw no weak place in his armour. The law he dared not use, appeals to his fear and the superstitions which dominate Catholic minds were as unavailable as the arrows which children might shoot at an old feudal castle. The thunders of the Church Lancaster regarded no more seriously than he would regard the threats of a puling child. Force he dared not use. Even now he knew that the house in which he sat was guarded, that the Englishman had done everything to protect the woman he had snatched from the grave.

"If we were only in a Catholic country!" thought Ritzoom. But he was not. England was free from priestly rule.

For a time Ritzoom seemed undecided how to act. In spite of everything, he was a Catholic by training and by inclination, and he longed sincerely for his Church to triumph. He hated, too, to be beaten in a battle of wits. At one moment it seemed that anger would overcome him; but only for a moment. In spite of all his prejudices, he admired and respected a strong man. He broke into a laugh.

"I'll have a cigar, since you are so kind as to offer it," he said, "and I remember that you always smoke a good brand."

Lancaster took no notice of this change of behaviour. He was not sure that it might not be a new move in the game Ritzoom was playing. So he turned to Gray.

"You neither look well nor happy, Jack," he said.

"I have nothing to do either with health or happiness," said the young priest.

"With what, then?"

"With duty, with the salvation of souls. To snatch from the burning those you would destroy. Come, Father Ritzoom, let us be going."

"Let me order you some refreshment. You look quite ill," said Lancaster kindly.

"No, I could not eat anything under your roof. You are like those who defamed the temple of God in the far back past. But I will pray for you, pray for your salvation."

"Thank you, Jack. May God give you happiness!"

"Happiness! Happiness!" cried the young fanatic. "It is all such as you seem to care about. What have I or you to do with happiness in this life? It is for me to save our souls, and the souls of others, that we may have eternal bliss beyond the grave."

"And so you have given up all thoughts of——"

"Do not say what is in your mind. It would be sacrilege. Yes, I have given up all. I love nothing but the Church, nothing. Gertrude Winthrop is dead, she is a nun; Jack Gray is dead, he is a priest. But what of that?—this life is nothing. May God save *you* before it is too late!"

He seemed scarcely able to control himself; his lips twitched nervously, his hands trembled like aspen leaves.

"There is one thing I would ask you," he continued. "Where is Father Relly? Where is the priest of God whose life you have sullied, whose vows you have made him break?"

"I do not know," said Lancaster. "I gave him money. He said he could not remain a priest. For years it has been all meaningless to him. He has gone to try and find freedom."

"Tush!" said Ritzoom contemptuously. "Relly is—well, God does make fools; He also allows them to live. But this poor fool will soon come back to us, and—well, we shall know how to deal with him."

"An unwilling horse is of but little value," suggested Lancaster.

"True; but we must not let the fellow's soul be lost."

"The fate of a man's soul surely depends on its disposition."

"Oh, that is one of your Protestant cards, I know. You play it very often, and for all it is worth. We say that obedience is the great test."

"Obedience—yes. But the obedience of a slave is a poor thing. The essence of obedience lies in the liberty and the spirit of the man who obeys. Relly's obedience to you has for years been the obedience of a man in chains. For my own part, I fancy you will never find him again."

"Of course, he has a helper in you?"

"Certainly."

"Ah, well, it does not matter; we shall——" But Ritzoom did not conclude the sentence. "Come, Father Gray," he said, after a few seconds' hesitation, "we must be going."

"Jack," said Lancaster, "I grieve that we have been at cross-purposes; but—I say, old man, is it too late?"

"For you to repent? No."

"Won't you come and see me again—so that we can have a chat—alone?"

"No."

"I wish you would. Say, old fellow, are you really content—happy?"

"Content? Happy?" cried the young priest feverishly. "As you regard it—no."

"But really, old chap—why stultify your life? Live, be a man, Jack!" And Lancaster held out his hand.

The young priest took it eagerly. His lips trembled and his eyes grew moist. He seemed about to speak and to speak freely.

"Lancaster, I—I——" he stammered, then he turned toward Ritzoom. The priest's penetrating and impenetrable eyes rested on him, and the words died on his lips.

"You—you do not—cannot understand," he said. "May God give you light." He heaved a sigh that was half a sob; it might have come from a broken heart. He spoke no other word, but walked out of the house with bent head and faltering footsteps.

Lancaster stood on the doorstep and watched the two men as they went away. Even when they had turned the corner of the square and were out of sight, he still stood bareheaded and watchful, as though he expected them to return.

"I fancy I shall never speak to Jack again," he thought, "never, never. They are both nearly dead. He is right. She is a nun, and he is a priest—and that is all, or nearly all. Both take their views seriously; thus in a few years they will be—God help them both!" he said aloud.

"Gray," said Ritzoom.

"Yes."

"What ails you?"

"Oh, nothing."

"That's well. This game's not played out yet."

"Isn't it?"

"No, it's not. This unholy marriage must not take place. Even if we have to kill the body to save the soul, it must not. We have to play our last, our final card. You and I must play it together."

"Must I see Lancaster again?"

"Yes, we must see them—both; it is necessary."

"I—I cannot bear it."

"Yes, you can, you must."

"Must I? Very well, if it is your will."

He spoke just as an automaton might speak. Apparently there was no meaning, no purpose in his words. He had learnt the lesson of obedience, and he must obey, and that was all. But Ritzoom knew that he did not understand what he was saying, for his eyes were as the eyes of a dead man.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE Reverend Anthony Ritzoom sat alone in his room. His face was not pleasant to look upon, and there was an angry look in his eyes.

"I expect the fellow is laughing at me," he said to himself; "he fancies his battle is won, and that I am powerless to touch him. Well, let him laugh."

He started to his feet, and began walking around the room.

"So far he has beaten me, there is no denying it; he has beaten me," he continued. "In some things it may seem as though I have been conqueror, but in reality he has had the best of the fight. And even where I have had my way the result has been anything but satisfactory. Gray was right about the Reverend Mother. She is only a walking corpse, a mere machine that breathes and moves. Who is the better because of her being a nun? From that standpoint Lancaster was right. This monastic system is——"

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently, and breathed a weary sigh. His eyes had a longing look.

"Then there's Gray," he went on again. "The fellow's a failure. He's not the man I expected him to be. I thought he would have turned out a Jesuit, and instead he is practically a Passionist, a Franciscan, aye even a Capuchin or a Carthusian. He's a monk, not a Jesuit priest." And he laughed scornfully.

He continued to walk round the room evidently cogitating deeply.

"The fellow shall not beat me; no, he shall not," he cried angrily. "It is no longer merely a battle between Lancaster and the Church, it is a duel between him and me, and I am not the man who likes being beaten. That woman would be useless as a nun if I got her back, even in spite of her vows; but I do not care, he shall not have her. It shall not be said that I have been beaten. I'll let him know that I am not a Jesuit for nothing."

He continued his walk for some minutes, as though in doubt what to do. Evidently his thoughts led him to no decision.

"I told Gray that he would have to help me to strike the last blow," he said; "but I doubt if I can trust him, besides, that scheme is dangerous. I must try and make it unnecessary."

Presently his eyes shone with new light, a smile of satisfaction rested on his clean-shaven face, and thick strong lips. Evidently he had thought of something which pleased him.

He went to his desk, and wrote three letters. They were not scribbled hastily. He seemed to consider each word before writing it; indeed in one case he destroyed several sheets of paper before he was satisfied.

"Yes, that will do," he said at length, "that will do. I shall be serving the Church, and I shall beat Norman Lancaster. And—no, he can never trace it to me. He will of course suspect, but there can be no shadow of proof. These letters, even if produced at a court of law, would go to prove the very opposite to that which I intend. I simply pull unseen wires."

He laughed in a quiet, satisfied way, and then with a jaunty step left the house, and walked in the direction of the City.

Meanwhile Lancaster guarded his house with all the jealousy with which an eagle might guard a nest containing her young. He scarcely ever went beyond his own door; a great fear constantly haunted him. But the light of happiness never departed from his eyes, the note of triumph never left his voice.

Day by day the woman he loved gained strength—very slowly, but still surely. He saw her only a few minutes each day during the first fortnight of her freedom. Frequent visits were not safe, the doctor declared—she was too frail, too weak; neither had he been allowed to converse with her.

As a consequence, his hold on her seemed insecure, and it seemed to him that at any time he might awake to the fact that she had been taken from him. Thus, when circumstances compelled him to leave London for a few hours, he took special precautions for his loved one's safety. He knew the people with whom he was fighting. He knew that their very conscientiousness, their very sincerity, would make them the most unyielding of enemies. And he was fighting for more than life. Understand it he could not, but all the world was, to him, in the room which he was almost forbidden to enter, and which was sacred as a shrine.

He hurried over his business eagerly, caught the first train back to the City, and then sped to the house as fast as horseflesh could take him.

His housekeeper met him at the door.

"Is all well, Mrs. Richards?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Lancaster," replied the lady smiling.

"And—and Miss Grant?" he asked anxiously.

"The young lady is progressing nicely."

"That is well. Has the doctor been to-day?"

"Yes, he was here this morning."

"Did Dr. Whyte leave any message about my—my seeing the patient?"

"No, he said nothing at all, except that she must be kept quiet."

"Just so. I would like some tea Mrs. Richards."

"Very well, sir."

But Lancaster had no appetite, he was too excited; besides, his mind was filled with all sorts of vague apprehensions. In spite of his defiance of Ritzoom, he knew that Constance would not be free from danger until she became his wife.

He knocked at the door of Constance's room, and was quickly answered by a nurse.

"Can I come in, nurse?"

"Better not, Mr. Lancaster; she is asleep, and Dr. Whyte said that on no account must she be disturbed when she was asleep."

The young man cast his eyes toward the bed where the patient lay, and then towards the window. Another nurse stood there, who looked like a stranger, with her back towards him. Evidently she was intent on watching something in the square.

He turned away and went back to his own room. His heart was heavy, he knew not why. He was filled with a great dread, and yet he had no reasons for his fears. He lit a cigar, but he did not smoke it. His face was drawn and haggard, his eyes had a haunted look.

"What is the matter with me?" he asked himself again and again. "I am simply yielding to foolish fears, I am encouraging absurd notions."

But the troubled expression did not leave his face.

"No," he cried at length, "I will let nothing pass unchallenged," and he rang the bell.

"Tell Mrs. Richards that I wish to see her," he said to the servant who answered the summons.

A few seconds later the housekeeper entered. She could not understand why Lancaster should wish to speak to her again so soon.

"Mrs. Richards," said Lancaster, "is one of the nurses changed?"

"Yes, sir."

"When?"

"To-day, sir. She went about two hours ago."

"Why wasn't I acquainted?"

"I really forgot it, sir. Last night Nurse Latimer received a letter saying a relative was ill or something, and she asked the doctor if she might leave."

"Yes, well?"

"Of course Dr. Whyte gave his consent, and then sent to the hospital for another."

"I see. Does he personally know the new nurse?"

"I don't know, sir."

"And you know nothing about her yourself?"

"Nothing, except that she is a very nice spoken young woman; indeed she seems quite a lady."

"Thank you. Will you wait a minute, Mrs. Richards, and ask Eliza to take a note to Dr. Whyte?"

He hastily scribbled a few lines, and then wandered around the room like one in suspense. When the servant returned he anxiously awaited her appearance in the room.

"Please, sir, Dr. Whyte is not at home. He has been called away, sir."

"Does his housekeeper know when he will be back?"

"I don't think so, sir."

A hard look came into Lancaster's eyes.

"Will you tell Nurse Williams that I wish to see the new nurse at once?" he said.

"Yes, sir."

A few seconds later the new nurse entered. She was a tall and rather handsome woman, of about thirty years of age.

Lancaster looked at her steadily. As the housekeeper had said, she had the appearance of a lady.

"You have kindly come to help us in our difficulty," said Lancaster quietly. "I am told that Dr. Whyte sent for you this morning."

The woman quietly assented.

"Will you favour me with your name?"

"Telford, Nurse Telford."

"Oh yes. Have you served under Dr. Whyte often?"

"No, not often."

"What hospital are you at?"

"St. Benjamin's."

"Thank you, and what do you think of the patient?"

"I really have had no chance of judging. She has been asleep ever since I came."

"Oh, then of course you can form no opinion." He hesitated a second, and looked on the floor, then for the first time she scrutinised him closely.

Suddenly he lifted his head, and their eyes met.

"You are a Roman Catholic," he said.

In spite of her evident desire to control her features, her lip trembled, and her face became tinged with a bright colour.

She shook her head as if to deny his assertion, but spoke no word.

"Oh then I am mistaken," replied Lancaster, quietly noticing the furtive look in the woman's eyes. "Of course if you were, it would be nothing to your discredit. Roman Catholics are often good people. What are your arrangements with Nurse Williams? What time do you commence your duties?"

"Immediately, sir."

"Just so. Thank you for coming in. I am sure you will excuse my desire to see you. I am naturally anxious as to who shall nurse the patient."

He opened the door for her to pass out, and then went towards the window of his room. A moment later he moved rapidly to the hall, and looked around. The new nurse stood still like one thinking deeply. In stepping back Lancaster made a slight noise. The new nurse started, and went upstairs, away from the patient's room.

No sooner was she out of sight than Lancaster knocked at the door of the apartment where Constance lay. Nurse Williams came to meet him.

"She is still asleep, Mr. Lancaster," she said with a smile. Lancaster knew Nurse Williams, and trusted her implicitly.

"Do you know the new nurse?" asked Lancaster.

"No."

"Know anything about her?"

"Nothing, except that Dr. Whyte said he would send one who was capable and trustworthy."

"Just so. She has done nothing for your patient yet, has she?"

"No, nothing."

"Well, would you mind remaining in charge till you hear from me again? Make any excuse to her; but do not let her go near Miss Grant. Don't let her pour out a drop of medicine nor move a pillow."

Nurse Williams looked frightened.

"Anything wrong, Mr. Lancaster?"

"I don't know yet; but you understand, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, perfectly."

Lancaster returned to his room, and hastily scribbled a telegram. He was about to take it to the nearest office himself, but decided not to leave the house. He could not tell why, but he felt as though enemies lurked everywhere. A servant was therefore sent with the message.

A little later a cab came rapidly up to the house

"Ah, Peters," said Lancaster to the man who entered, "I am glad to see you."

"Thank you, Mr. Lancaster. I know of your success, sir. But I suppose you are not quite out of the wood yet, sir."

For a few minutes Lancaster and the detective talked together with great earnestness, the latter asking keen, searching questions, to which the other gave sharp, pointed replies.

"I have my suspicions," said Peters at length, "and 'pon my word, sir, you would have made a good detective yourself, your scent is very keen; but there's one thing needed."

"What do you mean?"

"I must see this new nurse."

"I am afraid I should make her suspicious by calling her in again; but stay, there she is, going across the square."

The detective gave a sharp glance, and then seized his hat.

"You shall hear from me in a few hours, sir; meanwhile admit no strangers," he said, and left the house.

"Of course my suspicions may be baseless, but I feel sure I know that nurse's face," thought the young man. "Anyhow, I'm glad I've set Peters on the watch."

Lancaster stood at the window watching until the evening shadows began to gather, then he knocked at the door of the sick room again. He found the patient awake, but she did not seem quite so well. She was constantly haunted by fears, Nurse

Williams said.

"Where is Nurse Telford?"

"She is in her room, I suppose," replied Nurse Williams. "Anyhow, when I told her I would remain in charge until night, she said she would lie down until she was required."

"Just so," replied Lancaster. "I hope I shall not be taxing your strength by asking you to remain in charge a little longer."

"Oh, not at all, sir. I shall be glad to do so."

Lancaster spoke a few words to Constance, and then left the room.

"Well, sir, I've had a busy hour," said Mr. Peters a little later.

"Well, what have you discovered?" asked Lancaster.

"Discovered," repeated the detective. "Well, as you know, sir, I haven't had much time for discovery, much less proof; but unless all my previous experience is a huge mistake, you'll never see that nurse again."

"No," said Lancaster, with fast-beating heart. "I noticed you did not go in the direction of St. Benjamin's Hospital when you left here."

"Not likely; I shadowed the nurse."

"I hoped as much. Well?"

"She went by a very crooked route to the abode of the Rev. Anthony Ritzoom, which, by the way, is not far from here."

"Just so."

"Of course you can deduce what you like from that."

"Yes, I follow."

"Well, in order to carry out your instructions, which had become of far less importance, I visited the hospital, and discovered that after Dr. Whyte left this morning, Nurse Stubbs, whom he had engaged to take the place of the one who left last night (and who, I fancy, will return under peculiar circumstances), was taken very poorly, which resulted in the advent of Nurse Telford. Nurse Telford is a Roman Catholic."

"Ah!"

"Follow, sir?"

"Yes."

"But that is not all. Dr. Whyte was called away this morning to a consultation which will detain him till to-morrow, probably longer."

"Well?"

"Of course he had to make some arrangements; you see he has no assistant."

"And so another doctor will have to take his work?"

"Exactly so. You take up the point very creditably. Had not your suspicions been aroused that doctor would have called to-night."

"I see."

"Of course he would have had his credentials from Dr. Whyte."

"But he—he dared not have hurt Con—that is the patient. He dared not for the sake of professional honour."

"No; but I fancy that by to-morrow morning there would have been no patient in *this* house."

"You discovered, then, that——"

"Nothing. I only know that the doctor who would have come is friendly with the Reverend Ritzoom. I found that out by chance, some time ago. I make no avowals, but I have my theories. Your patient sleeps on the ground floor, her window opens on a quiet square, and so——"

"I see!" Lancaster rose to his feet, his teeth set, his hands clenched.

"Of course no physical injury would be done to the patient, and the Church would be served. I suppose, from their standpoint, a brand would be snatched from the burning," continued the detective quietly.

"I see."

"No blame could be attached to the doctor," continued the detective. "He would simply call as a *locum tenens*—as for the nurse, well them Jesoots would have many ways of making it all right with *her*. You see you could hardly have made the matter public, considering the way you took the young lady from the convent. Besides, they would be only paying you back in your own coin."

"Of course this is all theory," said Lancaster presently.

"Yes, sir, all theory; only, if two prophecies of mine come true, I think my theory will be substantiated."

"And they?"

"First that Nurse Telford will not be seen in this house again; and second, that Dr. Whyte's *locum tenens* will make no appearance."

At that moment Mrs. Richards appeared.

“A curious thing has happened, sir,” said the housekeeper. “A messenger has arrived from Nurse Telford asking for her bag. I did not know she had gone out, but it seems she has been summoned away.”

The detective laughed quietly.

“What am I to do, sir?” continued the housekeeper.

“Oh, send the bag by all means,” said Lancaster.

When Mrs. Richards had gone, Lancaster, for the first time, broke into an angry exclamation.

“That Jesoot is at the back of it all, sir. Nothing can be definitely traced to him; but he’s the brains, sir, he’s the brains,” remarked the detective.

“Doubtless,” said Lancaster; “but we’ve beaten him so far.”

“A man like that is hardly ever beaten. He’s got other cards up his sleeve, you may depend on that, and all of them will be played in the cause of religion.”

“I expect so; but it does not matter. Look here, Peters, choose your best men, and watch the house night and day.”

“Very well, sir; but that man’ll be sure to have a lot of things on foot until you get the law on your side.”

“Yes,” replied Lancaster, “and I will have it, I will have it at once.”

“I hope you will, sir; but you’ll have a lot of trouble in getting it, or my name’s not Peters of a private detective agency.”

CHAPTER XXXII

THE next morning Lancaster went to the nearest Registry office and arranged for a marriage by special licence; he had not long bidden goodbye to the Superintendent Registrar when another man entered the office, who came asking particulars concerning marriage. He was an American he said, and was quite ignorant of the laws of the country. After examining the notices on the walls, and having chatted pleasantly with the Registrar, he left with a smile upon his face. This American seemed to have a perfect knowledge of London, for he made several calls in different parts of the City without having to ask his way anywhere. Late in the afternoon he found his way to the house where Father Ritzoom resided, and related his discoveries.

"I can now leave everything to you," said Ritzoom, after they had conversed some time. "Horses, carriages, everything."

"Yes, everything," replied the man.

"Of course you'll be silent as the grave."

"There is no need to remind me of that, especially when one is dealing with a man like Lancaster."

"The fellow is doubtless clever," replied Ritzoom. "If once they are married, of course our power is gone. He obtains legal rights. Until then we can use many weapons. So far he has beaten us, but in face of the evidence I shall bring, no man will dare to proceed with the ceremony."

"But can you substantiate your statements?"

"I can cause delay, and in so doing——" Ritzoom shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"It's a pity the nurse scheme did not succeed."

"I thought it was safe, but Lancaster has learnt many lessons during the last few years. Still, we must save the poor girl's soul at all hazards, and we will too. Nothing, as far as I can see, can stop us. You have done well, McCarthy; you have discovered his arrangements, and in so doing you have given us the whip hand over him."

* * * * *

That same afternoon Lancaster had, for the first time for many hours, secured a little sleep. Throughout the whole previous night he had been awake, thinking of many things. He had been facing many contingencies, and preparing for all manner of difficult situations. After having seen the Registrar, and being assured that Constance was safe, he had been able to snatch a few hours' rest.

When he woke it was after six o'clock, and then after bathing his aching head he found his way into the room he called his den. He was in the act of ringing when Mrs. Richards appeared.

"The doctor has been, sir."

"Dr. Whyte?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"You gave no orders, sir, and Dr. Whyte said there was no necessity."

"And—and Miss Grant?"

"I think she is much better. I came to say that you are wanted in the drawing-room."

"In the drawing-room? Very well."

He went hurriedly, for he wanted to get rid of his visitor quickly, so that he might, if possible, visit the woman for whom he was fighting a great battle. No sooner did he enter the room, however, than he started back like one who had received a blow.

There before him stood Constance, dressed, not as a nun, but in dainty garments fitted for a bright spring day.

It was the first time he had really seen her. Each of his first interviews with her had been at nighttime, and when she was attired as a nun. Afterwards he had simply beheld her face in a darkened room, when she was thin and pale and wan.

Now she stood before him, still somewhat fragile and weak, but with the blush of returning health on her cheeks. Her eyes, too, shone with the brightness of hope and love and joy. Although she was twenty-seven years of age, she was still a girl in appearance.

"Constance!" said Lancaster.

"You are not cross, are you?" she said. "The doctor told me I was over-bold; but I pleaded so hard, and—I—I wanted to give you a surprise!"

She was indeed a vision of loveliness, and to the man whose heart had been made weary by years of long waiting, and

whose mind had been haunted with distressing fears, she seemed as an angel of God.

"Is—is—all well?" he stammered, scarce daring to believe his own eyes.

"Yes—that is, you are sure you are not disappointed in me, Norman?"

The woman's nature, in spite of long years of unnatural life, expressed itself. The woman does not live, never did live, never will live, who does not long to appear beautiful in the eyes of the man she loves.

He saw the tears well up in her eyes and her lips tremble.

"Will you come to me?" he said. "I am not worthy of you, but God knows I love you. Oh, how beautiful you are!"

They were able to talk quietly presently, and then Lancaster put the question which lay so near his heart.

"Can we be wedded soon—to-morrow—the day after?" he asked.

"Wedded—to-morrow!" she repeated.

"Yes, you have no doubts or fears, have you?"

"But can you, Norman? I am only a poor nun."

He mistook her meaning. He was afraid lest the terror of her vows were clinging to her, and that she feared, even yet.

"Surely you do not regard yourself as bound by——"

"No, it is not that," she interrupted; "all that is gone. The truth came to be before you—you dragged me back from the grave. Somehow, I do not know how it was, but it all fell from me in a second. That night when you tried to set me free, directly after I came to England, I felt that I was loving you at the cost of eternal life, and that in going away with you I must pay the cost with everlasting fires. But that all went afterwards. I thought I was going to die, and then religion became so much—so much more; God, and Christ were so much greater than—all the rest. And then my vows, and my fears—they all became as nothing. No, my vows seem as nothing but childish resolutions now; and even when they bound me I loved you so that—that—well, you know. But I am only a poor ignorant nun. I—I have nothing—but what you give me. Even these clothes, which you think so nice——"

"Is that all?" asked Lancaster, half sternly yet joyously. "Is that all, my poor persecuted maid?"

"That is all, Norman."

"Then we will be wedded soon. I have prepared everything."

"I am so glad," she whispered, with a fluttering, happy sigh.

* * * * *

Ritzoom and Gray stood outside a Presbyterian Church which stood some little distance from the square where Lancaster lived. It was about a quarter to nine in the morning. Both men looked anxious, but on Ritzoom's face was a look of determination peculiar to the man.

"We shall settle the matter this morning, my friend," he said quietly.

Gray did not answer. His face was deathly pale, except for a hectic flush on his cheeks. He looked as though he might be in the later stages of consumption.

"Everything is arranged," continued the priest "I have prepared for every contingency. I discovered late last night that there was no alteration in the arrangements, and so this religious fiasco is to take place this morning."

Still Gray spoke no word.

"When that part of the service is reached where the minister asks if any one wishes to raise objections, then—but you understand."

"Yes, I understand, but it is all useless I tell you."

"No, it is not. The action will cause delay—inquiry; and that is all we need at this juncture."

"Very well," said Gray with a sigh.

They entered the church.

"What time is the ceremony to take place?" asked Ritzoom of the man in attendance.

"Nine o'clock, sir."

"Is the Registrar present?"

"I believe so, sir. He will get in by the vestry door."

"But the bride and bridegroom will come in by the main entrance?"

"Yes, sir," replied the man, looking at him curiously.

The two priests selected seats behind a pillar from which they could see everything, without being conspicuous themselves.

Only a few people were in the building. Three or four idlers had been attracted by seeing the church doors open, and that was all.

Nine o'clock struck.

"They are late," said Ritzoom with a smile. "Well, let them be happy a few minutes longer, they do not know what is in store for them," but Gray noticed an anxious look in his superior's eyes.

"What is the use of it?" asked Gray presently. "The woman is unfitted for holy life."

"But she has taken vows," said the other, "and besides, that man Lancaster shall not beat me." He uttered the last words savagely, as though the thought of overcoming his opponent were more to him than the breaking of vows.

The minutes passed slowly away.

"There must be some mistake," said Ritzoom presently.

"I hope so," said Gray.

"What?"

The young man closed his lips tightly, but he did not speak again.

Presently another man entered the church hurriedly, and made his way to the spot where the two men were sitting.

"It's all over!" said the man.

"All over? what do you mean?"

"They were married an hour ago, at the Registry Office."

"What!" cried the priest, an angry red gleam shining from his eyes.

"It is true. The parson of this church has been there too, I suppose."

Gray's lips moved as if in prayer.

"Are you sure of all this?" asked Ritzoom. "There is no mistake, is there?"

"Quite. They left the house through the garden, and from there to the office."

"But I told you——"

"You told me to be on the watch at eight o'clock. They left before that time."

"And where are they now?"

"I don't know. They have not returned to the house."

Gray's eyes shone with a strange light.

"Then they must have guessed our plans, and tricked us," cried Ritzoom.

"That Lancaster is a very clever fellow," replied the other.

For a few seconds Ritzoom stood quite still. In his eyes was the look of a wild beast at bay. His strong thick lips twitched nervously, his hands trembled as if with passion.

"Let us go," he said presently.

He walked out of the church, while Gray followed him silently.

"Is there anything more I can do?" asked the man who had brought him the news.

"Do! You do!" and he laughed contemptuously.

He and Gray walked side by side past Lancaster's house, and through the square.

"Beaten!" he said between his set teeth.

"I am very glad," said Gray.

"Glad!"

"Yes. The scheme was born of lies."

"You forget to whom——"

"I forget nothing. I pray God He may give them the happiness which was denied to me!" At that time the man in Jack Gray was stronger than the priest.

"I believe, in spite of everything, you are half a Protestant," he said, and his words sounded like a threat.

But Gray answered never a word. Perhaps he thought of the time when he, too, might have been a happy man.

When Ritzoom reached his house he reviewed the whole situation carefully. He cast his mind back over the years to the time when he first met Lancaster. All the way through there had been a battle between love and religious vows.

For a long time he sat staring into vacancy. He made no movement, uttered no sound. His large strong face was set and stony, his clean-shaven lips were closed tightly together. He was thinking deeply, and although he told his thoughts to no one, it would not have been difficult to have imagined them, for in his eyes was the look of a beaten man.

Presently he rose to his feet like one who was just beginning to recover from a heavy blow. The old look of confidence, of calm assurance, was gone. For the first time in many years Ritzoom doubted himself.

"I'll go and speak to Gray," he said.

He opened the door of the room into which the young man had gone, and looked in. He was about to speak, but the words died upon his lips. The young priest was kneeling before a crucifix. On his face was an expression difficult to describe. Yearning, longing, disappointment, despair; they were all revealed in those wide open eyes, and pale, haggard cheeks. Faith was there too, faith and hope, but the hope was not in this life. The man was holding communion with that world where time is not, and he did not see the crucifix which stood before him.

Ritzoom came out, and shut the door quietly, without speaking a word.

* * * * *

Meanwhile an express train sped swiftly towards the sunny south. In a carriage sat a man and a woman alone.

"They cannot take me from you now, Norman, can they?" said the woman. There was a sob in her voice, but it contained no sorrow. Rather it was an expression of infinite joy, a joy too great for words to express.

"No, thank God; they cannot take you from me now, my wife!" And he held her close to his heart.

THE END.

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.
Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.
Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *The Scarlet Woman*, by Joseph Hocking.]