

## Chapter 5

MY father was an Irishman - an Irishman indeed. An Irishman with all the strength and weaknesses of his race. He was born in the city of Waterford, and like every true son of Erin, his love for his native land amounted to a passion. Every wrong, real or supposed, inflicted upon his country wrung from him a curse; while every right bestowed seemed to inspire his heart. His deep attachment to his own people sometimes made him unjust to the governing race. I never met with a man who was better read in the political and religious history of his own land. He could most cleverly set in argumentative array the strength of Catholicism against the weak points of Protestantism. It was fine to hear him talk about "the ould religion." He always argued that historic precedence was certain evidence of a divine faith. Age, to him, was proof of sanctity. It was humorous to hear how deftly he could shelve unholy Popes. Like every "good Catholic," he could trace apostolic succession without the snapping of a single link from Pope Pius to Pope Peter. His teacher of history and theological instructor was Cobbett. My reader will know what that means. Cobbett was the man who taught statesmen grammar, cursed Protestantism, and deified the Pope. Cobbett, like many other bigots, was blind in one eye, and when it suited his purpose was afflicted in the other. Many of Cobbett's judgments were based on fallacies. Prejudice often coloured his philosophy. He was clever and brave, but narrow. A clearer vision would often have corrected his logic. My father literally feasted on Cobbett, and without controversy, accepted every word he wrote as true.

My father was also a firm believer in all Roman Catholic tradition. The legends of his Church were to him facts. He would as soon believe that the heavens could fall as that one word of the priest could fail. Yet, strange to say, his faith in the Romish Church was a faith by proxy. He seldom attended her services. But he believed that the intercession of the saints, especially of "Mary, the mother of God," included himself, and that some of the super-sanctity of the Church's loyal sons and daughters would at last be reckoned to his soul. And even if the worst came, there was that last refuge of the bankrupt life,

" EXTREME UNCTION,"

which every man who had stood by God and the Pope could claim. But beyond all this, and last of all there was "purgatory," where venial sins were atoned for, and middle-class sinners, not holy enough for Paradise, were tortured until the prayers of the Church and the mercy of God» released them. Blessed be he who had a full purse to pay for masses for his soul, by so many years would his time of torture be shortened. Woe to the poor wretch who had to depend on the superfluous generosity or goodness of others. By such foolery does this huge ecclesiastical hierarchy impose on the superstitious ignorance of the people, and trade in the spiritual destinies of men.

My father was generally very reticent about the days of his youth. The information I gathered about his boyhood and early manhood was usually picked up in a fragmentary manner. It was only when the better mood was upon him that he would converse about his early days. To me he always seemed as an exile in a strange land. Ireland was the land of his love. Kings who exile men know how to inflict exquisite torture. The bit of turf outside many an Irishman's cabin-door is to his feet as soft as the carpet of heaven. I know no people on the earth with a more passionate love for the land of their birth than the Irish, except it be the Jew. To the Jew of old-time the stones in the street of Jerusalem were as precious as the jewels in the crown of the saints. One of my most interesting reminiscences in relation to my father was to hear him speak of the scenery and customs of his own

land. From these fragments of conversation I learned that his father was an old man-o'-war's man, who had served with some distinction in the British Navy under Nelson. I understood that he fought in several engagements. On his discharge from the service he received at pension and a right to share in a goodly sum of prize money, which right, through some neglect, he never claimed. He often told me he never saw his father the worse for liquor but once, and that his custom was never to drink a glass of whiskey save once a year, and that was on

#### ST. PATRICK'S DAY.

My father often averred that the great Macready was first cousin to his father. Of this I have no proof beyond his word. If it were true, it would show that the histrionic art sometimes runs in the blood. While my father was a boy, his mother, of whom he seemed to retain but a vague recollection, died, a victim of the plague. This happened in the early years of the last century when Ireland was visited with a terrible epidemic of cholera. Waterford was one of the cities which was devastated by the scourge. One morning my father left home for school. In the evening when he returned his mother was no more. The plague, his father told him, had seized her, in an hour or two all was over, and the dead-cart had called and taken the body away. He gave him a caution to mind where he went, for fear he also should be seized. My father's grief was great. To be told that he would see the face of his mother no more nearly broke his heart. He resolved not to heed the caution of his father. He would see his mother again at all risks. If he could not see her alive he would see her dead. Hurrying through the desolate streets he found the place where the plague-stricken dead were laid. Entering unobserved, he eluded the watchers and found himself within the mortuary. Beginning with the first body he lifted the cloth from the faces of fourteen lifeless forms before he looked on the face of his mother. He took one long, tearful look, and then covering the face as before, he fled away terrified. A lad who could do a deed like that must surely have had some latent nobility of soul. A right environment, a proper education, joined to the grace of Christ, would have made him a prince of God. My father when sober was kind even to sacrifice. He would share the last crust he had with his children, or the stranger in need. The cry of pity he could never withstand when in his right mind. But the heart which melted at the tears of a child could be roused to the most ungovernable fury when the drink-fiend was supreme.

After the death of his mother his father resolved to give him a trade, and for this purpose apprenticed him to an uncle who was in business in Waterford. Soon as the indentures had been prepared and signed, his father died, and like my mother, he was left an orphan. His uncle proved a cruel master. He used to feed his apprentices, for he had several, on the meanest food, and during both summer and winter they were compelled to sleep in a miserable hovel. In my father's case, all ties of kinship were forgotten. I have heard him say that his chief employment on the Sabbath day was carrying water from a far-distant brook, and when opposite his master's door, be compelled to throw it on the ground. This was done to suit the tender mercies of his uncle, and, as he said, "To keep him out of further mischief." At nineteen years of age, wearied of the ill-usage, he ran away from his servitude and came to England.

My father's creed, as I have already stated, was that of a Roman Catholic. From his earliest years he had been instructed in all the beliefs and traditions of the Roman Church. The Bible to him was a book to be feared. He venerated the covers, but shunned the contents. No matter how plain the sense, he believed that no one could give the right interpretation save the priest. He taught me to look upon the English Bible as a mixture of truth and error. He led me to believe that the Bible, as we

possessed it, was a Book which had been given to the world in a fit of anger by a disappointed monk named Martin Luther. I really believed from what I had heard of Luther that he was nothing less than a combination of fool, fanatic, and devil. It was only after God's light entered my soul that I learned by reading and study the baseless character of my earlier opinions. In the Roman Church, as every one knows, reason is subordinated to faith. If reason contradicts belief, so much the worse for reason. Catholic dogma places the world of sense in contradiction to the realm of spirit. In the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the sense of touch says, "Bread," Catholic dogma says "Flesh." The sense of taste says, "Wine," Catholic dogma says, "Blood." And woe he to him who says his reason is true. Roman Catholicism is a religion of shutting one's eyes, opening one's mouth, and swallowing whatever the Pope and the priest like to give you. Many of the teachings of the Roman Church are an insult to common sense. If it were not for the bit of truth she has wrapped up in her many-folded ecclesiastical napkin she would have been dead and buried long since. I one day stood in the Oratory at Brompton watching the stream of penitents as they passed to shrine and confessional. Near where I stood there was a huge font of holy water (?). Each worshipper as he passed dipped the fingers in the water and then reverently sprinkled the sacred drops upon his person. Alas, for such superstition! From my soul I pitied the intelligence of people who could believe that in such a solution, into which, possibly, the unclean fingers of many an unwashed hand had entered, any sanctity remained. I could not help remarking to a friend who stood near. "The devil could drink a sea full of that stuff and not be sick." If the angel of healing lingers about earth's waters still, I would sooner expect to find him in the pure mountain spring than within the narrow circle of a muddy font, the water of which a thousand hands have stained. Most unfortunate for me my father's beliefs seriously affected my own young life. Under his tuition I grew up in lamentable ignorance of all those precious truths which make life a blessed privilege, and God a lovable Being. The character of God as understood through the absurd interpretations of the Roman Church, was to me most awful. I knew nothing of the Fatherhood of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. The result of such training found me at twenty-one years of age in total ignorance of the Scriptures, with the exception of a single verse, and how I became possessed of that I have stated in a former chapter.

Soon as by the mercy of God I was brought to know Jesus Christ, and through Him received the forgiveness of sins, I commenced to pray for my poor deluded father. My first entrance into the experience and power of intercessory prayer was on his behalf. His attitude to me when he knew of my conversion was violently antagonistic. He felt that my association with the Primitive Methodist Church was a slight on his own. I had insulted her beliefs by my professed conversion. Conversion in the Methodistic sense was to him meaningless. The gospel of forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ apart from the medium of the Church and the mediation of the priest was a lie. My readers may think I am exaggerating; but when you hear a man like Dr. Maitland, keeper of the MSS. at Lambeth, uttering a sentence like this: "The Reformers pruned away much of mediaeval Catholicism, but they added nothing of their own except the doctrine of Justification by Faith – *one of the most dangerous delusions that Christianity has seen*" ("The Dark Ages." Intro. Page x.) my readers will see that I am confirmed by some of their most eminent scholars in declaring the Catholic belief of the pernicious effect of the soul's direct access to God through His Son. Hold fast to that doctrine, ye Protestants, for its universal direct access to God through His Son. Hold fast to that doctrine, ye Protestants, for its universal diffusion and acceptance will make obsolete the superstitious flummeries of an apostate Church. My father associated salvation with an ecclesiastical corporation. The soul received a passport to heaven through the absolution of a priest. God's Kingdom was

commensurate with the Catholic hierarchy. All outside her pale were reprobate. If souls outside the Romish Covenant were saved, they were saved at a disadvantage, and many of them if saved at all, would be saved by the superfluous sanctities and intercessions of Catholic saints. The almost religious brutality of the Romish belief was never more vividly seen than when Queen Victoria died. The Catholic Church could only intercede for her at the throne of God as for an alien. And Catholic intercession was needful before Victoria could be admitted to the highest heaven. Is there any wonder Catholicism is cruel? And that her cruelty in the spiritual realm hangs like a millstone on the neck of civilisation?

My first yearning desire after conversion was that my father should be brought into the light of the Gospel. To believe that the Holy Spirit would ever break through the dense spiritual ignorance which enveloped his mind was very difficult. To assist my faith for this result I fell back not only on the promise of God, but also on that which to me appeared a miracle - my own conversion. The surprise of that wonderful event has never left me to this hour, nor do I think it ever will. The change wrought in my life was apparent even to my father. He confessed that the "Methodist heresy" had made a wonderful difference in me. I was sober, I was kinder in my spirit. The prodigal was in his right mind. The old man with his unholy deeds was put off, the New Man in Christ was put on. Habits of reading and prayer were formed. Home was the abode of peace. The hearth-stone became an altar. These and other things evidenced a change so great that not even my father's bigotry could gainsay it. Often he would come to reason with me upon the danger of joining a heretical sect. He argued that it would be safer for me to be a sinner with the Catholics than a saint with the Methodists. But my conscience and my common sense would not accept this. In the meantime, grasping more intelligently the vital differences between Catholic and Protestant belief, I found my mind gathering strength, and better able to expose the subtle forms of his argument. At times when he and I were pursuing a point of controversy, he would discover that he was losing ground; then by sheer brute force of speech he would break down all opposition of argument, and hide himself, like many of his co-religionists, behind a curse.

Finding he could make no impression upon me, and declaring that if I kept outside the "true Church my soul would be lost," he sent the priest to, if possible, reason me out of my refractory mood. The priest came, and after a few minutes the conversation turned to the question of the Infallibility of the Pope.

"So you believe in the Infallibility of the Pope?" I asked.

"Yes, I do," he answered. "It is a dogma of the Catholic Church which every one of her sons is bound to believe."

"And in the strength of that belief you yield obedience to your lord the Pope and pursue your calling as a priest?"

"I do."

"Well now, tell me why you hold the Bible from the people?"

"Because the Bible is a Book difficult to understand. Its meaning is spiritual and heavenly, and must be interpreted in harmony with the infallible dogmas of the Holy Catholic Church."

"Then I suppose you believe that a layman could not of himself properly understand the sense of this heavenly Book, and that the priest alone can give the true meaning?"

"That is so."

"Will you please tell me how the priest obtains the power infallibly to interpret the Scriptures?"

“ He receives it by virtue of his ordination.”

“Will you please tell me what this power is?”

“ It is the Holy Ghost.”

“ Then I understand that the Holy Spirit is the one Infallible Interpreter in the soul and mind of the priest by which he correctly interprets the Scriptures? ”

“That is so.”

“Do you believe it is possible for the priest to be a bad man?”

“Yes, he may be.”

“And do you not also believe that some of the priests congregation may possess more sanctity of life than the priest himself?”

“ Yes, that is possible.”

“And, of course, there can be no sanctity of life without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Now, if an ordinary person possesses more of that Spirit, which you say is the only power by which a man can rightly interpret the Bible, than the priest himself, what becomes of the infallibility of the priest’s interpretation?”

Confused, the priest rose and bowed himself to the door. For ever after he left me severely alone.

For seven years I eagerly sought the salvation of my father’s soul. To believe that the light of the truth as it is in Jesus would ever break in upon his mind was a great trial of faith. But the power of the Spirit of God working through my ministry, life and prayers prevailed. I shall never forget the last scene in his death-chamber. When weary at the close of a great mission, I received the letter which informed me that his life was drawing to a close. A long railway journey and a few eager steps brought me to his door. Immediately I passed to his room. How changed he was! The strong man was broken. The many, many wrongs which had gathered around my life consequent upon his example were not only forgiven, but in that hour of solemn separation, forgotten. What a place of reconciliation and pardon the death-chamber is. Standing near to his bed I addressed him as near as I can recollect in the following words:— “Father, you know what was my manner of life up to twenty-one years of age. You know all about its prodigality, its wrong-doing, its sin. And you know also how, nearly eight years ago, my life was changed. It was then that God pardoned my sin, and consecrated me to His service. You know also how He has led me to devote my life to win the perishing to His Gospel, and you know also how hundreds through the preaching of the good news of His grave have been led to His feet. But all through these years I have carried a burden which sometimes has nearly bowed me down. That burden was your soul; and now we meet for the last time want to know if my prayers have been answered? I want to know what you think of these things, and what is your state for eternity?”

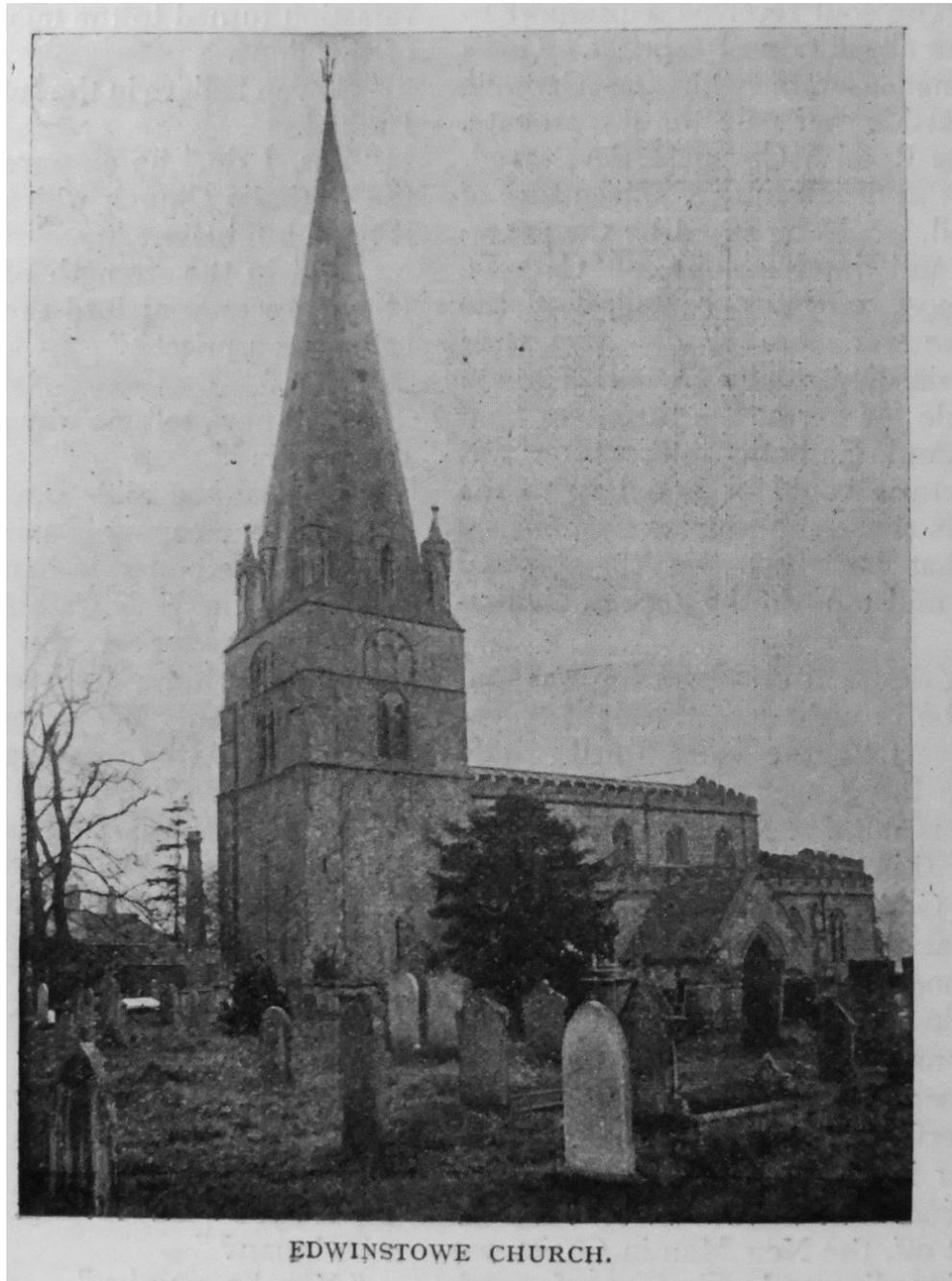
His answer was brief, but sufficient. It repaid me for all my praying. It filled me with a gladness that comes again even as I write. He said:— “My son, I am glad to tell you that God, for Christ’s sake, has pardoned all my sins.”

Beckoning me close to him, he whispered, “Kneel!”

I knelt as near to him as I could, when, placing his poor thin hands on my head, he gave me a blessing, the first I ever had from his lips - and the last. Exhausted, he lay for a few moments quite still, looking into vacancy. Then he spoke as follows:- “Yes, I can see it all now; all the past comes back to me. And I wish, oh, how I wish, I could begin again! I would like to live my time over again, if only for your sake and your mother’s. But it is too late.”

In that room, and from those words, I learned lessons I can never forget.

*(To be continued.)*



\* By a regrettable blunder a view of Bongate Church appeared in the April part of "My Autobiography" as Edwinstowe Church. The right view is given in the text.

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#### References

*Primitive Methodist Magazine* 1901/377