

## ERNEST THE SEEKER.

## CHAPTER FIRST.

"Truth's lovely form, that once was a perfect shape most glorious to look upon, was hewed into a thousand pieces, and scattered to the four winds. From that time ever since, the sad friends of truth, such as durst appear, imitating the careful search that Isis made for the mangled body of Osiris, went up and down, gathering limb by limb still as they could find them." — MILTON.

"CONSTANT'S journal from Rome, mother," said Ernest, as he broke the seals of a package, "now shall you know this friend of mine,

'His love sincere, his thoughts immaculate,  
His tears pure messengers sent from his heart,  
His heart as far from fraud, as heaven from earth.'

"Ah! Ernest! This mania of tolerance and many-sidedness, as you call it, will keep your mind in such a chaos, I fear, that the Spirit of God will never move on the face of the waters, and say, 'Let there be light.' What can interest you so much in this young priest? He always seemed to me to have his mother's enthusiasm, and gentle as she was, I certainly thought her crazed, as she glided about in her dark robes, like a devotee or sister of charity."

"Constant made me his friend by a well timed rebuke, mother," said Ernest, as he took a letter from his desk, and read as follows:—

"MY DEAR SIR,

"'The heart knoweth its own bitterness,' and may heaven preserve you from ever feeling the pain, which an expression of yours to-day occasioned me. I complain of no purposed unkindness, for probably you are ignorant that I am a Catholic; but I pray you, never say again that our 'priests are knaves or fools,' till you have proved the justice of your charge. It is my dearest hope to be admitted to the holy office. I vowed to consecrate my life to it, as I knelt by my mother's death-bed. I was bred up in the Episcopal church, of which both my parents were members, till I was fourteen years of age. At this time

my poor father became so ill, that he was advised to winter in Palermo. My mother of course accompanied him. I need not dwell upon the sad history. He rapidly declined; and it was in these dark hours, that my mother's mind was called, as she saw him on whom she had rested passing in weakness away, to turn for support to the friend who never withdraws, and to hope for reunion in heavenly homes with the beloved one whom affection could not retain on earth. She sought relief in the services of the nearest church. The touching symbols of these holy rites deeply affected her; and in her loneliness she appealed to the sympathy of the Confessor. He visited them; and before the last change came, my mother had the divine joy of receiving together with my father the sacrament of the Eucharist; of seeing the extreme unction administered to him in his agony; and after his spirit had departed, of having the body buried in consecrated ground, and of joining in sublime and consoling masses for his eternal peace. You will believe me when I say she returned home sanctified by her sorrows. I was her only child, and we became inseparable companions. She directed my studies, she guided my prayers, she made me her helper in her works of benevolence; and heaven forgive me! if as I looked up in her sweet face, becoming ever more spiritual as it day by day grew thinner and paler, and into those eyes so calmly bright, as if the light of another life beamed through them, and listened to her tones so musical and mild, that my heart melted,—heaven forgive me! if I worshipped her. My mother must ever be to me a saint. She, as her dying legacy, prayed that I might become an honored minister of God. In a few years, heaven willing, I shall be a Priest; alas! how unworthy a one, in contrast with the blessed thousands who through centuries have offered the perfect sacrifice.

CONSTANT SEYMOUR."

"There speaks at least a good son. You will hear the journal now, will you not? The words of one so fervent, even if deluded,

'Enforce attention like sweet harmony.'

"Rome, Dec. 10.

"*Laus Deo!* Arrived this morning, and am now quietly established at the college. The huge building, with its massive stones, projecting cornices, and heavy carved windows, looked gloomy as I entered; and as our footsteps echoed through the silent court and long passages, the thought saddened me, that so many years were to be passed beneath these solemn shades. But the paternal welcome of Father B., and the courteous demeanor of my fellow students, quite cheered my spirits; and now that I have once joined in worship in our beautiful little chapel, and have arranged my apartment, I feel at home. I like this high ceiling, this deep window, with its diamond shaped panes, and these oaken pannels dark with age. In the sacred recess I have placed my Corregio's Agony in the Garden; Fenelon's placid face smiles over my table; my mother's copy of à Kempis is lying by my side; and more than all, dearest mother, thy gentle look blesses me from this miniature. Well may I feel happy, in striving to fulfil your dying wish! *Ad te levavi oculos meos.*

"After Vespers walked with a friend to the Pincian. The sun was setting, as we climbed the long ascent of steps; and we reached the summit just in time to see the golden rim disappear behind the ridge on the west of the city, where umbrella pines stood strongly marked against the sky. A haze of glory, such as Claude so often dipped his brush in, hung for a moment like a brilliant veil over the wilderness of roofs beneath us; but as the shadows spread, the scene grew clearer, and I took my first survey of the Holy City. In front, at the distance of a mile, swelled sublime the dark dome of St. Peter's, flanked by the far stretching wings of the Vatican. Nearer rose the round tower of St. Angelo, and, winding at its foot, the Tiber was revealed by its reflection of the still bright heaven; while to the left stood the columns of Trajan and of Antonine with the bronze apostle on its top, and the eye rested on the low arched roof of the Pantheon. It was no dream! I, a child from a far land, was really taken home to the bosom of the mighty mother, who has fed the world with her holiness, and learning, and art. Beneath that soaring dome, so gracefully light, yet so firm, were at this moment

burning the golden lamps around the tomb of St. Peter. Within those very walls had been held for centuries the sacred conclaves, whose councils the Holy Spirit condescends to guide. Under these very roofs, which I now looked upon, had been trained the hosts of martyr missionaries, who have carried the cross over burning deserts, and polar snows, and the farthest ocean. Around me on every side was a vast multitude, who had forsaken the world and its vanities for the purity and charities of a religious life. Lights on a thousand altars, clouds of incense from swinging censers, chaunts of countless choristers, and murmured prayers of crowds of priests sanctified the very air. I was in Rome! not imperial Rome, — that blood-stained desert, — but Christian Rome, blossoming with truth. The Eagle has fallen before the cross; the palaces of voluptuous nobles have crumbled; the dust of centuries has buried the pavements over which rolled the triumphal cars of cruel armies; nature's kind ministries have carpeted the deep-dyed sands of the arenas; from the ruins of barbarous pomp have sprung these graceful temples, and halls of science, and galleries filled with images of beauty, which a divine faith inspired; and in place of chained captives, driven to the shambles to gratify the bloody thirst of a populace, come joyful troops seeking the light of peace and love to carry with self-sacrificing toil to the whole world. *Domini est Terra.*

"Dec. 13.

"Walking to-day through a narrow street, with high walls enclosing gardens on each side, I came to a niche, where pious hands keep ever burning a light before an image of the Virgin; and there witnessed a sight, which, in all its picturesque simplicity, is peculiar to Catholic lands. Two peasant boys were kneeling before it, one playing on a pipe, the other, who held by a string a pet goat, repeating an Ave Maria. The father stood behind wrapped in his dark brown cloak, his conical hat with its slouched brim in his hand. I waited till their offering was over, that I might give them alms. They formed, indeed, a singular yet graceful group. The boys, in place of cloak, had dressed sheep skins hanging on their shoulders; their leggings were blue; and the sandals were laced with

pink and orange ribbons crossing the leg to the knee. In their hats they each wore a short feather, and their black bead-like eyes looked brightly out over cheeks, where ruddy health blushed through a brown, tanned skin. Long clustering locks fell over their shoulders. The father was dark and stern enough; and it required no great imagination to see him with a carbine on his shoulder, watching behind a rock on the hill side for the traveller winding up the road. Rough and wild creatures truly! Yet the Catholic church has a hold even on them. How admirably wise has she been in adapting herself to all classes of minds and characters. What would these semi-barbarians care for a homily or a tract? But the picture of the Holy Mother can soften their rude hearts.

“I have just withdrawn from my window, to which I was attracted by the sound of tramping feet and the glare of moving lights upon the wall. It was a procession of Carmelites. Each held in his hand a torch, whose flickering blaze made the darkness in the street seem almost tangible, and falling down on their white sweeping robes, transfigured them with a bright glory. Silently with even step and two by two they passed down the deserted street, probably to a funeral. How can Protestants speak with such rude suspicions of these holy brotherhoods, devoted as they are to all-sacrificing charity? What other system provides, as our venerable Church does, for the wants of the needy? Not a poor beggar dies in this city, whose pains are not solaced by the gentle cares of some sister of charity, and whose remains are not followed to the grave by solemn and respectful attendants. May I but imbibe this spirit of devoted benevolence of which I see such manifestations every hour!

“Dec. 15.

“Attended mass to-day at the church of the Jesuits. How can I speak adequately of the music? It came from a gallery raised near to the arching roof, and the sound there echoed and softened seemed to fall from heaven. It realized, oh yes, far more than realized, my highest conception of devotional sentiment. Language cannot utter our swelling emotions. Precise terms confine their flow.

But music, — where each note suggests without naming a thought, and where the blending sounds are a symbol of a thousand interwoven feelings, — music is indeed the vehicle of devout expression. First came a deep distant swell of the solemn bass of the organ, like a flood lifting up its voice, like the breaking of many waters, fuller and fuller, louder and louder in peal, new chords ever mingling as the stream of harmony rolled on, till the whole soul seemed borne aloft upon the waves of sound; — and then gently, softly it sank into a calm, the higher notes prevailing, till there broke forth the flute-toned voices of young choristers, like the greeting of cherubs from happier worlds. I was deeply moved myself, and could not but notice the effect of the services upon a young man kneeling at my side. By his long, light brown hair, fair complexion, and blue eye, I knew him to be a German, probably from his dress an artist. Repeatedly he kissed his crucifix, while tears gathered and rolled down, till seemingly overcome, he bowed his head even to the marble floor and sobbed audibly. How many recollections of distant dear ones and home, how many hopes of success, how many thronging images of beauty were mingling at that moment with this gushing tide of devotion. Oh! barren indeed are other forms of worship in comparison with these, appealing to the soul as they do through our most heavenly faculty, — the imagination. On this young artist's mind, who can estimate the effect of the grand architecture, and the pictured forms of the richly apparelled priests, and the white-robed acolyte, of the graceful curling incense, the tinkling bell, the solemn pause, the burst of song? Poor reason, men clip your sky-cleaving pinions, and then chide you for lagging in the dust of this work-day earth.

“I was much struck by seeing a lady in splendid figured silk kneeling near to a peasant, who by his soiled dress had probably but just come in from the muddy roads of the country. In rising, he accidentally planted his iron studded and miry shoe on the rich skirt, which spread itself over the marble. Not a sign showed that such a trifle could distract the wearer's mind from the sublime exercises in which she was engaging, or give even momentary offence. Where in Protestant lands can you see this true spirit of Christian equality, — leveling in the temple of the King of

kings all the poor barriers of caste, reared by men's selfishness in the social world? No pews encumber the floors of these cathedrals, no poor divisions wall off the privileged few from brethren who come to worship a common Father.

“Dec. 17.

“Went to the English college to hear a lecture from the learned and eloquent Dr. W. on the sacred use of classic learning. The rooms were crowded with the chief dignitaries of the church, the leading literary men of the city, artists, distinguished foreigners, and ladies. The lecture was nearly two hours in length, and took a wide range. It was filled with the nicest criticisms, with descriptions of authors, as marked and accurate as are the heads on ancient seals, with exquisite selections from the old historians and poets, and illustrated with large engravings of the finest specimens of art. And yet the Church is said to discourage learning, and to base itself upon popular ignorance. Oh! sad, sad is this spirit of schism! Can it come from any one but the father of lies? Look at these mile-long libraries, stored with the choicest literature of all ages, and thrown liberally open for the world of scholars to consult; look at these colleges, where multitudes under ablest professors are trained up in the best scientific, philosophic, historical, and literary knowledge of every time! How little do Protestants know the rock on which the Church is built! Preserver of light in a world of gloom, restorer of ancient truth, nurse of

‘thoughtful monks, intent their God to please  
For Christ's dear sake, by human sympathies  
Poured from the bosom of the Church,’—

how have ungrateful children, ignorant of thy wide interests and liberal wisdom, defamed thee, Mother Church!

“Visited in my walk the Pantheon. How wise to consecrate the beautiful works of ancient art, thus signifying, that as God has made this outward creation, with its countless glories, to minister in unceasing worship,

‘In that cathedral, boundless as our wonder,  
Whose quenched lamps the sun and moon supply;  
Its choir the winds and waves,—its organ thunder,  
Its dome the sky,’

so man should use his highest conception of grandeur and loveliness for his Maker's praise. How sublime too the change which this graceful dome, these noble columns, these marble pavements have witnessed. The gods of ancient times were indeed the loftiest ideal of mere natural manhood; but these pictures on the altars beam with a light of heavenly, redeemed, glorified humanity.

“As I stood examining an altar piece, I was much interested in observing the various worshippers who knelt before it. One was an old man with streaming white locks and beard, who leaning heavily on his staff, as he bent his stiffened form, might have answered as a study for a Saint Jerome. Next was a mother, with a rosy-faced, chubby boy of six years, who, sportive and full of life, seemed restless in kneeling so long on the cold, hard stones, while the sallow face, deep marks about the mouth, and sunken eye told a tale of suffering in her whose arm embraced him. Not far from them was a contadina, with her snowy starched cap standing out from her head, her large gilded earrings, gay ribbons, green boddice, and scarlet skirt; and last a young girl, of perhaps thirteen, her coal-black hair, in long braided plaits, hanging down her shoulders, and a covered basket on her arm. Graciously do our church doors stand open at all hours for those whose homes afford no privacy. The passing emotion of devoutness is not deadened as where religious service is confined to the Sabbath; sorrow may pour out its tears,—penitence may confess its burdened heart,—tempted nature may purify itself,—and the perplexed find peace at any hour.

“Returning this evening about dusk, I was struck with a manifestation of the care, with which the Church goes out to seek its scattered sheep. Turning suddenly a corner, I found myself in the midst of a singular company. A cook, with his glowing brazier, was dealing out frittered messes to those who had a *baioccho* to pay for them. Women with their matted locks and bare necks, and men in scanty cloaks and slouched hats, moved to and fro, vociferating and gesticulating,—their features strongly marked by the ruddy light of the fiery coals; while just opposite, a Franciscan,—his brown robe girt round him

by a rope, his cowl thrown back, his arm bare and raised on high, holding a crucifix, was pouring forth to a knot of listeners an impassioned appeal. Thus, in the midst of noisy crowds, where hasty words bring rash deeds, and the bantering jest is followed by the gleaming knife, the sudden stroke, and the laugh is choked in blood, — there in the very haunts of levity and crime do the ministers of the word of life appear.

“Dec. 19.

“To-day at the Vatican! Will Protestants explain, why their faith does not nurture such giant minds, as have written the history of their thoughts in prodigal richness all over the walls of this palace? When will Protestantism produce its Buonarotti, its Leonardo, its Dante? Out of the crowd of sublime images, which have this day enlarged my conception of power and beauty, two alone rise prominent, so eloquent are they of the deep reverence and the imprisoned strength of Michael Angelo. They are the Sibilla Persica and the Prophet Joel. One may well be diffident in thinking to interpret these magnificent visions; but I *fancied* I saw a purposed contrast between the darkened Sybil and the enlightened Seer. The withered dame, with painfully contorted frame, is poring intently over the half open volume on which only a partial light falls; and behind are two young boys, cloaked to the neck, and mute, still, as if listening through long ages for the voice which should loose their fixed attention. In the compartments below are sleeping figures; one a mother pressing her infant to her bosom, as if overcome in the midst of her vigil she was still haunted by the foreboding of ills; the other, a vigorous and muscular man, utterly spent with fatigue, and lost in profoundest rest. The perfect abandonment to heavy sleep is wonderfully given by the body bent forward till the chest leans upon the limbs, and by the arm hanging lifelessly down. All speaks the midnight of ignorance as to human destiny. A silence as of the secret chamber of a pyramid broods oppressively over it. What intense action, on the contrary, in the Joel! The mother is wakened, the child looks brightly out as upon the sunny morning; and the prophet, — his grand forehead and curling hair full in the light, the two inspirited boys

with lively gestures looking over him as he reads, — seems to be chanting with a triumphant hope that thrills every muscle, ‘I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.’ The devoutness of such a man as Michael Angelo, the all-absorbing trust that knows not a doubt, and which in the midst of evil times rises indomitable, — where can it be seen beyond the pale of that One Holy Church, founded on the martyred bodies of apostles, built up by the consenting traditions of eighteen centuries, and cemented by the prayers and tears of countless saints? The *Unity of the Faith*, this was the sublime inspiration, which gave such full vigor to believers’ minds, in times before the so-called Reformation made a chaos.

“But it was not merely with the awe, which the genius of Michael Angelo awakened, that I regarded the Capella Sistina. Here were the very seats, here was the very altar, where week by week the Holy Father and the Cardinals unite in worship. What! do Protestants dare to think, that the good old man, who humble and lowly bends here in prayer, is the opposer of that Master, whose keys he bears? And these venerable, long experienced counsellors, whose days are spent in laborious correspondences, and earnest consultation for the good of the Faithful, the world over; — can any one, who sees them exchanging that beautiful sign of the kiss of peace at the close of their religious rites, suppose them earthly minded and ambitious? Protestants must surely be ignorant of the poverty, the disinterestedness, the severe industry —”

“There! my dear Ernest — that will do for me;” said Mrs. Hope, rising — “Constant is as wild as his mother; infatuated, perfectly infatuated! And yet he has sweet sensibilities, I grant. But that he should have been so long in that city of moral death, surrounded by sights of poverty, wretchedness, vice, and idleness in the people, and of luxury, ostentation, and proud affluence in the priesthood, witnessing parade and mumery in place of true worship, without having his eyes opened, shows that he is a thorough enthusiast. If he had been bred up in such customs, one could more easily pardon him! Do not, I beseech you, let his taste and pretty words mislead you. He but whitens a

sepulchre. I do fear for you, my son," seeing a smile struggling with respect on Ernest's face; "and I fear the more, because I see that this tolerant sympathy looks generous; and thus you may mistake vacillating indecision for a large wisdom. Will you forever be run away with by each new notion and caprice of other minds?"

"Dear mother," answered Ernest, playfully, "you must plead guilty for some part of my vagaries. You bade me be a Seeker. Dread not the spirit that rose at your bidding. You have not forgotten the lines you early taught me, —

'Yet some seeke knowledge merely to be knowne,  
And idle curiosity that is;  
Some but to sell, not freely to bestow;  
These gaine and spend both time and wealth amisse,  
Embasing arts, by basely deeming so;  
Some to build others, which is charitie,  
But these *to build themselves, who wise men be.*' "

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