

ERNEST THE SEEKER.

CHAPTER II.

"Then let the good be free to breathe a note
Of elevation—let their odors float
Around these Converts, and their glories blend,
Outshining nightly tapers, or the blaze
Of the noon-day. Nor doubt that golden cords
Of good works, mingling with the visions, raise
The soul to purer worlds."—WORDSWORTH.

As Ernest entered the boudoir, Edith hastily closed her portfolio, and wiping away a tear, rose gracefully to greet him.

"Ah! Ernest! Is it you? How glad I am it is no stranger. I would not have an indifferent eye see me thus moved. My Saint has gone to join the blessed. Sister Luise died last night;" and after a moment gazing at him she added, "*You* shall see this sketch in which I have hinted to myself the lesson of her life."

Ernest took her hand, and seating himself at the table, they looked together at the three pencilled outlines. The first represented a cavern's mouth, on the edge of a garden, where in the distance dancing groupes were visible. Entering the vault, his face veiled, one arm wrapped in his heavy robe, extending behind him, an aged man seemed slowly drawing on a beautiful girl,—whose feet followed willingly;—while the averted head, the straining eye, the parted lips told, that the heart was with one of the rejoicers behind, who stood watching her. The second sketch was of a chamber in the rock, lighted only from a cleft,—and on the floor, as in a swoon, the female form alone,—her face hidden in her mantle, with one hand cast forward, grasping the crucifix. In the third was again a garden, and a cavern's mouth, but now reversed; and near and far, under shading branches, placid figures seemed conversing. In the fore-ground his back to the beholder, stood with light, triumphant air a youth, from whose presence glory seemed to beam, while lowly in gesture, but with upraised and assured face, glided forth from the dark prison the Virgin.

"And so she has cast off her earthly dross," said Ern-

est. "I know not whether the bishop was right, however, in persuading her to enter the convent. God does not fear liberty; why should the Church?"

"Not right! Why her lover was unworthy. Would you have had her thrown away, — a priceless treasure, to be trampled down by neglect and scorn? O! how beautifully maternal is the Church, that she thus gathers to her quiet breast the poor foot-sore wanderers. Think Ernest! She had loved, guilelessly, fully, one who could never have known her worth. The blossom opened on the dusty road, and drooped. Would you have had her live on, desolate, her secret whispered everywhere, each coarse eye scanning her pale face? The world offered nothing. And by the very entireness of her love was she fitted to be a bride of heaven! O, surely our good father was right! But it is nearly the hour! Will you attend me to the funeral!"

"The world offered much, Edith! Many a blighted stalk yields support to the vine, that otherwise would have trailed in the dust. The crowds are rich in occasions for sounding forth harmoniously, in the experience of others, the song we have marred in our own life-rehearsal. But peace to her slumbers! Let us go!"

The Church was in entire silence as they entered: and only a few poor people present, — who had heard the sad news, that their benefactress was dead. Edith was at once absorbed in her devotions; and Ernest gave himself to the study of his favorite altar-piece. The copy was poor; and yet the divine aura still pervaded it. With pliant, unexhausted strength, the radiant angel, his golden locks tossed back by the wind, his fine indignant face turned downward on the writhing monster, seemed with his light foot to crush the demon as he smote him, and stood victorious, the impersonation of Purity intolerant of passion.

"Terribly just," thought Ernest, "it is so! Forever, forever, must each angel spurn and oppose the foul, the selfish. Yet what an instinct of compassion have we! I cannot abandon that monster — though neither can I bear with him. Oh! surely, surely, evil is as *unnatural* to us as it is *hateful*. But the world is a poisonous atmosphere. The best grow sickly in it. Is not the Church right then

to sanctify some green circles, within whose borders devils dare not enter?"

His thoughts were broken by the entrance of the priest, and the murmured sound of those few words, so freshly pathetic, however monotonously chanted —

"Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam."

The service proceeded as usual, till through the grating of the side chapel rose the soft mellow voices of the nuns, echoed from the opposite grating by the clear high tones of the children.

"And from the latticed gallery came a chant
Of psalms, most saint-like, most angelical,
Verse after verse sung out so holly,
The strain returning, and still, still returning."

Ernest felt deeply the mysterious power of this unseen music. Is not the ear a finer avenue to the spirit than the eye? Faint and more faint, the chant died away with the retiring voices; and then Edith beckoned Ernest to follow her. The Portress opened the door of the convent to one always there privileged; and leading the way through many passages to a window, she pointed silently out upon the church-yard. Nothing could have been more touching than that scene. Slowly the procession was winding among the simple crosses, which marked the graves, to where the hillock of fresh-dug earth showed the resting place for their sister. Four young girls, clad in white, with garlands of white roses followed the chanting priest, and the boys with swinging censers, two and two; — then came four nuns, in their long black veils, with white scarfs around their necks, supporting the coffin, itself covered with a long white pall, like nature's snowy winding sheet. Two by two the sisters followed; then two by two the children, — in long tapering files, — all, even to the littlest, bearing the lighted candles. Beautiful symbol! that the good fight is fought, the victory won, and that the conquering soul, unquenched by death, has ascended to brighter worlds of never dying light.

When the solemn rite was ended, as Edith calmly crossed herself, and turned to go, Ernest thought he had never seen her so serenely beautiful. It seemed to him

as though her parted friend had dropped the mantle of her peace. There was a depth in her dark eye, a sacred sweetness on her pale brow and colorless cheek, which awed him.

"I have spent hours and hours with her," said Edith, as they passed homeward. "She had imbibed from the world all its elegant tastes and high accomplishments, and had dedicated them to God. She never checked my prattle, but seemed to rejoice in the fresh springing flowers of a young heart. And then so gently she instilled her holy faith, never arguing, never explaining, but living so happily, so gently, in the pure wisdom of her spiritual love. I have watched her, kneeling by the sleeping children, in winter nights for hours, till I fell asleep, gazing at a bright star which shone over her, and when I awoke found her still kneeling there wrapped in her long robes, — and day was breaking. And then she was so patient. Once, after some rudeness, I remember seeking her pardon, and asking whether she could still love me; and her answer was so holy, yet so simple! 'I love you all in God, dear children. He loves us all.' I cannot mourn for her, I hardly dare to pray for her! But for myself I must pray. Adieu! I must be alone."

Thus speaking, as she entered the door, she took his hand, bowed gently, and withdrew to her apartment.

Ernest stepped for a moment into the boudoir, and in her album wrote these words from Novalis:

"Friendship, love, and piety should be mysteriously treated. It is only in very rare confiding moments we should speak of them. *Many things are too tender to be thought of, many more to be expressed.*"

He felt that the shrine of a sweet sister's inmost life had once again this day been opened to him, and he was a purer man. "When the world is redeemed," thought he, as he walked on, "will not women be the prophets to us? Surely, through a holy woman, infinite goodness smiles upon us in its gentle glory, as it does not elsewhere. And how heaven has marked her as his consecrated vessel. Beauty in her is hateful, loathsome, where it is not pure; and devoutness brightens the homeliest features into grace, as the lamp reveals the picture in the rough porcelain shade. And we would have them all be wives and moth-

ers; — wives of busy idlers, mothers of worldly slaves? Alas! it would be no mockery too commonly to decorate the marriage feast with cypress. How often is that promised Eden but a waste wilderness. Must innocence forever be driven out of the garden by seeking after unknown good, and find the flaming sword of remorse opposing its return? O Experience! Experience! can the elixir of life be found only by squeezing your thorny fruit! And then the world's insolent neglect, or selfish use of those who will not sell themselves to the stranger, and marry, for marriage's empty privileges, the unworthy. Wonder is indeed, that Protestants have no sacred retreats, no holy sisterhoods. Heaven keep thee ever his own, dear Edith! or give thee a fitting friend."

The scene of the morning had so deeply touched him, that the thought of study was irksome; and he determined to pay a visit to the bishop. Several persons, whose dress and manner proved them to be of quite different classes of society, were seated, each waiting his turn for conversation in the little parlor; and retiring till the good father's words of consolation and counsel had been given, Ernest withdrew into the recess to commune with the copy of Raphael's divinest Madonna. The picture was so hung, that light through a window above, and hidden from the spectator, was poured full upon the clouds of dim cherub faces, and on the heads of the mother and child. The colors had somewhat faded; but the drawing and expression were in a purer style than any work, which Ernest had ever seen. Soft deep shadows around the eyes gave a tender thoughtfulness to the Virgin's look. The name he had heard years before given to this picture, thrilled through him — "The Girl-Mother." Yes! There stood that sweet peasant, in the joyous innocence of her youth, full of all harmonious affections, sobered in prophetic awe. The dignity of womanhood had robed her suddenly; and gayety was veiled in blessedness. How lightly she rested on the light vapor, as if already ethereal, — how buoyantly her garments floated there. And O! what majesty, what calm, unconscious power, what pure swelling instincts, what conceptions, too grand for words, seemed to crown the divine boy, as with easy attitude he sat on the throne, which God had consecrated, of his mother's reverential love.

Ernest was thankful that chance had led him hither, thus to finish his morning's meditation; for the words of the German mystic rose to his memory: "The mysterious charm of the Virgin—that which renders her so unspeakably attractive—is the presentiment of maternity. *She is the aptest emblem of the Future.*"

He turned aside to examine the books upon the nearest shelves; and accidentally opening a volume of the Dublin Review, his eye was attracted by an article, headed "Galileo—The Roman Inquisition." This called to mind some startling statements he had heard in a late address, which he longed to have disproved or verified; and, as absorbed, he rapidly skimmed the pages, the bishop laid his hand upon his shoulder, and saluted him with; "Ah! my young friend! doubtless you think that excellent writer is but whitening, with the chalk of sophistry, the foul spots upon the skirts of the church."

"Not so! I was rather astonished at this new proof of how a pistol shot, well echoed, can be made to sound like thunder. The story of Galileo's sufferings for truth has been so often and so confidently told, I never doubted its truth; and from my youth have associated the name of the great astronomer with a vision of dungeons and of papal tyranny."

"No wonder! no wonder!" said the old man, mildly, "we are sadly, cruelly slandered. Shall I tell you, briefly, the true tale of Galileo's *prosecution*, not persecution.* Nicholas, the Cusan, a poor ultramontane, first advanced the startling proposition, 'Quod cœlum stet, terra autem moveatur,' 'the earth moves, the heaven is at rest,' and for this noble service to science was raised by Nicholas the Fifth, before 1464, to the dignity of the Cardinal's hat, and to the bishopric of Brixen. Behold the *first punishment* of this "heresy." In 1510, Leonardo da Vinci adopted, as established, the same doctrine; for already in 1500, Copernicus, in the very heart of Rome, had taught it to overwhelming crowds. Ay! more! when in 1536, it was known that Copernicus was too poor to

*Vide Dublin Review, No. IX. for July, 1838, p. 79, from which what follows is condensed, as the Roman Catholic version of Galileo's life.

print his great work, Cardinal Scomberg, and after him Gisio, charged themselves, from unparalleled liberality, with all the necessary expenses of its publication; and thus, as has been beautifully said, 'the successor of St. Peter flung over the infant theory the shield of his high protection.' What reason then was there, after this long favoring of this new scientific discovery, and after deliberate inculcation of it, at a later day, to stifle it? And now to pass to Galileo, when he first visited Rome, for the purpose of making 'palpable and plain,' as he said, 'the thing that by God's help he had discovered,' how was he greeted? With suspicion and insult? No! prelates and cardinals vied to do him honor; gardens and palaces were flung open for his use."

"But surely," said Ernest, "there is some foundation for the story of his being a martyr for science,—some real face to hang the hideous mask upon."

"You shall hear, young friend, and verily I think, you will agree, the mask was hung upon a senseless block. Galileo, not content with scientific demonstrations, began a series of theological epistles, attacking the established mode of interpreting certain texts; and it was for this, and for this *alone*, that he was denounced and warned 'to confine himself to his system and its demonstration, and leave explaining views of Scripture to the theologians, whose particular province it was to discuss them.' Thus, as has been well said, 'Galileo was persecuted not for having been a good Astronomer, but a bad Theologian.' But Galileo was passionate, headstrong, heated; he would not limit himself; he absolutely forced the decision of this question of texts upon the Pope and Inquisition; and therefore, and only therefore, was it necessary, to bind him to *total* silence; which was done by Bellarmine in the kindest, and least public way; immediately after which he was admitted to a long and friendly audience with the Pope. And was he then disgraced? Far, far from it; he was admired, courted as before; Cardinal Barberini wrote verses in his praise and mounted the papal throne; and Galileo came to Rome loaded with honors. And now, young friend, mark me. What return did Galileo make? He published his Four-days-dialogues; and on the very first page, to the *Discreet Reader*, attacked with bitter

irony and sarcasm the decree of 1616. All this he did," continued the Bishop, opening the volume and reading aloud, "'till in an evil hour, intoxicated by success, he burst, in the wantonness of wayward pride, through the restraint of personal respect, public order, and even private gratitude; and levelled the shafts of his satire against the very highest personage in the land—the same, his own best benefactor. Then, and not till then, was he made to feel the heavy hand of power, when he had stung it to the quick; then, and not till then, was he made to bite the dust of humiliation before the authority he had insulted. Yet even then the sage was not forgotten in the delinquent, nor the claims of the High Priest of Science, lost on the clemency and consideration of his judges.' And what, after all, was the sentence? Simply this. '*The Church has not condemned the system, nor is it to be considered heretical, but only rash.*' In a word, young friend, the system, though probable, was not proved; and Galileo was bid to wait. This was all; and for this every pert protestant writer is to fling in the face of our venerable mother his insults at her bigotry. But I will pardon them! History has been hoodwinked long enough. We shall be better known in the next age. But I fear I have wearied you. Let us talk of other topics."

"No! dear Sir! No!" said Ernest. "I long to hear from your lips an explanation of your exercise of spiritual power over the mind. Tell me, if time and inclination are propitious, why and how far you would permit liberty."

The bishop looked at him steadfastly, for a moment, as if with his luminous grey eye he would throw a light into the most secret chambers of Ernest's consciousness, and then opening a large port-folio, he selected an engraving, and set it before him, with these few words:

"The rule of the Church is almost too simple and natural to explain; that divine picture embodies it."

It was Raphael's cartoon of Christ's last interview with his disciples on the lake of Galilee. How touching was the contrast between the calmness of the master, and the eager enthusiasm of the disciples. Firmly and gracefully, in perfect equipoise, stood Jesus, pointing with one hand to the feeding flock, and with the other to the kneeling Peter, who, overwhelmed in mingled shame and confidence,

seemed pleading the truth of his grateful affection. Ernest could almost hear the mild command from the opening lips, which he read in the beaming benignity of the soft eyes, "Feed my sheep."

"The duty of the Church is protection, you mean," said he looking up.

"Yes! my son! She is put in charge by the Great Shepherd of his little ones; and woe to her if she is not faithful. Can she allow the poor lambs to wander astray in the fogs of speculation, or be lost in the drifting snows of skepticism, or ruined by wolfish doubts?"

"Blessed be the meek-hearted, Father! who are willing to be led by the still waters in the green pastures; but I am a wild chamois, finding spare feed on the dizzy heights of thought, among the cataracts of untried instincts."

"Even so! even so! But I have hope of one so true. God forbid, that you should only be brought into the fold, bleeding and crippled. Why waste your years in seeking what is already stored up for you, if you will take it? Look there!" continued the bishop, pointing to long rows of volumes of the Fathers; "there is contained all, and far more than you will find in the superficial, half-grown writers of our time. Why drink always of the muddy pools, which have dripped from the fountain into the dusty road, when you may dip from the bubbling spring itself?"

"But how am I to know you have all truth?" asked Ernest. "I have little faith in human infallibility."

"Ah! what sad prejudices darken us all. The Church is infallible, young friend, only because it embraces the consenting testimony of all ages. No one man is infallible. But I ask you, is not our faith the most of all reasonable in the mere way of argument? The Lord promised to be with his church to the end of the world! Will he most readily visit the minds of the consecrated and devoted ministers of his truth, or the uncultured, wild minds of those perplexed in the world?"

Here a mother, leading in a truant and deceitful daughter to be exorcised of the demon by the good bishop's words, interrupted the conversation, and Ernest withdrew.

As he walked homeward, he murmured to himself, "wolfish doubts"—so Father, we must give up our free

thought. You may be right. But I am not yet ready. I must examine fresh suggestions, that come to my tent-door. They may be lepers to blast me with disease, but they may be also angels in disguise.
