

# THE PRIEST AND THE ACOLYTE

John Francis Bloxam



With an introductory protest by Stuart Mason

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WITH AN INTRODUCTORY PROTEST  
BY

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So many copies of "The Priest and the Acolyte" have been sold by unscrupulous publishers and booksellers under the implication that it is the work of Oscar Wilde that it has been thought good to issue this edition with the object of putting an end, once and for all, to the possibility of purchasers being misled as to the authorship.

The story was originally published in *The Chameleon*, the first and only number of which appeared in December, 1894. The author of the story was an undergraduate at Oxford, "an insufficiently birched schoolboy," as he has recently been described, and he alone was responsible for the contents of the magazine which he edited. At the time of the trial of Lord Queensberry for libel a few months later it was attempted to show that Oscar Wilde not only approved of the theme of the story, but that he was actually a party to the publication of it, on the grounds that he sent to the editor a number of aphorisms under the title of "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young."

The simplest way of showing what Oscar Wilde really thought of the story is to quote what he said when examined in Court on the subject.

John Sholto Douglas, Eighth Marquis of Queensberry, was arrested on a warrant on March 1, 1895, on a charge of uttering a criminal libel against Oscar Wilde. On the following morning he was brought up before Mr. Newton at Marlborough Street Police Court, and after some formal evidence had been taken was remanded on bail for a week, and on the second hearing was formally committed to take his trial at the Central Criminal Court a few weeks later.

The trial began at the Old Bailey on Wednesday, April 3, before Mr. Justice Henn Collins. Sir Edward Clarke, Q.C., M.P., Mr. Charles Mathews and Mr. Travers Humphreys appeared for the prosecution; Mr. Carson, Q.C., M.P., Mr. C. F. Gill and Mr. A. Gill being for the defence.

The court was crowded. The Marquis was the first to arrive. He came in alone, and stood, hat in hand, in front of the dock. He spoke to no one, and no one spoke to him. There was little that was aristocratic in the Marquis's appearance. He was of short stature, with a round face, and clean shaven except for a streak of red whisker. His lower lip drooped considerably. A few minutes before half-past ten, Mr. Oscar Wilde entered the court and took a seat immediately in front of his Counsel, with whom he at once joined in an animated conversation.

The Judge was ten minutes late, but (the Marquis having entered the dock) the preliminary proceedings were soon got through, and at a quarter to eleven, Sir Edward Clarke began his speech for the prosecution. Everybody listened attentively to the story, as set forth by Counsel, of the prosecutor's achievements at college, his subsequent success as a *littérateur*, and the circumstances under which he became acquainted with the defendant's family. "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," which Oscar Wilde contributed to *The Chameleon*, was mentioned in the plea of the defence as "immoral and obscene," and Sir Edward Clarke occupied some time in an endeavour to prove the contrary. With regard to *The Chameleon*, Counsel admitted that it contained a story entitled "The Priest and the Acolyte," which could not be justified, but he declared his client could not be held responsible for the publication as a whole, he being but a contributor to its pages. As a matter of fact, Mr. Wilde urged upon the editor that the book should be withdrawn.

Soon after Mr. Carson began his cross-examination, it became apparent that the line he was adopting would result in a conflict between Counsel. Mr. Wilde was being questioned as to his opinion on certain extracts from "The Priest and the Acolyte," when Sir Edward Clarke jumped to his feet and appealed to the Judge whether the questions were relevant, inasmuch as Mr. Wilde was not responsible for the story. The Judge ruled in favour of Mr. Carson. Sir Edward, a few minutes later, raised another objection, but he was again overruled.

The interval for luncheon came as a pleasant relief to all, and, on the application of Mr. Carson, the Judge consented to the defendant being allowed his freedom till the court resumed its sitting.

Sir Edward Clarke, in the course of his speech for the prosecution, said that there were two extremely curious counts at the end of the plea. One was that in December, 1894, was “published a certain immoral work in the form of *The Chameleon*, relating to practices and passions of an unnatural kind;” and that his client had “joined in procuring the publication of *The Chameleon*, with his name upon it as the principal contributor.” That was a very gross allegation. Directly Mr. Wilde saw the magazine, he noticed there was a story in it called “The Priest and the Acolyte,” which was a disgrace to literature, which it was amazing any body wrote, and still more amazing that any body allowed to be published under his name.<sup>1</sup> Directly Mr. Wilde saw that story he communicated with the editor, and upon his insistence the magazine was withdrawn. He had no knowledge that that story was about to be published. It was strange indeed, then, to find that publication put upon the particulars as justifying the charge against Mr. Wilde.

In his examination in chief, Sir Edward Clarke said: It is suggested that you are responsible for the publication of *The Chameleon* on the front page of which some aphorisms of yours appear. Beyond sending that contribution had you any thing to do with the preparation or ownership, editorship or publication of that magazine?

Witness—No; nothing whatever.

Until you saw this number of *The Chameleon* did you know any thing about the story, “The Priest and the Acolyte”?

Nothing at all.

Upon seeing the story in print, did you communicate with the editor?

The editor came to see me at the Café Royal to speak to me about it.

Did you approve of the story of “The Priest and the Acolyte”?

I thought it bad and indecent, and I strongly disapproved of it.

Was that disapproval expressed to the editor?

Yes.

Oscar Wilde was then cross-examined by Mr. Carson for the defence.

You read “The Priest and the Acolyte”?

Yes.

You have no doubt that that was an improper story?

From the literary point of view it was highly improper. It is impossible for a man of literature to judge it otherwise, by literature meaning treatment, selection of subject, and the like. I thought the treatment rotten and the subject rotten.

You are of opinion, I believe, that there is no such thing as an immoral book?

Yes.

May I take it that you think "The Priest and the Acolyte" was not immoral?

It was worse; it was badly written.

Was not the story that of a priest who fell in love with a boy who served him at the altar, and the boy was discovered in the priest's room, and a scandal arose?

I have read it only once, in November last, and nothing will induce me to read it again.

Did you think the story blasphemous?

I think it violated every artistic canon of beauty.

That is not an answer.

It is the only one I can give.

I want you to see the position you pose in.

I do not think you should say that.

I have said nothing out of the way. I wish to know whether you thought the story blasphemous.

The story filled me with disgust.

Answer the question, sir. Did you, or did you not, consider the story blasphemous?

I did not consider the story blasphemous.

I am satisfied with that. You know that when the priest in the story administers poison to the boy he uses the words of the Sacrament of the Church of England?

That I entirely forgot.

Do you consider that blasphemous?

I think it is horrible. "Blasphemous" is not the word.

Mr. Carson then read the words describing the administration of the poison in the Sacrament, and asked Mr. Wilde whether he approved of them.

The witness replied that he thought them disgusting, perfect twaddle.

I think you will admit that any one who would approve of such an article would pose as guilty of improper practices?

I do not think so in the person of another contributor to the magazine. It would show very bad literary taste. I strongly objected to the whole story. I took no steps to express public disapproval of *The Chameleon*, because I think it would have been beneath my dignity as a man of letters to associate myself with an Oxford undergraduate's productions. I am aware that the magazine might have been circulated among the undergraduates of Oxford, but I do not believe that any book or work of art ever had any effect whatever on morality.

Am I right in saying that you do not consider the effect in creating morality or immorality?

Certainly, I do not.

So far as your own works are concerned you pose as not being concerned about morality or immorality?

I do not know whether you use the word "pose" in any particular sense.

It is a favourite word of your own.

Is it? I have no pose in this matter. In writing a play or a book I am concerned entirely with literature, that is, with art. I aim not at doing good or evil but in trying to make a thing that will have some quality of beauty.

What would any body say would be the effect of "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" taken in connection with such an article as "The Priest and the Acolyte"?

Undoubtedly, it was the idea that might be formed that made me object so strongly to the story. I saw at once that maxims that were perfectly nonsensical, paradoxical or any thing you like, might be read in conjunction with it.

On Tuesday, April 30, which was the fourth day of the first trial of Oscar Wilde, Sir Edward Clarke entered an emphatic protest against Mr. Gill having read over again the cross-examination of the accused upon his books and writings which he had given at the trial of Lord Queensberry. It was not fair to judge of a man's conduct by his books, but the Prosecution had gone much further than that, and had sought to judge Wilde by books which he did not write, and by a story which he had repudiated as horrible and disgusting. Public opinion had been excited

and fanned by the quotation in Court of passages of literature for which he was not responsible.

The subject then dropped, and the next reference to it was made by Mr. Justice Charles in his summing up on the last day of Oscar Wilde's first trial (May 1) when the Jury disagreed and was unable to return a verdict. His lordship said that he did not propose to deal at any length with the incidents of the Queensberry trial, but that it must be remembered that the evidence of Wilde at that trial was given on oath and must not be lost sight of in considering that which he had given the previous day or two in that Court. A very large portion of the evidence of Wilde at the Queensberry trial was devoted to what Sir Edward Clarke had called "the literary part of the case," and it had been attempted to show by cross-examination that Wilde was a man of most unprincipled character with regard to the relation of men to boys. In regard to a magazine called *The Chameleon*, published in the autumn of 1894, it was alleged that Wilde had given the sanction of his name to the most abominable doctrines, but the only connection proved between that magazine and the defendant was that it was prefaced by two or three pages of aphorisms by the accused, of which it was sufficient to say that some were amusing, some cynical, some, if his lordship might be allowed to criticize, silly; but wicked, no.

The learned Counsel who represented Lord Queensberry, the Judge continued, had called attention to a story, a filthy narrative of a most disgusting character, called "The Priest and the Acolyte," of which the author, who signed himself "X," should be thoroughly ashamed. With that story Wilde had had nothing whatever to do, and to impute to him any thing in it was quite absurd. To judge him by another man's works which he had never seen would be highly unjust.

In the second trial of Oscar Wilde, which was heard before Mr. Justice Willis on the following May 22 to 25, no mention was made of *The Chameleon* or of "The Priest and the Acolyte."

What is stated above ought to be sufficient, once and for all, to dissociate the name of the author of "Salomé" and "Lady Windermere's Fan" from the story reprinted in the following pages.

1 Sir Edward Clarke was in error. The story was published anonymously, being signed "X" only, though the author's real name was more or less an open secret in Oxford at the time. [Return to text](#)

## THE PRIEST AND THE ACOLYTE

*Honi soit qui mal y pense*

### PART I

Pray, father, give me thy blessing, for I have sinned.”

The priest started; he was tired in mind and body; his soul was sad and his heart heavy as he sat in the terrible solitude of the confessional ever listening to the same dull round of oft-repeated sins. He was weary of the conventional tones and matter-of-fact expressions. Would the world always be the same? For nearly twenty centuries the Christian priests had sat in the confessional and listened to the same old tale. The world seemed to him no better; always the same, the same. The young priest sighed to himself, and for a moment almost wished people would be worse. Why could they not escape from these old wearily-made paths and be a little original in their vices, if sin they must? But the voice he now listened to aroused him from his reverie. It was so soft and gentle, so diffident and shy.

He gave the blessing, and listened. Ah, yes! he recognized the voice now. It was the voice he had heard for the first time only that very morning: the voice of the little acolyte that had served his Mass.

He turned his head and peered through the grating at the little bowed head beyond. There was no mistaking those long soft curls. Suddenly, for one moment, the face was raised, and the large moist blue eyes met his; he saw the little oval face flushed with shame at the simple boyish sins he was confessing, and a thrill shot through him, for he felt that here at least was something in the world that was beautiful, something that was really true. Would the day come when those soft scarlet lips would have grown hard and false? when the soft shy treble would have become careless and conventional? His eyes filled with tears, and in a voice that had lost its firmness he gave the absolution.

After a pause, he heard the boy rise to his feet, and watched him wend his way across the little chapel and kneel before the altar while he said his penance. The priest hid his thin tired face in his hands and sighed wearily. The next morning, as he knelt before the altar and turned to say the words of confession to the little acolyte whose head was bent so reverently towards him, he bowed low till his hair just touched the golden halo that surrounded the little face, and he felt his veins burn and tingle with a strange new fascination.

When that most wonderful thing in the whole world, complete soul-absorbing love for another, suddenly strikes a man, that man knows what heaven means,

and he understands hell: but if the man be an ascetic, a priest whose whole heart is given to ecstatic devotion, it were better for that man if he had never been born.

When they reached the vestry and the boy stood before him reverently receiving the sacred vestments, he knew that henceforth the entire devotion of his religion, the whole ecstatic fervour of his prayers, would be connected with, nay, inspired by, one object alone. With the same reverence and humility as he would have felt in touching the consecrated elements he laid his hands on the curl-crowned head, he touched the small pale face, and, raising it slightly, he bent forward and gently touched the smooth white brow with his lips.

When the child felt the caress of his fingers, for one moment every thing swam before his eyes; but when he felt the light touch of the tall priest's lips, a wonderful assurance took possession of him: he understood. He raised his little arms, and, clasping his slim white fingers around the priest's neck kissed him on the lips. With a sharp cry the priest fell upon his knees, and, clasping the little figure clad in scarlet and lace to his heart, he covered the tender flushing face with burning kisses. Then suddenly there came upon them both a quick sense of fear; they parted hastily, with hot trembling fingers folded the sacred vestments, and separated in silent shyness.

The priest returned to his poor rooms and tried to sit down and think, but all in vain: he tried to eat, but could only thrust away his plate in disgust: he tried to pray, but instead of the calm figure on the cross, the calm, cold figure with the weary, weary face, he saw continually before him the flushed face of a lovely boy, the wide star-like eyes of his new-found love.

All that day the young priest went through the round of his various duties mechanically, but he could not eat nor sit quiet, for when alone, strange shrill bursts of song kept thrilling through his brain, and he felt that he must flee out into the open air or go mad.

At length, when night came, and the long, hot day had left him exhausted and worn out, he threw himself on his knees before his crucifix and compelled himself to think.

He called to mind his boyhood and his early youth; there returned to him the thought of the terrible struggles of the last five years. Here he knelt, Ronald Heatherington, priest of Holy Church, aged twenty-eight: what he had endured during these five years of fierce battling with those terrible passions he had fostered in his boyhood, was it all to be in vain? For the last year he had really felt that all passion was subdued, all those terrible outbursts of passionate love he had really believed to be stamped out for ever. He had worked so hard, so

unceasingly, through all these five years since his ordination—he had given himself up solely and entirely to his sacred office; all the intensity of his nature had been concentrated, completely absorbed, in the beautiful mysteries of his religion. He had avoided all that could affect him, all that might call up any recollection of his early life. Then he had accepted this curacy, with sole charge of the little chapel that stood close beside the cottage where he was now living, the little mission-chapel that was the most distant of the several grouped round the old Parish Church of St. Anselm. He had arrived only two or three days before, and, going to call on the old couple who lived in the cottage, the back of which formed the boundary of his own little garden, had been offered the services of their grandson as acolyte.

“My son was an artist fellow, sir,” the old man had said: “he never was satisfied here, so we sent him off to London; he was made a lot of there, sir, and married a lady, but the cold weather carried him off one winter, and his poor young wife was left with the baby. She brought him up and taught him herself, sir, but last winter she was taken too, so the poor lad came to live with us—so delicate he is, sir, and not one of the likes of us; he’s a gentleman born and bred, is Wilfred. His poor mother used to like him to go and serve at the church near them in London, and the boy was so fond of it himself that we thought, supposing you did not mind, sir, that it would be a treat for him to do the same here.”

“How old is the boy?” asked the young priest.

“Fourteen, sir,” replied the grandmother.

“Very well, let him come to the chapel to-morrow morning,” Ronald had agreed.

Entirely absorbed in his devotions, the young man had scarcely noticed the little acolyte who was serving for him, and it was not till he was hearing his confession later in the day that he had realized his wonderful loveliness.

“Ah God! help me! pity me! After all this weary labour and toil, just when I am beginning to hope, is every thing to be undone? am I to lose every thing? Help me, help me, O God!”

Even while he prayed; even while his hands were stretched out in agonized supplication towards the feet of that crucifix before which his hardest battles had been fought and won; even while the tears of bitter contrition and miserable self-mistrust were dimming his eyes—there came a soft tap on the glass of the window beside him. He rose to his feet, and wonderingly drew back the dingy curtain. There in the moonlight, before the open window, stood a small white figure—there, with his bare feet on the moon-blanching turf, dressed only in his long white night-shirt, stood his little acolyte, the boy who held his whole future in his small childish hands.

“Wilfred, what are you doing here?” he asked in a trembling voice.

“I could not sleep, father, for thinking of you, and I saw a light in your room, so I got out through the window and came to see you. Are you angry with me, father?” he asked, his voice faltering as he saw the almost fierce expression in the thin ascetic face.

“Why did you come to see me?” The priest hardly dared recognize the situation, and scarcely heard what the boy said.

“Because I love you, I love you—oh, so much! but you—you are angry with me—oh, why did I ever come! why did I ever come!—I never thought you would be angry!” and the little fellow sank on the grass and burst into tears.

The priest sprang through the open window, and seizing the slim little figure in his arms, he carried him into the room. He drew the curtain, and, sinking into the deep arm-chair, laid the little fair head upon his breast, kissing his curls again and again.

“O my darling! my own beautiful darling!” he whispered, “how could I ever be angry with you? You are more to me than all the world. Ah, God! how I love you, my darling! my own sweet darling!”

For nearly an hour the boy nestled there in his arms, pressing his soft cheek against his; then the priest told him he must go. For one long last kiss their lips met, and then the small white-clad figure slipped through the window, sped across the little moonlit garden, and vanished through the opposite window.

When they met in the vestry next morning, the lad raised his beautiful flower-like face, and the priest, gently putting his arms round him, kissed him tenderly on the lips.

“My darling! my darling!” was all he said; but the lad returned his kiss with a smile of wonderful almost heavenly love, in a silence that seemed to whisper something more than words.

“I wonder what was the matter with the father this morning?” said one old woman to another, as they were returning from the chapel; “he didn’t seem himself at all; he made more mistakes this morning than Father Thomas made in all the year he was here.”

“Seemed as if he had never said a Mass before!” replied her friend, with something of contempt.

And that night, and for many nights after, the priest, with the pale tired-looking face, drew the curtain over his crucifix and waited at the window for the glimmer of the pale summer moonlight on a crown of golden curls, for the sight of slim

boyish limbs clad in the long white night-shirt, that only emphasized the grace of every movement, and the beautiful pallor of the little feet speeding across the grass. There at the window, night after night, he waited to feel tender loving arms thrown round his neck, and to feel the intoxicating delight of beautiful boyish lips raining kisses on his own.

Ronald Heatherington made no mistakes in the Mass now. He said the solemn words with a reverence and devotion that made the few poor people who happened to be there speak of him afterwards almost with awe; while the face of the little acolyte at his side shone with a fervour which made them ask each other what this strange light could mean. Surely the young priest must be a saint indeed, while the boy beside him looked more like an angel from heaven than any child of human birth.

## PART II

HE world is very stern with those that thwart her. She lays down her precepts, and woe to those who dare to think for themselves, who venture to exercise their own discretion as to whether they shall allow their individuality and natural characteristics to be stamped out, to be obliterated under the leaden fingers of convention.

Truly, convention is the stone that has become head of the corner in the jerry-built temple of our superficial, self-assertive civilization.

*“And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.”*

If the world sees any thing she cannot understand, she assigns the basest motives to all concerned, supposing the presence of some secret shame, the idea of which, at least, her narrow-minded intelligence is able to grasp.

The people no longer regarded their priest as a saint, and his acolyte as an angel. They still spoke of them with bated breath and with their fingers on their lips; they still drew back out of the way when they met either of them; but now they gathered together in groups of twos and threes and shook their heads.

The priest and his acolyte heeded not; they never even noticed the suspicious glances and half-suppressed murmurs. Each had found in the other perfect sympathy and perfect love: what could the outside world matter to them now? Each was to the other the perfect fulfilment of a scarcely preconceived ideal; neither heaven nor hell could offer more. But the stone of convention had been undermined; the time could not be far distant when it must fall.

The moonlight was very clear and very beautiful; the cool night air was heavy with the perfume of the old-fashioned flowers that bloomed so profusely in the little garden. But in the priest's little room the closely drawn curtains shut out all the beauty of the night. Entirely forgetful of all the world, absolutely oblivious of every thing but one another, wrapped in the beautiful visions of a love that far outshone all the splendour of the summer night, the priest and the little acolyte were together.

The little lad sat on his knees with his arms closely pressed round his neck and his golden curls laid against the priest's close-cut hair; his white night-shirt contrasting strangely and beautifully with the dull black of the other's long cassock.

There was a step on the road outside—a step drawing nearer and nearer; a knock at the door. They heard it not; completely absorbed in each other, intoxicated with the sweetly poisonous draught that is the gift of love, they sat in silence. But the end had come: the blow had fallen at last. The door opened, and there before them in the doorway stood the tall figure of the rector.

Neither said any thing; only the little boy clung closer to his beloved, and his eyes grew large with fear. Then the young priest rose slowly to his feet and put the lad from him.

“You had better go, Wilfred,” was all he said.

The two priests stood in silence watching the child as he slipped through the window, stole across the grass, and vanished into the opposite cottage.

Then the two turned and faced each other.

The young priest sank into his chair and clasped his hands, waiting for the other to speak.

“So it has come to this!” he said: “the people were only too right in what they told me! Ah, God! that such a thing should have happened here! that it has fallen on me to expose your shame—our shame! that it is I who must give you up to justice, and see that you suffer the full penalty of your sin! Have you nothing to say?”

“Nothing—nothing,” he replied softly. “I cannot ask for pity: I cannot explain: you would never understand. I do not ask you any thing for myself, I do not ask you to spare me; but think of the terrible scandal to our dear Church.”

“It is better to expose these terrible scandals and see that they are cured. It is folly to conceal a sore: better show all our shame than let it fester.”

“Think of the child.”

“That was for you to do: you should have thought of him before. What has his shame to do with me? it was your business. Besides, I would not spare him if I could: what pity can I feel for such as he——?”

But the young man had risen, pale to the lips.

“Hush!” he said in a low voice; “I forbid you to speak of him before me with any thing but respect”; then softly to himself, “with any thing but reverence; with any thing but devotion.”

The other was silent, awed for the moment. Then his anger rose.

“Dare you speak openly like that? Where is your penitence, your shame? have you no sense of the horror of your sin?”

“There is no sin for which I should feel shame,” he answered very quietly. “God gave me my love for him, and He gave him also his love for me. Who is there that shall withstand God and the love that is His gift?”

“Dare you profane the name by calling such a passion as this ‘love’?”

“It was love, perfect love: it *is* perfect love.”

“I can say no more now; to-morrow all shall be known. Thank God, you shall pay dearly for all this disgrace,” he added, in a sudden outburst of wrath.

“I am sorry you have no mercy;—not that I fear exposure and punishment for myself. But mercy can seldom be found from a Christian,” he added, as one that speaks from without.

The rector turned towards him suddenly, and stretched out his hands.

“Heaven forgive me my hardness of heart,” he said. “I have been cruel; I have spoken cruelly in my distress. Ah, can you say nothing to defend your crime?”

“No: I do not think I can do any good by that. If I attempted to deny all guilt, you would only think I lied: though I should prove my innocence, yet my reputation, my career, my whole future, are ruined for ever. But will you listen to me for a little? I will tell you a little about myself.”

The rector sat down while his curate told him the story of his life, sitting by the empty grate with his chin resting on his clasped hands.

“I was at a big public school, as you know. I was always different from other boys. I never cared much for games. I took little interest in those things for which boys usually care so much. I was not very happy in my boyhood, I think. My one ambition was to find the ideal for which I longed. It has always been thus: I have always had an indefinite longing for something, a vague something that never quite took shape, that I could never quite understand. My great desire has always been to find something that would satisfy me. I was attracted at once by sin: my whole early life is stained and polluted with the taint of sin. Sometimes even now I think that there are sins more beautiful than any thing else in the world. There are vices that are bound to attract almost irresistibly any one who loves beauty above every thing. I have always sought for love: again and again I have been the victim of fits of passionate affection: time after time I have seemed to have found my ideal at last: the whole object of my life has been, times without number, to gain the love of some particular person. Several times my efforts were successful; each time I woke to find that the success I had

obtained was worthless after all. As I grasped the prize, it lost all its attraction—I no longer cared for what I had once desired with my whole heart. In vain I endeavoured to drown the yearnings of my heart with the ordinary pleasures and vices that usually attract the young. I had to choose a profession. I became a priest. The whole æsthetic tendency of my soul was intensely attracted by the wonderful mysteries of Christianity, the artistic beauty of our services. Ever since my ordination I have been striving to cheat myself into the belief that peace had come at last—at last my yearning was satisfied: but all in vain. Unceasingly I have struggled with the old cravings for excitement, and, above all, the weary, incessant thirst for a perfect love. I have found, and still find, an exquisite delight in religion: not in the regular duties of a religious life, not in the ordinary round of parish organizations;—against these I chafe incessantly;—no, my delight is in the æsthetic beauty of the services, the ecstasy of devotion, the passionate fervour that comes with long fasting and meditation.”

“Have you found no comfort in prayer?” asked the rector.

“Comfort?—no. But I have found in prayer pleasure, excitement, almost a fierce delight of sin.”

“You should have married. I think that would have saved you.”

Ronald Heatherington rose to his feet and laid his hand on the rector’s arm.

“You do not understand me. I have never been attracted by a woman in my life. Can you not see that people are different, totally different, from one another? To think that we are all the same is impossible; our natures, our temperaments, are utterly unlike. But this is what people will never see; they found all their opinions on a wrong basis. How can their deductions be just if their premisses are wrong? One law laid down by the majority, who happen to be of one disposition, is only binding on the minority *legally*, not *morally*. What right have you, or any one, to tell me that such and such a thing is sinful for me? Oh, why can I not explain to you and force you to see?” and his grasp tightened on the other’s arm. Then he continued, speaking fast and earnestly:—

“For me, with my nature, to have married would have been sinful: it would have been a crime, a gross immorality, and my conscience would have revolted.” Then he added, bitterly: “Conscience should be that divine instinct which bids us seek after that our natural disposition needs—we have forgotten that; to most of us, to the world, nay, even to Christians in general, conscience is merely another name for the cowardice that dreads to offend against convention. Ah, what a cursed thing convention is! I have committed no moral offence in this matter; in the sight of God my soul is blameless; but to you and to the world I am guilty of an abominable crime—abominable, because it is a sin against convention,

forsooth! I met this boy: I loved him as I had never loved any one or any thing before: I had no need to labour to win his affection—he was mine by right: he loved me, even as I loved him, from the first: he was the necessary complement to my soul. How dare the world presume to judge us? What is convention to us? Nevertheless, although I really knew that such a love was beautiful and blameless, although from the bottom of my heart I despised the narrow judgment of the world, yet for his sake and for the sake of our Church, I tried at first to resist. I struggled against the fascination he possessed for me. I would never have gone to him and asked his love; I would have struggled on till the end: but what could I do? It was he that came to me, and offered me the wealth of love his beautiful soul possessed. How could I tell to such a nature as his the hideous picture the world would paint? Even as you saw him this evening, he has come to me night by night,—how dare I disturb the sweet purity of his soul by hinting at the horrible suspicions his presence might arouse? I knew what I was doing. I have faced the world and set myself up against it. I have openly scoffed at its dictates. I do not ask you to sympathize with me, nor do I pray you to stay your hand. Your eyes are blinded with a mental cataract. You are bound, bound with those miserable ties that have held you body and soul from the cradle. You must do what you believe to be your duty. In God's eyes we are martyrs, and we shall not shrink even from death in this struggle against the idolatrous worship of convention.”

Ronald Heatherington sank into a chair, hiding his face in his hands, and the rector left the room in silence.

For some minutes the young priest sat with his face buried in his hands. Then with a sigh he rose and crept across the garden till he stood beneath the open window of his darling.

“Wilfred,” he called very softly.

The beautiful face, pale and wet with tears, appeared at the window.

“I want you, my darling; Will you come?” he whispered.

“Yes, father,” the boy softly answered.

The priest led him back to his room; then, taking him very gently in his arms, he tried to warm the cold little feet with his hands.

“My darling, it is all over.” And he told him as gently as he could all that lay before them.

The boy hid his face on his shoulder, crying softly.

“Can I do nothing for you, dear father?”

He was silent for a moment. "Yes, you can die for me; you can die with me."

The loving arms were about his neck once more, and the warm, loving lips were kissing his own. "I will do any thing for you. O father, let us die together!"

"Yes, my darling, it is best: we will."

Then very quietly and very tenderly he prepared the little fellow for his death; he heard his last confession and gave him his last absolution. Then they knelt together, hand in hand, before the crucifix.

"Pray for me, my darling."

Then together their prayers silently ascended that the dear Lord would have pity on the priest who had fallen in the terrible battle of life. There they knelt till midnight, when Ronald took the lad in his arms and carried him to the little chapel.

"I will say mass for the repose of our souls," he said.

Over his night-shirt the child arrayed himself in his little scarlet cassock and tiny lace cotta. He covered his naked feet with the scarlet sanctuary shoes; he lighted the tapers and reverently helped the priest to vest. Then before they left the vestry the priest took him in his arms and held him pressed closely to his breast; he stroked the soft hair and whispered cheerily to him. The child was weeping quietly, his slender frame trembling with the sobs he could scarcely suppress. After a moment the tender embrace soothed him, and he raised his beautiful mouth to the priest's. Their lips were pressed together, and their arms wrapped one another closely.

"Oh, my darling, my own sweet darling!" the priest whispered tenderly.

"We shall be together for ever soon; nothing shall separate us now," the child said.

"Yes, it is far better so; far better to be together in death than apart in life."

They knelt before the altar in the silent night, the glimmer of the tapers lighting up the features of the crucifix with strange distinctness. Never had the priest's voice trembled with such wonderful earnestness, never had the acolyte responded with such devotion, as at this midnight Mass for the peace of their own departing souls.

Just before the consecration the priest took a tiny phial from the pocket of his cassock, blessed it, and poured the contents into the chalice.

When the time came for him to receive from the chalice, he raised it to his lips, but did not taste of it.

He administered the sacred wafer to the child, and then he took the beautiful gold chalice, set with precious stones, in his hand; he turned towards him; but when he saw the light in the beautiful face he turned again to the crucifix with a low moan. For one instant his courage failed him; then he turned to the little fellow again, and held the chalice to his lips:

*“The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life.”*

Never had the priest beheld such perfect love, such perfect trust, in those dear eyes as shone from them now; now, as with face raised upwards he received his death from the loving hands of him that he loved best in the whole world.

The instant he had received, Ronald fell on his knees beside him and drained the chalice to the last drop. He set it down and threw his arms round the beautiful figure of his dearly loved acolyte. Their lips met in one last kiss of perfect love, and all was over.

When the sun was rising in the heavens it cast one broad ray upon the altar of the little chapel. The tapers were burning still, scarcely half-burnt through. The sad-faced figure of the crucifix hung there in its majestic calm. On the steps of the altar was stretched the long, ascetic frame of the young priest, robed in the sacred vestments; close beside him, with his curly head pillowed on the gorgeous embroideries that covered his breast, lay the beautiful boy in scarlet and lace. Their arms were round each other; a strange hush lay like a shroud over all.

*“And whomever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.”*

X.

*June, 1894.*



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