

The New Utopia.

(From the Irish Monthly.)

CHAPTER VI.—continued.

The familiar name struck on my ear and raised a host of recollections.

"Ah," said one of the men of science, "I've been down there lately. You know the improvement of the mines is one of the duke's hobbies."

"And not merely mines, is it?" said the secretary. "I've heard a good deal of his work among the people."

"Just so," replied the scientific gentleman, "he's always at something; you know it would puzzle the calculating boy to number his hobbies; but the last thing has been the mines, and really his ideas about ventilation are very creditable."

"You are speaking, I presume, of the Duke of Leven?" I inquired.

"Ah, yes, you would have known him, of course, before going to Australia. Curious history his has been, certainly."

"He is really an excellent fellow," said Sir Clinton, but not long for this world, I fear; I never saw a man so altered."

"Well, he is a very good fellow, of course," said the county member; "but he is carrying things too far, to my mind."

"How so?" I ventured to ask.

"Oh, I don't know exactly; lives the life of a hermit, which, in his position is a mistake, and does mischief; and then he's always sporting some social view or other; setting himself a little against the current. One thing, you know, he's a Catholic."

"Yes," observed the second man of science, who till now had spoken but little, "it's a great pity that. Cuts a man of his standing so completely out of everything. He can't take his proper place in general society, parliament, or anywhere."

"Well," began the editor, of all the idiotic absurdities a man can be guilty of, I should say that was the primest. I declare it would justify a commission of lunacy."

"I'm afraid that's the real explanation of the whole thing," said the county member looking sagacious, and touching his forehead; "there certainly is a touch in the top story."

"Touch or no touch," said Sir Clinton, "he has done wonders at Bradford. I know it by the results at the sessions."

"And may I ask what he has done?" said the editor, with the slightest possible tone of sarcasm.

"Changed the whole system of wages, shut up about twenty public-houses, and, really, I don't know how he has managed it, but they're not so brutalized by half since he's had the manor."

"And if I am rightly informed (you'll correct me, of course, if I am in error), but I understood he had brought over a lot of German monks and built them a monastery."

"Ah, yes," said Sir Clinton, "that's at Glenleven, on the moors, you know. Well, it's one of his crotchets, and perhaps, not the most sensible."

The secretary shook his head, and looked disgusted. "I know that we shall have to put a stop to all that sort of thing some day," he said, "and the sooner the better, in my opinion."

Then the conversation, by an easy change, flowed into foreign politics, and I was left to digest all I had heard, and form my own conclusions. Was Leven really a little touched? Was he unpopular? Or was he dying? Had his ten years of boundless means produced as their whole result an improved system of wages and mine ventilation, and the building of a monastery? And did he fritter away his genius and his undoubted powers in a quick succession of profitless hobbies?

I should go down next day to Oakham and judge for myself.

CHAPTER VII. RETURNING HOME.

My first week at Oakham was given to my family. I had to be introduced to my new brother-in-law, Oswald, who had brought Mary over from Exdale Manor, that we might all be once more together. The duke had been called away to Scotland, and, to tell the truth, I was not sorry to have time and opportunity for rectifying my ideas on the new order of things before meeting him. My father praised him highly, for was he not a Leven? That single fact sufficed for him; nor would I have disturbed the simplicity of his loyalty to the representative of the old family by so much as a question. My mother had a special kindness for him, only regretting that he had never married. Mr. Edwards, as courteous and harmonious as ever, fully seconded her regrets, and suggested that the influence of a refined and affectionate wife might have softened something of that austerity of character which he humbly conceived was out of tune with the century. His curate, the Rev. Wilfred Knowles, who happened to be present, said nothing, but I thought he looked a good deal, and on inquiry, I found that the curate held more advanced views than the vicar, and was supposed to have what Mrs. Edwards termed "monastic tendencies."

All this explained but little. Oswald informed me the general impression in the county was that his politics were revolutionary; but the solitary fact in support of this theory appeared to be that his first act on coming to Oakham had been to lower his farmers' rents on condition that they raised the rate of their labourers' wages. Mary said it was all malice, and that they did not understand him. She evidently was his warm friend, and her husband declared that she did what she liked with him.

On the third day after my arrival, I strolled up to the park in company with Oswald, and could not help observing with a little surprise that the pineries and forcing-houses kept their ground, and had even apparently received some additions. I inquired for my old friend Jones, but found he had departed, and that his place was filled by one of a younger generation.

"I half expected he would have made a clean sweep of all this," I said "he used to inveigh against it all as though grapes in June had been one of the deadly sins."

"Ah!" said Oswald, that was Mary's doing. She suggested to him that if he did not choose to grow grapes and apricots for his own table, he would be doing a good work to grow them for other people and that they would be like gifts from paradise if he sent them to the hospitals. So now every week they are packed up and sent to the Exborough Infirmary, and the County Hospital, and half-a-dozen other institutions, not to speak of his own affair that he has founded at Bradford.

"Really that was a bright idea of old Mary's," I said; "who would ever have thought of her taking the command in that style?"

"Yes," and she gets her own perquisites, I believe," said Oswald, "with which she makes happy all the sick people of the neighbourhood."

"How about the orchids?" I asked, rather maliciously.

"Oh, as to them, you had better ask Verney." And so saying, he led the way to a small enclosure where a young and intelligent-looking man was superintending the packing of various cases of fruit and flowers. I looked at the rich fruit, no longer grown for show or luxury, and felt pleased to think of its altered destination. "And the flowers?" I asked, amazed at the quantity which were being delicately packed in a cool moss, about to be carried off to the station.

"To Bradford, sir, and Honchester," replied Verney, the head gardener, "and one or two other missions. Thursday will be Corpus Christi, and they use a wonderful quantity of flowers."

"Hm!" I thought; "I see all about it; what used to go to the dinner-table and the ball-room he sends to the hospital and the altar. Well, that is like old Grant;" and it gave me a glow of pleasure.

I soon found that Verney was a Catholic, as were several of the men now employed about the place, and I heard from him that a private chapel had been added to the house, which sufficed for the wants of the few Oakham Catholics. But a magnificent church had replaced the old and miserable erection at Bradford; and there was a convent with nuns who worked the schools and served the hospital; and, besides that, half the town had been rebuilt, and the wretched dens which formerly abounded were replaced by model lodging-houses.

"The duke himself has a house at Bradford," said Oswald, "and spends a good deal of time there; how he can endure it, I don't know, but he sees to all manner of things himself, for at heart, you know, he likes business."

"I suspect also, Oswald," said I, "that he has a liking for souls."

"Well, I should have thought Bradford about the last place to have supplied him with that commodity," said Oswald; very queer style of souls he must find among the colliers, and not the most responsive, for just now they seem greatly disposed to stone him by way of showing their gratitude."

"How so? Is he not popular?"

"Not with all. You see, he attempts to limit their means of making beasts of themselves, and many resent it like true-born Britons. They've got a fellow named Degg to lead them now, who possesses a tongue, and a quite remarkable gift of slander, of which he gives the duke a weekly benefit in a rascally penny paper, which he edits, and which he sells by thousands. It's a grand thing is our education movement; it enables each man now-a-days to read his Degg."

"Would you like to see the chapel, sir?" said Verney.

"Immensely," I replied. And leaving his flowers in charge of one of the men in attendance, he led the way towards the building. It had an approach through the shrubberies as well as from the house for the convenience of the congregation; and Verney, having found means of informing the chaplain of my presence, left me in the hands of that gentleman and returned to his green-houses.

The Oakham chapel was small in size, and my first impression of it was rather devotional than magnificent. Except in the east window there was no painted glass; but through the open casements came the sound of waving branches, and the green and pleasant light which falls through summer foliage.

After a few minutes, I began to take in some of the details. Though the chapel was Gothic in style, the architect had contrived to find places for several pictures, some of which struck my eye as familiar. I remarked it to the chaplain. "Probably," he replied, "you may remember them formerly in the Bradford collection; the Crucifixion which you see there used to hang in the great dining-room. It had been a Spanish altar-piece I think, and the duke said it was a sacrilege to put such a painting over a gentleman's side-board."

"And at the same time that he removed it," whispered Oswald, "he burned half-a-dozen Venuses and Adonises, which had been the glory of old Bradford's gallery: a fact, I assure you; and at Christie's they would have brought their thousands."

The paintings had, in fact, been taken from various parts of the ducal mansion: all, with one exception, a singular picture, painted, as the chaplain told me, by a young German artist, under the duke's personal direction. It was a single figure, representing a young man in poor and squalid attire, lying on a bed of straw, and clasping a crucifix. The back-ground was dark, and there were few or no pictorial adjuncts; only in one corner of the picture appeared something like a ladder or flight of steps above the head of the principal figure. All the beauty of the painting was in that head; wasted, sweet, superhuman in its expression, carrying me back to the description which Grant had once given of old Father Henry Young's countenance, in which the pride of flesh and blood had all been destroyed and obliterated.

"What a singular picture," said Oswald. "Who is it? a saint?"

"It is St. Alexis," replied the chaplain, and Oswald evidently was not greatly the wiser. But I looked, and thought and looked again, and I fancied I had understood its meaning. The noble youth who fed the world, who despised pleasure, and held riches as a curse, the prince who chose, in his own father's house, to live unknown, and to die as a beggar, was, doubtless, one whose story might have a deep attraction for a man made rich against his will, and ever-fighting with wealth and its temptations.