

THE STORY OF AMBROSE HERNE.

(From "Conversations with Cousin Rachel, Part III.")

It is now nearly 200 years since the people of England rebelled against their king, and put him to death—King Charles the Martyr, for whom there is a service in the Prayer-book; and he is called a martyr because he chose rather to suffer death than to give up the cause of the Church in England. When he was dead, the Church had no human protector in England,—that is, there was at that time no man able to stand up in defence of the Church of England, although there were many willing, like their king, to die for it; but the bishops were driven away, and the clergymen were obliged to leave their parishes, or were shut up in prison; and the great men and lords of the nation, who had fought and suffered for their king, were either dead or banished. The rebels had quarrelled among themselves, and could not agree how they should be governed, after they had killed their king and driven away his son, till the power was seized by one of the cleverest of them, named Oliver Cromwell, who ruled over England from 1649, when King Charles I. was murdered, till nearly 1660, when his son, King Charles II., was called home, and restored to reign over his rightful kingdom. During this time, the faithful subjects of the king and children of the Church were often oppressed, and especially in this—that it was made unlawful to use the services of the Prayer-book, even privately. This oppression was sometimes greater, sometimes less, according as it suited Cromwell's interests to favour one set of people or another, or according as his conscience at times reproached him for his conduct to the king, and to the king's faithful subjects.—At the time when this story begins, Oliver Cromwell was established in his power, and King Charles II. was driven from the kingdom.

Ambrose Herne was an orphan, and was brought up by his uncle; but you must know first who his parents were. Stephen Herne, the father of Ambrose, was a tenant of Sir Francis Egerton of Marston Hall, and lived in a farm of his till the rebellion began.—His wife Mildred had been waiting-maid to Lady Egerton, the mother of Sir Francis; and they lived both much attached to the family. They lived happily and peacefully till the beginning of the troubles; but when Sir Francis raised a troop to serve the king, Stephen was among the first to belong to it; and he fought bravely and loyally in the good cause. He left his wife and infant son at Marston Hall, under the care of the good Lady Egerton; and when he died in battle, they remained there still, and Mildred was comforted and protected by her kind mistress; but though she bore her affliction patiently, she did not live many years after it, and the orphan Ambrose was soon left altogether friendless; for Marston Hall was seized by the rebels, and Lady Egerton was taken to prison. It was then that his uncle Richard took him into his house, and brought him up with his own children.

Richard Herne had never served his king as Stephen had; nor had he, like Stephen, remained faithful to the Church, but had listened to the new teachers, who drew people away from their loyalty, and taught them that rebellion was no sin. After the king's death, he lived in ease and plenty; and his brother Stephen's farm was given to him, instead of being inherited by Ambrose. He let his nephew share in the plenty of his house; but Ambrose was not happy there. It was not because he had been deprived of his father's property that he was not happy—he was too young to think about that; but he could not forget his mother, nor those things which his mother taught him. She had taught him to say the Lord's prayer and the creed as soon as he could speak, and these were never repeated in his uncle's house. She had taken him every Sunday to church; and as soon as he could read, she had made him follow the service in her Prayer-book, and join in the responses. But his uncle had no Prayer-book; and when he went to church, it was to hear the prayers said by the new ministers, after their own fancy. His mother had taught him to speak of holy things in few words and those full of reverence; to fear to dishonour God's holy Name; and to bow humbly and quietly into His presence; to kneel and to bow before Him. But in his uncle's house holy things were spoken of rashly, hastily, and disrespectfully. When they went to church, they did not uncover their heads; and when they prayed to the high God who is in heaven, it was in such a manner as would have been too bold to an earthly father or master. His mother had taught him to think with grateful pleasure and humble awe of the blessings of his Baptism, and the vow which was then made for him; and to look forward to receiving the confirmation of those blessings, by the laying on of the bishop's hands, and renewing his vow before the congregation. She had taught him to look on, beyond this, to the other holy Sacrament, which was to bring him into full communion with Christ and His Church. But his uncle thought lightly of Sacraments, and renounced the authority of bishops. He followed one minister or another, after his own fancy, and obeyed none except as he felt inclined. His mother had taught him that God's word bids us honour the king, and his uncle told him that he had no king; for he who had reigned over England was now dead, and his son was a wanderer in a foreign land. Ambrose was not happy, for he could not forget his mother and her instructions. His heart never opened to his uncle; nor, indeed, did the hearts of Richard Herne's own children open to him. He was a stern man, not unkind in his family, but severe and rigid. He wished his sons and nephew to be religious after his notions of religion; and he talked much to them, and expected them to talk much of it. His eldest son, Simon, talked of it as much as he could wish, and in the very words that Richard taught him. He copied his father's manner, and was grave and strict like him. He wished to be thought religious; and so he made up for the want of a really religious heart, which would have produced a reverent and becoming demeanour, by affecting a constant seriousness.

The next son, Ralph, took a contrary turn; he was disgusted by the talk of which he heard so much, avoided his father's presence, and followed as much as he could his own inclinations. Presently the clergyman began to read, and Ambrose knew the Evening Service of the Church. He remembered the first sentence and the exhortation; and at the confession he knelt down and repeated the words after the minister. He listened whilst the absolution was pronounced; and when the Lord's prayer was read he joined in it aloud; for he repeated it daily by himself, though he had not heard it since he left this house. And when the Psalms for the day were given out, and then the chapters, it brought back to Ambrose such a remembrance of the regular succession of services to which he was once accustomed that his heart felt as full as it had done just before on the terrace; but now it was with pleasure and hope, instead of despondency. It almost seemed to him like a dream, and he felt afraid of waking from it. When the service was ended, the clergyman preached to his flock. He exhorted them to patience under their troubles and difficulties, and to perseverance in the old ways of their holy Mother, the Church; he spoke of the quietness and confidence in which is strength. Ambrose had never heard any one speak as this clergyman did; for he spoke as the commissioned minister of God, calmly relying on the dignity of his office, and the might that was with him. The boy could not take his eyes from that tranquil countenance; and his ears drank in every sound of the soft voice, which spoke so gently, and yet so awfully, as in the presence of the Master who sent him; whose message he delivered with no such rude gestures or loud tones as Ambrose was accustomed to see, to hear, and to shrink from. He spoke to the baptised children of God in the name of the Father who was watching them; he spoke to the members of Christ, who had promised to be present among the two or three gathered together; he spoke to the inheritors of the

kingdom of heaven, and warned them not to forfeit their inheritance. Ambrose looked and listened as awe-struck, and yet charmed; he listened till the sermon ended, and all fell on their knees for the parting prayer and the blessing. That blessing came upon the heart of Ambrose with peace and refreshment, exhausted as he felt from the rush of thoughts which the last few hours had brought. After all the rest of the congregation had risen and gone out, Ambrose remained still kneeling—still with his hands pressed before his eyes. When at last he looked up, he saw the clergyman alone, watching him with an inquiring, but kind expression. He started up then; and before he had time to decide whether he dared approach one for whom he felt a deep reverence, the minister of God stood close by him, and in a mild tone asked from whence he came.

"You seem," he said, "to be a stranger here." "I am here by chance this evening." "I came hither by chance this evening." "Not by chance, I would believe, but rather by the guidance of Providence; if, as it seems, the words of our holy service have fallen on unaccustomed but not indifferent ears. Is it so, that this holy service is strange to you?" "O no, not strange!" said Ambrose, gathering courage; "I used to hear it once, when my mother was living. I always heard it then." And while he spoke, his eyes again filled with tears.

The clergyman looked at him kindly, tenderly; more tenderly, Ambrose thought, than any countenance had looked on him since his mother died; or at least since he left the friends with whom his mother had lived.

"Have you lost your mother, then, my poor boy? Have you no mother living?" "No sir; I am an orphan." "And with whom do you live?" "With my uncle; but I am staying now with my cousin at the farm—Marstone farm."

"With Simon Herne? Is he your cousin? Can it be that you are the son of Stephen Herne, that faithful servant of the Egertons and of the king? You are not his son?" "I am his son," Ambrose replied. The clergyman took his hand eagerly.

"My boy, are you indeed the son of that true-hearted man, and that gentle Mildred whom Lady Egerton loved so much? O that this house could receive you now! But I am its lonely inhabitant, ministering to my flock in secret, and without means to provide for your necessities, even were you able and willing to part from your relations. I can do nothing for you," he ended, in a dejected tone.

"O sir," said Ambrose, with an impulse which overcame his shyness, "you can do all for me." The clergyman looked at him earnestly and understood his meaning. "My child," he said, "God can do all for you. But you rightly reprove my unbelief. Here is still a refuge, whilst one servant of God remains to speak in His name to offer up the prayers of His Church. Yes; here is your refuge. Come hither as often as you can, and as privately as may be, without deceit. You shall ever find a welcome. Let the words which you have heard already be your farewell for to-night. In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength."

Ambrose carried home those words in his heart, and they became the watchword of his life. In quietness and in confidence he found strength. From that Sunday evening he came daily to Mr. Vincent to receive his instructions, and he shared in all the services of the Church. Eagerly he listened, and deeply he treasured what he heard, and endeavoured to practise it in his daily course. At home he worked diligently at his uncle's business; and by his private prayer he sought and gained continual help.

Mr. Vincent was always kind and tender towards him, but not weakly indulgent. He required much from his pupil, and shewed him how to perform such a power that was not his own. Ambrose, who had been disgusted and discouraged by the teaching he had hitherto heard, received Mr. Vincent's with entire submission, and with firm purpose to act upon it. If any precept seemed hard, he strove but the more earnestly to fulfil it, and took a pleasure in the effort it cost him to get the better of himself. Day by day he felt his mind more at rest; and as the rosebud slowly unfolds to perfect beauty, so did this young Christian grow to Christian holiness. Thus passed his days in trial, yet in peace. He had to bear ill-humour and coldness from Simon, harshness from his uncle, ridicule from Ralph. When, by degrees, they discovered his intercourse with Mr. Vincent, they employed all that reproach and mockery could do in the way of persecution; and when actual persecution was stirred up against Mr. Vincent, Ambrose shared his dangers and his troubles.

At length the time arrived when King Charles II. was restored to his kingdom; and with him those who were restored to England who had been banished for his sake. Sir Francis Egerton was one of them, and he came to live again at Marstone Hall. Richard Herne was now dead, and Simon occupied the farm. Ambrose made no attempt to have him removed, and regain possession of it; but when Sir Francis sent for him, as the son of an old servant of the family, and asked what he could do for him, he gratefully accepted the offer of being received into his service. He had a recollection of Sir Francis in his own boyhood; and he entered on his service with a happy heart, full of zeal for his master, and full of thankfulness for the fulfilment of all his long-cherished wishes. The old village-church was now open again for the performance of the service which had been continued in secret during the years of trouble; the font, which had been hidden, in order to save it from injury, stood again by the ancient doorway; the holy Table was restored to the east end of the church; and the fragments of painted glass, which had been preserved when the windows were shattered by the rebels, were now replaced with the best care and skill. Mr. Vincent, who had for several years before the rebellion served the church of Marstone as curate to the aged rector, and had remained still watching over his flock after the church was closed to him, now returned to the discharge of all his duties. And daily did the sound of the church-bell gladden the heart of Ambrose, and its open door invited him to enter those holy courts with praise, to fall down and worship.

Yet harder trials than those of the days of persecution were now to come upon Ambrose; they came from an unexpected source, from his own master.—Sir Francis had returned after that he went. In his wandering life he had taken up idle, dissipated habits, and when he came home, he led a life of rioting and wastefulness. Those long-deserted walls of the old manor-house echoed with sounds of clamour and profaneness, sadder to Ambrose than their former silence and solitariness. He did not feel tempted to join in such mirth, as many of his fellow-servants did; it gave him too much pain. He did not feel inclined to change his long-established habits; but he found himself oppressed and confused by evil example where he expected good. He found it difficult to reconcile duty and obedience to his master with steadfast resistance to evil. Still he persevered. He said nothing about his difficulties—nothing, except to Mr. Vincent, and even to him, but little of that which concerned others than himself, but went on steadily and sally.

It was the Whitsuntide following the year of the king's restoration, when, on an evening bright as that on which he first met Mr. Vincent, Ambrose went alone to the same flower-border, where the rosebud had once recalled so many thoughts to his mind. He came there in a sorrowful mood, though of a different kind from that which had formerly possessed him. He had just risen from a scene of riotous festivity, in which his master's tenants and servants were indulging,—alas! to celebrate the holy festival; Ralph was amongst them, and Simon—yes, Simon having once been persuaded to join in mirth, which he

had formerly condemned in its most innocent form, had not known where to stop; and no longer supported by the praise of strictness, he plunged headlong into sinful pleasures.

Ambrose had left them, pursued, as usual, by mockery and the reproach of hypocrisy. He came to his favourite garden-terrace, where, at his leisure hours, he was accustomed to work at getting it into order, clearing away the bushes from below, and cultivating the flowers with care. He was sadly and thoughtfully busied at his work, when Mr. Vincent passed near the Hall, and he asked no questions of Ambrose; nor did Ambrose say why he was there alone, or why he was sorrowful. Mr. Vincent knew but too well. But Ambrose did not know the sorrowful news which Mr. Vincent had to announce to him. The aged rector of Marstone was lately dead; and Sir Francis, in order to rid himself of the watchful eye from which he shrink, had given the living to a young clergyman, who was coming at once to reside there, and to fill Mr. Vincent's place.

When Ambrose heard that Mr. Vincent was going to leave Marstone, the tears came into his eyes.—Then he said, earnestly, "I may go with you, sir?—I can maintain myself by my labour, and I might serve you too."

"If you ask to go with me, Ambrose," said Mr. Vincent, "I cannot refuse you. But if you ask me what you should do, I should give you a different answer."

"I will ask you, sir," said Ambrose, after a short silence, "what would you have me do?" "I would have you remain here," answered his minister. "Do not think I have decided lightly on advising you to remain in a scene of trial and of temptation. I have thought anxiously and deeply for you. I can but tell you the desire which is earnest in my mind. I can trust you in this point of difficulty. I would not have you leave it. I would have you remain here, to bear silent witness of example against that which passes here. Only persevere as you have hitherto done. You know not of what good you may be the instrument; you know not whom you may influence. It is not for you to look forward, or to count on doing great things; but go on steadily. 'In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength.' If ever the trial becomes too great—if your heart faints with weariness, or if temptation presses too hard, then come to me. I need not promise you a welcome. But, Ambrose, if you can, I wish you to remain near your master. I must leave him."

"I will do what you bid me," Ambrose answered, with his eyes sadly fixed on the ground. "Only, sir, he had to pray for your poor Ambrose, when you are gone away."

Just then the bell began to call to the evening service, and its sound came to both of them with comfort and encouragement. To Ambrose it was the voice of his Mother—the Mother who would never forsake him; he could not now sink into despondency. To the clergyman it spoke of his high and holy duties. He went down to the church, followed by Ambrose; and when they parted after the service, each spoke in a more cheerful tone than they had done in the garden.

Ambrose obeyed his minister, and stayed. It was long before he could see what good was done by his staying; yet by degrees some little ground was gained. He had less mockery to endure; for, in spite of themselves, his fellow-servants learnt to respect him. He felt that he had some hold upon Ralph, and that though he was now but too wild, without his influence he would be wilder still. But the time came at last, which shewed the importance of his stay. Sir Francis fell dangerously ill; and, in his illness, could bear no attendance but that of the faithful servant, who had never copied the example of his evil ways: he could not bear to see any of the companions of his excesses. Ambrose was with him day and night; and sometimes, during those long and anxious watchings, he could breathe a few words in his master's ear, which brought back the pure and happy thoughts of early years—a few words of the Church-service, or a verse of a psalm, which he had once learned from his mother. After a time, Ambrose gained his consent to that which he had at first vehemently refused, the attendance of a clergyman. By degrees his illness abated, and he was able to form more deliberate purposes of repentance; but whilst the strength of Sir Francis was gradually restored, that of Ambrose was fast failing. He had caught the fever from his master, and by a strong effort and the fervour of mind which upheld his body, he had still kept his place by his master's bedside; but as the motive for his exertion lessened, he gave way, and at last resigned himself to lie down on a sick bed. With calm and cheerful spirit, he lay down there when he felt that his work was done, and in spite of all the care and solicitude bestowed by those around him, he felt a deep conviction that he should not rise from it again. Mr. Vincent heard of his illness, and came to see him. He found Marstone Hall changed since he left it; all was quiet there now. Sir Francis received him with the humility and contrition of a sincere penitent; and after an interview with him, Mr. Vincent was conducted to the sick bed of Ambrose. He was welcomed by a smile of deep happiness.—Ambrose seized his hand, and kissed it. First, he thanked him earnestly for bidding him stay at Marstone, and then, as earnestly, for coming to see him in his sickness. He spoke with ardent gratitude of his master's kindness and care for him; then, being rather exhausted by speaking, he lay still, silently looking at Mr. Vincent. The minister of the parish readily consented that Ambrose's earliest friend should attend upon him in his sickness, should read and pray by his bedside, and administer to him the holy Communion. It was a peaceful decline. He said little; but listened, with glistering eyes and ardent looks of fixed attention, to every word that came from Mr. Vincent's lips, whilst his clasped hands shewed how fervently he joined in the prayers that were offered up. So day passed after day, till he became too weak to hear more than a few words at a time, or to take much notice of any sound but that of Mr. Vincent's voice, or the church-bells, when they called to morning and evening service. One summer evening, when the service was ended, and Mr. Vincent returned from attending it, he found the room where Ambrose lay more still than usual. The flowers which were, by order of Sir Francis, daily brought to him from his favourite terrace, lay unnoticed on his bed. He did not raise his eyes at the sound of Mr. Vincent's voice. The minister knelt down, and read the prayer for the departing; and when he arose, and pressed the hand which no longer returned his pressure, he knew that the spirit had fled. Sir Francis mourned for his faithful servant, whilst he mourned for his own errors; and Ralph, who had waited tenderly on his cousin during his illness, took to heart the lesson of his death. He occupied Marstone Farm when Simon left it (as he did, not long after); and amongst the few to whom Ambrose was known, he was not soon forgotten. The green mound in the churchyard which marked his grave was not unnoticed, and roses from the garden-terrace were sometimes to be seen there. And so ended a life, of which quietness and confidence were the strength.

"He could not trust his melting soul. But in his Maker's sight."

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