

"I have to meet some friends—private friends," he muttered; "and yet, methinks, I can trust you."

He looked at me wistfully.

I assured him he would find no enemy in me, and the look of mistrust melted away.

"Come," he said.

We walked together through many streets, all silent and deserted. My companion told me that the people had gathered in or near Olympia in obedience to the command of the Pope.

"Some are in hiding," he added, with a shy glance in my direction. "And it is said that many thousands, who in their hearts deny this man allegiance, are skulking here and there to-day."

By this time I was athirst; and as it had been my habit to drink a glass of mild ale when I needed it, I looked around me for some inn or respectable public-house. But I saw none.

Remarking on this to my companion, he told me that there were no open drinking places for the sale of intoxicating liquors in the country. I was amazed thereat, and marvelled why I had not heard of this before.

"What has become of the great brewers?" I asked.

"Dead, or in prison, and their estates confiscated for the benefit of the children of deceased drunkards."

"They might be put to a worse use than that," I remarked.

"There are whispers," said my companion, quietly, "of the funds being misappropriated. Heavy salaries are paid to the officers who are high in favour with the Pope. They say, too, that fourth-fifths of the children receiving the benefit of the charity are not the children of deceased drunkards, but the offspring of living members of the Army."

"The charities of the last century suffered from abuse," I said. "But what of the publicans?"

"All banished to the recently-discovered North Pole, there to expiate their sins as purveyors of destruction to the people," replied my companion. "And, again, it is said that many a man goes thither who is not a publican, but simply obnoxious to the Pope."

"As like as not," I said. "Well, as no drink is to be had I will fall back upon an old friend—a cigar. There may be a tobaccoist handy."

"Nay," interposed the old man; "the tobaccoists went with the publicans. One great manufacturer of tobacco has been publicly whipped for ignoring the Papal edict against the manufacture and sale of tobacco in any form. It scared the rest. You see, no man can enter the Army if he drinks or smokes, and as all are commanded to enter the Army the tobaccoed trades had to give way."

"And if a man not a tobaccoist or a publican refuses to enter the Army—what then?"

"He is either imprisoned or banished, and there is talk of a few heretics being burned as a check against growing signs of rebellion against his Holiness. But here we are. Follow me, and do not speak unless you are addressed by one of the members of the Band of the New Reformation."

CHAPTER III.

A MEETING OF DISSENTERS.

My companion tapped lightly upon the door three times. After a short delay it was opened a few inches, and somebody within said—

"The word?"

To which, in response, my companion whispered—

"Reformation!"

Immediately the door was thrown open and we entered.

In the passage stood a tall young fellow, whose appearance suggested an athlete of one of the Universities as I had known them in my youth, and this, notwithstanding the fact that he was wearing a red jersey, on which was embossed the familiar but, to me, always terrible motto, "Blood and Fire."

"I beg your pardon, my lord," he said; "we did not expect you to-day."

"I have brought a friend with me," my companion answered.

The young athlete, who by this time had closed and barred the door, led the way to the back of the house, where he opened another door, showing the way to a cellar.

Descending about a dozen steps, I found myself in an underground place, about fifteen feet long and twelve wide, from which all daylight had been carefully excluded.

In the centre was a table, around which about a dozen men were seated, with one at the head, who acted as president or chairman.

A small lamp was hanging from the ceiling, and by its weird, imperfect glare I was able to see the faces of those assembled.

They were a mixed body, as I judged—bankrupts in purse, if thread-bare clothing is any guide to that condition, and clericals of various denominations.

I could have gone round and laid a finger on each, saying to one, "You are a Bishop," to another, "You are a Dean," to a third, "You are a shining light among the Baptists," to a fourth, "The Congregationalists own you for a mainstay," and so on.

Church and Dissent were pretty evenly represented—drawn together, as it seemed to me, into close brotherhood by the bonds of oppression.