IN EXCHANGE FOR HIS SOUL.

By FRANCIS W. GREY, in the Canadian Messenger of the Sacred Heart.

"The air is full of farewells to the dying."—

—Longfellow.

New Year's eve in the old town of Edinburgh, and old Angus Ferguson lay dying. Dying, amid the din of revelry, of drunken cries, of clanging bells; dying with the old year. The priest had been summoned, for the old man was resolved to pass — f God pleased—to the Great Assize, as his Catholic forbears had done, "fortified with the rites of the Holy Church." Meanwhile, there was one last farewell to take of his son Donald.

"Laddie," he said, faintly, breathing with difficulty, for the end was very near, "my ain laddie, kiss your father farewell, for I maun be ganging sune."

The young man bent over the bed and kissed the damp, pallid forehead, reverently and tenderly, but could find no words to say.

"Listen," said the old man, still in the same labored whisper, "when ye hae seen me laid to rest, ye'll gang to my brither James, in Lunnon."

"Yr're brither?" Donald exclaimed, in astonishment. "I didna ken ye had a brither."

"God kens I wadna judge him," returned the father, "but he grew shamed, in yon vast city, first o' his faith and then o' his Scot's kindred, and, sae, I aye deemed it better ye suldna ken I had a brither; but noo," he continued, "noo, that I canna bide wi ye, my laddie, ye maun e'en gang to him. He wanna close his heart against his dead brither's bairn. Death mends a'. But oh! my ain laddie," he added earnestly, "dinna ye grow ashamed of your faith nor of your Scotch birth; dinna forget your faither and mither, and they winna forget you."

"God kens I winna," was the answer; it seemed to satisfy the dying man. Donald meant it, then. How could he answer otherwise than sincerely in the presence of death?

There was s sound of footsteps, coming up the lodging-house stairs, a knock at the door, and the priest entered, bearing the Bread of Life to the Pilgrim about to set out on that strange, dark journey we must all make some day. Donald knelt, reverently, for a moment, then left the room while his father made his last confession. Presently the priest opened the door and signed him to enter.

It was over, at last, and as Donald gazed at the dead face, on which rested the peace "which passeth all understanding," he knelt, seeking to give utterance to the grief that seemed too great for endurance. Then, as by an irresistible impulse, the words burst from him, "Faither! Mither! pray for your bairn!" Was it that he felt himself unworthy to ask other intercession? If so, would not the dear ones who had, surely, entered into rest—so, at least, he felt convinced—plead for him to God and to His Blessed Mother?

That was how Donald Ferguson began his New Year, by the bedside of his dead father, vowing never to forget him, never to forget his faith, never to be ashamed of his Scotch birth. Ashamed? How could he be? Had not both father and mother lived and died loyal to the faith and to Scotland? In the great new world of London, to which, as his dying father had bidden him, he must journey, when his dear one had been laid to rest, what temptations could possibly shake his loyalty? That he was sincere who can doubt? But he was over confident of his own strength, too sure that he could resist where others had failed.

After the funeral, the priest asked him, kindly, what he meant to do.

"My faither bade me go to his brither James, in London," answered Donald, forgetting that his father, his thoughts full of his approaching end, had omitted to say where in the great city his brother was to be found.

"His brother James," returned the priest, in surprise, "not, surely, James Ferguson, the atheist lecturer and bookseller?"

"God kens," said Donald, sadly, "he just bade me seek his brither James. "I doot," he continued thoughtfully, "it maun be the man ye say, father."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because my faither never tauld me he had a brither till just—"his voice broke with a sob he could not repress.

"Just before the end?" suggested the priest, with genuine sympathy for the young man, whose heart seemed nigh breaking.

"Aye," Donald mastered his emotion by an effort. Then, more calmly, added: "He said he wadna judge him, but he had grown ashamed o' his faith and o' his Scot's kindred. I doot, it maun be he."

"I am afraid," the priest spoke sadly. How was a lad of nineteen, but lately come with his father from his Highland glen, to stand against James Ferguson, the atheist? And yet, what was to be done? The lad must, of course, do what his dying father had bidden him. Who could tell what God might bring out of it? "God help you," he said earnestly; "our Lady pray for you."

"Faither and mither will," returned Donald quietly. The priest was struck by the expression. "Do you doubt that our Lady will?" he asked, and waited anxiously for the answer.

"Doot? Na, I dinna doot," replied Donald; but I doot I'm no worthy she suld think of me," he said, sadly.

"Is there anything"— began the priest, but Donald interrupted him, respectfully, though hastily, with, "Muckle, father, muckle; but I canna explain noo. Maybe," he added, still in the same sad tone, "I'll tell you ane day; pray you for me," the young man added pleadingly; "I ken well I need your prayers."

"That will I," said the priest, earnestly. Then they shook hands and parted.

"And so you are my nephew?" The voice was cold, like eyes and face, but not altogether unkindly. Donald looked at the face that was so like his father's, yet so unlike—why, he found out after awhile, though in the truth the reason was not hard to guess. It was the soul of each man that left its impress on his face; what wonder there should be such difference?

"I cannot deny my kindred," James Ferguson continued, "so I bid you welcome, Janet!" he called, "come here."

"Yes, father!" a sweet voice, as Donald could not help thinking; a sweeter face, as the girl entered the room.

"Janet," said the bookseller, "this is your Cousin Donald." The cold voice grew soft as he spoke to the girl he loved so dearly.

"Welcome, Cousin Donald," said Janet, holding out her hand and smiling in the cousinly fashion.

Donald took the little, slim hand that was held out to him. This was a welcome worth having indeed.

Atheist as he was, the old bookseller could not, as he said to himself, deny his kindred. Moreover, as he had no son his nephew's coming was, in truth, rather a relief to him. Here was a young man who, if properly trained—that is, in accordance with his (James Ferguson's) ideas —could succeed to the business. It would be no wrong to his step daughter Janet that his own kith and kin should succeed him. Besides they would marry; that was the destiny all true men and women were bound to fulfil in his estimation. But the young man must be trained first.

It proved an easier task than James Ferguson had expected. There were no open attack's on the young man's faith; the old bookseller was too wise for that. He gave his nephew a free run of his library and left the rest, as he would have expressed it, "to time and reason."

The very atmosphere of the house and shop was, in fact, deadly to faith, especially to faith which, already weakened by secret sins, by neglect of the sacraments, had, in great measure, lost its hold on Donald's heart and life. The end came all too soon. First he ceased to go to mass, then, uninvited, went to hear his uncle lecture.

But with the death of his faith — as it seemed to him to be—came a lesson he could never have expected. "Cousin Donald," said Janet, gravely, after supper that Sunday evening on which he had been to the Free Thought Hall to hear his uncle speak, "I was sorry to see you at the hall this afternoon."

"Sorry!" exclaimed Donald, in utter astonishment; "why?"

"You are a Catholic, are you not?" enquired Janet in return.

"I was," he said, indifferently, almost as if he were confessing a folly of which he felt ashamed.

"You were, then," she rejoiced gravely, "and you are now?"—

"A free-thinker, like your father," he said, with evident self-satisfaction.

Janet was silent for several moments. Then, all at once: "Cousin Donald," she said, "were you ever lost in mist on the hills of Glen Urquhart, where you used to live?"

"Often," he said, wondering what her meaning could be.

"And did you ever pass," she continued, "out of the mist and cold into a warm lighted room, into the presence of those who you loved?"

"Often," he answered again, wondering more than ever what her questions meant.

"One more question," she said, with a gentle persistence he had never observed in her before. "Did you ever pass from such a warm, lighted room, from the presence of those you love, into the mist and cold of the hillside?"

"Often," replied Donald for the third time. "Why do you ask?" he added, unable to restrain his curiosity any longer.

"Because that is what you have done now," returned Janet, almost sadly.

"What do you mean?" he asked almost sharply. "What could she mean?" he wondered.

"As a Catholic," she rejoined, still speaking with a quiet gravity that was new to him, "you believed in heaven, in God, in the saints? Believed that you would meet your dear ones, after the dark and cold of death?"

"Some foolishness of that sort," he said, with a scornful indifference that hurt her, which gentle as she was, she found it hard to forgive. "Yes, and then?"

"You have passed out of the light and warmth of home," she answered, "into the mist and cold."

"And you?" the retort was almost involuntary, but it evidently pained her.

"I never had any home to go to," she replied, with inexpressible sadness, "I have lived in the mist and cold, the utter emptiness, all my life."

"Let me live there with you, Janet," he said, with a lightness that shocked her. "I shall be quite content to do so, for I love you dearly."

"Do you?" she answered, still sadly.

"You know I do." he rejoined, speaking more earnestly. Can you not love me in return?" he added pleadingly.

"How can I, seeing that I cannot trust you?" said Janet, more gravely than ever.

"Why not?" demanded Donald, in surprise."

"How can I trust one who is not loyal?" she returned and Donald, in spite of himself, understood what her reproach meant, and said nothing. "Perhaps," added Janet, as she rose to leave the room, "perhaps . . . who may find the home that you have left."

And Donald could not answer her. The weeks lengthened into months, and the months into years, and Donald's training, so his uncle thought, was complete, if not quite complete. The young man had proved an apt pupil and experience were the only teachers he needed now. Meanwhile the business prospered, and Donald was taken into formal partnership. He was to be paid the full price for his soul—such as it was.

He had begun to lecture at the Free Thought Hall, with all the acrid fervor of an apostate, to win over— a worthy conquest truly!—the callow shop boys, and self-conscious lawyer's clerks who thought it manly to "shake off the trammels of effete superstition." Donald in fact, spoke so very candidly concerning "the powers that be," that the said powers, indifferent to his attacks on all things sacred—so long as he did not assail them—threatened to persecute him for seditious speaking. It was a martyrdom he would have gloried in; his uncle, however counselled prudence, and Donald was constrained to submit. If what he said was true, why not say it, in spite of any consequences that might follow? That was the question he put to his uncle.

"Because," the old man answered, "you must teach people truth, by degrees, as the priests teach their false creeds, bit by bit.

It was the first allusion Donald had ever heard him make to the faith they had both denied, and he wondered why he should have made it now. His uncle has accepted his first attendance at the Free Thought Hall, and then his offer to lecture, as a matter of course. Was it some lingering memory of his dead brother that had kept the old man from openly attempting his nephew's "conversion?" Who can say?

"I suppose so." Donald was burning for martyrdom; possibly because he wished to convince Janet of his sincerity. Janet, to her father's surprise had ceased to attend the Free Thought Hall from the day that Donald first began to lecture there. Her father could not understand it, but, from a reluctance which he, himself, failed to understand, he refrained from questioning her. Consistent, even in his atheism, he reasoned that adherence to truth or to error was a matter of free choice; a liberty not to be tampered with by any one.

Donald, who had missed his "Imitation" out of his room might, had he cared to think about it, have found a clue to Janet's cessation from her attendance at the Free Thought Hall. That phrase of hers, "Perhaps; who knows? I may find the home that you have left," might have given him cause for reflection, had he been in a mood for doing so; had he watched her, he might have discovered that she was, already, groping her way through the mist and cold, towards the home of which she had spoken.

Janet, in fact, had begun to go to mass every morning. It was an evidence of the thoroughness and earnestness of her character that she should have begun there; she knew that Catholics went to mass; she would go, too; perhaps she would come to understand it some day. Then she began to read the "Imitation" which she found in Donald's room, covered with dust; the "Imitation," and then the Missal. And, in the Missal, she, being a good Latin scholar read, chiefly, three things, the "Stabat Mater," the "Lauda Sion, Salvatorem," and the "Dies Irae." The first spoke of a mother's love such as she had not known since she was a little child; of love and sorrow such as she could dimly realize; of home ties such as—she felt sadly—Donald had broken so lightly. The wonderful reasoning of the —Lauda Sion" appealed to her intellect; if Christ were indeed God, surely, she thought this must be true. The "Dies Irae," with its pleadings for mercy; for those who had passed—into nothingness, as she had been taught? surely not!—spoke to her once more of the warm, lighted home where dear ones dwelt; beyond the dread Throne of Judgment; the home which Donald had left. She was in good faith, even in her atheism:—

"God, by a way they have not known,
"Shall lead His own."

God was leading her to the home she longed for; leading her by the way that He had chosen.

It was a short way; such as she did not take long to find in passing from the mist of doubt into the clear light of the City of God. The priest to whom she presented herself for instruction soon realized that this was, indeed, one of God's chosen, "a child of God and of Mary." She had, as he learned, never been baptized; in due course he administered that holy rite, and Janet, whose thoughts had been definitely turned in this direction by the shock of Donald's apostasy, crossed—with what joy who can tell?—the threshold of that Home that he had left so lightly.

One morning as she returned from mass and was passing her stepfather's door, she heard, as she thought, a low moan from within the room. Receiving no answer to her knock, she entered hastily, to find him lying in a strangely contorted position, half in and half out of the bed. Her quick mind grasped the truth in a moment—he was paralyzed.

The doctor, on arriving, confirmed her fears. He told her more—that James Ferguson could live, at most, a few days, would probably never recover consciousness. Then it was that, in all the fervor of her new found faith, she kneeled by the bedside of him who had indeed, been a father to her, and vowed to give her whole life to the service of Christ's poor, if he would only grant her dear one the grace of a Christian death. Mother of God!" she prayed, "My Mother! plead for him, and plead for me." Then went and consulted her friend, the priest who had received her.

How many masses, how many prayers, were offered for the conversion of James Ferguson, the atheist. He only knows to whom they were addressed. Two days had passed, but the sick man had not recovered consciousness, and the doctor said he might die at any moment.

Then, all at once. James Ferguson opened his eyes, and seeing Janet, strove to speak, but could not. There was a look in his face as of one who yearns for something: Janet wondered what it could be.

Was it an inspiration? She always felt that it was, hers being that faith "as of a little child," which we all need, which so few of us attain to. She never reasoned it out; she simply held up her crucifix.

The longing in the sick man's eyes grew more intense, but a smile stole about the lips that could not utter nor articulate sound. But he held out the one hand that was not wholly paralyzed and clasped the crucifix which Janet placed there.

"A priest?" she asked, almost breathless with emotion.

Her father's eyes sought the crucifix and then her face. She left the room for a moment, and ran to find the servant. "Mary," she said hurriedly, "do you know where Father Thompson lives?"

The girl stared at her in amazement. "Yes, miss," she managed to say, "why?"

"Never mind why," was the answer "go and get him as quickly as you can."

Father Thompson came at once, and Janet explained what had occurred.

"I understand," he said, and entered the sick room.

In a little while he came out and beckoned to her. "I thought you said he could not speak?" he said, and there was awe in his voice.

"Can he?" she exclaimed, yet almost as one who hears news that she has expected. You see, she had real faith.

"He has made his confession," was the quiet answer, "and wishes to bid you farewe'l."

Janet entered the room, but the lips that had framed that last confession were silent, this time, forever. With the crucifix in his hand, With a smile of peace unalterable on his face, James Ferguson had passed to the judgment of Him whom he had owned at last, and Janet thought of the words:—

Tu latronem recepisti
Mihi quoque spem dedisti.

A miracle? Yes, if you will; but it is not written: "The prayer of faith shall save the sick?" That is just it; the "prayer of faith."

This, then, was what Donald Ferguson had gained in exchange for his soul. He was his uncle's heir, as next of kin; James Ferguson taking it for granted that Donald and Janet would marry; had made a new will, leaving his business and the bulk of his saving to his nephew. Janet, who had a small income, inherited from her mother, would, so he reasoned, share his property as Donald's wife.

But Janet had, as Donald phrased it, lapsed into superstition and was no fit mate for a prominent Free Thought leader. Of his uncle's deathbed repentance he affected to make light, but he had honor enough— if it can be called honor—to ask Janet formally, but coldly, to be his wife. It was his duty, and he did it as such.

"I cannot marry you," she answered quietly. She might have loved him as, she knew, he might have loved her. But God had heard her vow, and she must keep it.

"No?" he returned; his pride made him speak far more differently than he felt. He, too, knew that they might have loved each other, but for his "enfranchisement," as he chose to term it.

"No," she replied, still very quickly. "I am going to be a Sister of Charity."

"As you please;" it was all that he would say; and she left him, sadly, knowing that she would see his face no more.

But the price he had paid for his "enfranchisement" did not deter him from remaining free; it only made him proclaim his "freedom," more emphatically, to the callow apprentices and lawyer's clerks, who thronged the hall to his lectures, which grew more blasphemous from week to week.

They reached a climax at last. He had announced his intention of lecturing on "Christian Superstition;" the announcement by God's providence—which men called chance — reached the ears of a Sister of Charity, once known as Janet Robinson, the step-daughter of James Ferguson the atheist. A youth who had heard Donald's announcement was run over in the street the next day and was taken to a hospital in charge of the Sisters of Charity. He called himself a Free Thinker, but owned that he had been a Catholic. Janet was told to take care of him.

"You are a Catholic?" she said gently, after dressing his hurts.

"I was," he answered, sullenly, "but I am a Free Thinker now." This proudly, as if well satisfied with himself.

"So was I," she rejoined, still speaking gently, "but I am a Catholic now."

"Were you?" He seemed surprised; then, as by association of ideas, "so was our leader."

"Who is he?" she asked, knowing, yet fearing, the answer. . .

"Donald Ferguson," he replied; "he is to lecture on 'Christian Superstition' next Sunday. I wish I could hear him!" He really seemed to consider it a hardship that he could not. But, next day, hearing that he could not recover he changed his mind. His Free Thought was not of the kind that faces death.

"So do I," she said gravely, which appeared to surprise him, coming from a Sister of Charity.

Then she spoke, first to her superioress, afterwards, with her permission to the chaplain, no other than Father Thompson. The priest listened; then promised, readily, to do as she asked him.

The Free Thought Hall was crowded the following Sunday, to hear Donald Ferguson's lecture on "Christian Superstition." What the lecture was like, may be fancied, but can hardly be described; such blasphemies are passed over in silence.

Outside the hall he was accosted by one whom he could never have dreamed of seeing there, of all places —a Catholic priest?

"May I speak to you for five minutes?" said Father Thompson, for it was he.

"Certainly," was Donald's answer, given politely enough, if not exactly cordially. "Won't you step inside the hall, it is empty now," he added.

Father Thompson followed, as he was bidden. Once inside, he said, quietly: "You have been lecturing on 'Christian Superstition,' I believe?"

"Yes," almost curtly, this time Donald felt like resenting the other's "interference." Then remembered, just in time, that it does not become a philosopher to lose his temper.

"This was your mother's crucifix," returned Father Thompson, holding it up for Donald to look at, "was her reverence for it 'superstition'?"

Donald gazed at the crucifix, like a man in a dream. Then, involuntarily —in spite of himself, as it seemed to him—remembered how he had taken it from his dead father's hand; how his father had taken it from the cold fingers of his wife, Donald's mother. He Donald, had kissed it, with tears in his eyes, by the deathbed of each of his dear ones; had vowed never to forget them. Had they forgotten him? Had He whose Image it was? Was it his mother that held it out to him. "Superstition?" How could he dare to say it? For answer he flung himself on his knees before the sacred symbol, and, in the Scot's tongue, which he had discarded, along with his faith, cried out, with a burst of tears: "Faither! Mither! I canna! I canna!"

Then, after a while, Father Thompson heard his confession, and gave him back his crucifix.

"Thank God and our Lady, sister," he said to Janet, on his return to her, "your prayer has been answered."

"Say, rather, the prayers of his father and mother," she returned humbly, "what could mine avail if they had forgotten him?"

And Father Thompson, thinking of the prayer of Monica, knew that she was right.

The Free Thought Hall was crowded again on the following Sunday, for Donald announced that he would lecture on "Christian Idolatry." He came on to the platform, pale but collected. He might not leave it without suffering bodily injury. If so, let God's will be done.

"Friends," he began, quickly, "I am going to say something you may not approve of. Will you give me a fair hearing?"

"Yes, yes," came from various parts of the hall. The callow apprentices, the "enlightened" lawyers' clerks, the socialistic artisans, looked at each other in surprise. What could he have to say?"

Then Donald, remembering Janet's parable, told them how, as a boy, he had been lost in the mist on the hillside; how, after long, almost hopeless wandering, he had found the house at last; had passed from the mist and cold and loneliness, into the warm lighted room, into the presence of those he loved. "What would you have thought of me," he asked, "if I had passed, of my own free choice, out into the mist and cold again?"

"That you were a fool!" said a sharp voice, at which there was a laugh, instantly hushed again, however.

"That what you and I have done, though," Donald continued, speaking with an earnestness that was new to his hearers. He spoke of the faith of Christians, of Catholics, of God, our Lady, of the saints; of our dear ones who were gone home; of heaven—of the emptiness, the loneliness of unbelief. They gave him a fair hearing; they could not help themselves. He spoke like one inspired. "I was to speak on "Christian Idolatry," he said, at last; "this crucifix,"—holding it up—"my father took it from my dead mother's hand, and I from his. Dare any of you"—his voice rang like a challenge to battle—"call this idolatry?" and, as he spoke, he bent on his knees, reverently, and kissed the crucifix before them all.

There was a storm of cries, of cheers of hisses. Then a big burly German, once a Lutheran, pushed his way through the crowd, on to the platform. Donald wondered what was coming. "Boys," said the man, "he has courage. Let him be what he will, three cheers for the man that dares speak his convictions!" Then the cheers drowned the hisses, and, presently, the audience dispersed, to think of what had occurred according to the bent of each individual. Donald had "witnessed a good confession."

The Free Thought Hall is now a Catholic Club; many of Donald's hearers belong to it; many come here to listen to lectures on the evidences of Catholic Christianity.

"What shall a man give in exchange for his soul? What, if it be not the prayers of those who love him; of our Lady and of the saints? What, if it be not at all that a man dare to confess Christ, even at the risk of martyrdom? Truly, as is said in the Book of Job "All that a man hath will he give for his life."