

THE TABLES OF THE LAW

I



WILL you permit me, Aherne," I said, "to ask you a question, which I have wanted to ask you for years; and have not asked because we have grown nearly strangers. Why did you refuse the cassock and the berretta, and almost at the last moment? I never expected you, of all men, to become 'a spoilt priest.' When you and I lived together, you cared neither for wine, women, nor money, and were absorbed in theological and mystical studies." I had watched through dinner for a moment to put my question, and ventured now, because he had thrown off a little of the reserve and indifference, which, ever since his last return from Italy, had taken the place of our once close friendship. He had just questioned me too, about certain private and almost sacred things, and my frankness had earned, I thought, a like frankness from him.

When I began to speak he was lifting to his lips a glass of that old wine which he could choose so well and valued so little; and while I spoke, he set it slowly and meditatively upon the table and held it there, its deep red light dyeing his long delicate fingers. The impression of his face and form, as they were then, is still vivid with me, and is inseparable from another and fanciful impression: the impression of a man holding a flame in his naked hand. He was to me, at that moment, the supreme type of our race, which, when it has risen above, or is sunken below, the formalisms of half-education and the rationalisms of conventional affirmation and denial, turns away from practicable desires and intuitions, towards desires so unbounded that no human vessel can contain them, intuitions so immaterial that their sudden and far-off fire leaves heavy darkness about hand and foot. He had the nature, which is half alchemist, half soldier of fortune, and must needs turn action into dreaming, and dreaming into action; and for such there is no order, no finality, no contentment in this world. At the Jesuit school in Paris he had made one of

the little group, which used to gather in corners of the playing field, or in remote class rooms, to hear the speculative essays which we wrote and read in secret. More orthodox in most of his beliefs than Michael Robartes, he had surpassed him in a fanciful hatred of all life, and this hatred had found expression in the curious paradox, half borrowed from some fanatical monk, half invented by himself; that the beautiful arts were sent into the world to overthrow nations, and finally life herself, by sowing everywhere unlimited desires, like torches thrown into a burning city. This idea was not at the time, I believe, more than a paradox, a plume of the pride of youth; and it was only after his leaving school that he endured the fermentation of belief which is coming upon our people with the reawakening of their imaginative life.

Presently he stood up, saying:

"Come, and I will show you, for you at any rate will understand," and taking candles from the table, he lit the way into the long paved passage that led to his private chapel. We passed between the portraits of the Jesuits and priests, some of no little fame, whom his family had given to the Church; and framed photographs of the pictures which had especially moved him; and the few paintings his small fortune, eked out by an almost penurious abstinence from the things most men desire, had enabled him to buy in his travels. The photographs of pictures were from the masterpieces of many schools; but in all, the beauty, whether it was a beauty of religion, of love, or of some fantastical vision of mountain and wood, was the beauty achieved by temperaments which seek always an absolute of emotion, and have their most continual, though not most perfect expression, in the legends and music and vigils of the Celtic peoples. The certitude of a fierce or gracious fervour in the enraptured faces of Francesca's and Crivelli's Madonnas, and in the august faces of the sibyls of Michael Angelo; and the incertitude, as of souls trembling between the excitement of the spirit and the excitement of the flesh, in the wavering faces Sodoma made for the churches of Siena, and in the faces like thin flames, imagined by the modern symbolists and pre-Raphaelites, had often made that long, gray, dim, echoing passage seem to me like a vestibule of eternity.

Almost every detail of the chapel, which we entered by a narrow Gothic door, whose threshold had been worn smooth by the secret worshippers of the penal times, was vivid in my memory; for it was in this chapel that I had first, and when but a boy, been moved by the mediævalism which is now, I think, the governing influence on my life. The only thing that seemed new

was a square bronze box ; like those made in ancient times of more precious substances to hold the sacred books ; which stood before the six unlighted candles and the ebony crucifix upon the altar. Aherne made me sit down on a long oaken bench, and having bowed very low before the crucifix, took the bronze box from the altar, and sat down beside me with the box upon his knees.

"You will perhaps have forgotten," he said, "most of what you have read about Joachim of Flora, for he is little more than a name to even the best read. He was an abbot in Corace in the twelfth century, and is best known for his prophecy, in a book called *Expositio in Apocalypsin*, that the Kingdom of the Father was passed, the Kingdom of the Son passing, the Kingdom of the Spirit yet to come. The Kingdom of the Spirit was to be a complete triumph of the Spirit, the *spiritualis intelligentia* he called it, over the dead letter. He had many followers among the more extreme Franciscans, and these were accused of possessing a secret book of his called the *Liber Inducens in Evangelium Æternum*. Again and again groups of visionaries were accused of possessing this terrible book, in which the freedom of the Renaissance lay hidden, until at last Pope Alexander IV. had it found and cast into the flames. I have here the greatest treasure the world contains. I have a copy of that book, and see what great artists have made the robes in which it is wrapped. This bronze box was made by Benvenuto Cellini, who covered it with gods and demons, whose eyes are closed to signify an absorption in the inner light." He lifted the lid and took out a book bound in old leather, covered with filigree work of tarnished silver. "And this cover bound for Canevari ; while Giulio Clovio, the one artist of the later Renaissance who could give to his work the beauty of a hidden hope, tore out the beginning page of every chapter of the old copy and set in its place a page, surmounted by an elaborate letter, and a miniature of some one of the great whose example was cited in the chapter ; and wherever the writing left a little space elsewhere, he put some delicate emblem or intricate pattern."

I took the book in my hands and began turning over the jewel-like pages, holding it close to the candle to discover the texture of the paper.

"Where did you get this amazing book ?" I said. "If genuine, and I cannot judge by this light, you have discovered one of the most precious things in the world."

"It is certainly genuine," he replied. "When the original was destroyed, one copy alone remained, and was in the hands of a lute player of Florence, and from him it passed to his son, and so from generation to generation,

until it came to the lute player, who was father to Benvenuto Cellini, and from him it passed to Giulio Clovio, and from Giulio Clovio to a Roman engraver ; and then from generation to generation, the story of its wandering passing on with it, until it came into the possession of the family of Aretino, and so to Giulio Aretino, an artist and worker in metals, and student of the kabalistic heresies of Pico della Mirandola. He spent many nights with me at Rome discussing philosophy ; and at last I won his confidence so perfectly that he showed me this, his greatest treasure ; and, finding how much I valued it, and feeling that he himself was growing old and beyond the help of its mysterious teaching, he sold it me for no great sum, considering its great preciousness."

"What is the doctrine?" I said. "Some mediæval straw-splitting about the nature of the Trinity, which is only useful to-day to show how many things are unimportant to us, which once shook the world?"

"I could never make you understand," he said with a deep sigh, "that nothing is unimportant in belief, but even you will admit that this book goes to the heart. Do you see the tables on which the commandments were written in Latin?" I looked to the end of the room opposite to the altar, and saw that the two marble tablets were gone, and two large empty tablets of ivory, like large copies of the little tablets we set over our desks, had taken their place. "It has swept the commandments of the Father away," he went on, "and displaced the commandments of the Son by the commandments of the Holy Spirit. The first book is called *Fractura Tabularum*. In the first chapter it mentions the names of the great artists who made them graven things and the likeness of many things, and adored them and served them ; and in the second the names of the great wits who took the name of the Lord their God in vain ; and that long third chapter, set with the emblems of sanctified faces, and having wings upon its borders, is the praise of breakers of the seventh day and wasters of the six days. Those two chapters tell of men and women who railed upon their parents, remembering that their god was older than the god of their parents ; and that, which has the sword of Michael for an emblem, commends the kings that wrought secret murder and so won for the people a peace that was *amore somnoque gravata et vestibus versicoloribus*, 'heavy with love and sleep and many-coloured raiment ;' and that with the pale star at the closing has the lives of the noble youths who loved the wives of others and were transformed into memories, which have transformed many poorer hearts into sweet flames ; and that with the winged head is the history of the robbers, who lived, upon the sea or in the desert, lives which it compares

to the twittering of the string of a bow, *nervi stridentis instar*; and those two last, that are fire and gold, are devoted to the satirists who bore false witness against their neighbours and yet illustrated eternal wrath; and to those that have coveted more than other men the house of God, and all things that are his, which no man has seen and handled, except in madness and in dreaming.

"The second book, which is called *Straminis Deflagratio*, recounts the conversations Joachim of Flora held in his monastery at Corace, and afterwards in his monastery in the mountains of Sylae, with travellers and pilgrims, upon the laws of many countries; how chastity was a virtue and robbery a little thing in such a land, and robbery a crime and unchastity a little thing in such a land; and of the persons who had flung themselves upon these laws and become *decussa veste dei sidera*, 'stars shaken out of the raiment of God.'

"The third book, which is the finish, is called *Lex Secreta*, and describes the true inspiration of action, the only Eternal Evangel; and ends with a vision, which he saw among the mountains of Sylae, of his disciples sitting throned in the blue deep of the air and laughing aloud, with a laughter which it compares to the rustling of the wings of Time."

"I know little of Joachim of Flora," I said, "except that Dante set him in Paradise among the great doctors. If he held a heresy so singular, I cannot understand how no rumours of it came to the ears of Dante; and Dante made no peace with the enemies of the Church."

"Joachim of Flora acknowledged openly the authority of the Church, and even asked that all his published writings, and those to be published by his desire after his death, should be submitted to the censorship of the Pope. He considered that those, whose work was to live and not to reveal, were children and that the Pope was their father; but he taught in secret that certain others, and in always increasing numbers, were elected, not for life's sake, but to reveal that hidden substance of God which is colour and music and softness and a sweet odour; and that these have no father but the Holy Spirit. Just as poets and painters and musicians labour at their works, building them with lawless and lawful things alike so long as they embody the beauty that is beyond the grave; these children of the Holy Spirit labour at their moments with eyes upon the shining substance on which Time has heaped the refuse of creation; for the world only exists to be a tale in the ears of coming generations; and terror and content, birth and death, love and hatred and the fruit of the Tree are but instruments for that supreme art

which is to win us from life and gather us into eternity like doves into their dove-cots.

"I shall go away in a little while and travel into many lands, that I may know all accidents and destinies, and when I return, will write my secret law upon those ivory tablets, just as poets and romance writers have written the principles of their art in prefaces; and will gather pupils about me that they may discover their law in the study of my law, and the Kingdom of the Holy Spirit be more widely and firmly established."

He was pacing up and down, and I listened to the fervour of his words and watched the excitement of his gestures with not a little concern. I had been accustomed to welcome the most singular speculations, and had always found them as harmless as the Persian cat, who half closes her meditative eyes and stretches out her long claws, before my fire. But now I longed to battle in the interests of orthodoxy, even of the commonplace: and yet could find nothing better to say than:

"It is not necessary to judge everyone by the law, for we have also Christ's commandment of love."

He turned and said, looking at me with shining eyes:

"Jonathan Swift made a soul for the gentlemen of this city by hating his neighbour as himself."

"At any rate, you cannot deny that to teach so dangerous a doctrine is to accept a terrible responsibility."

"Leonardo da Vinci," he replied, "has this noble sentence, 'The hope and desire of returning home to one's former state, is like the moth's desire for the light; and the man, who with constant longing awaits each new month and new year—deeming that the things he longs for are ever too late in coming—does not perceive that he is longing for his own destruction.' How then can the pathway which will lead us into the heart of God be other than dangerous? why should you, who are no materialist, cherish the continuity and order of the world as those do who have only the world? You do not value the writers who will express nothing unless their reason understands how it will make what is called the right more easy; why then will you deny a like freedom to the supreme art, the art which is the foundation of all arts? Yes, I shall send out of this chapel saints, lovers, rebels, and prophets: souls which will surround themselves with peace, as with a nest made of grass; and perhaps others over whom I shall weep. The dust shall fall for many years over this little box; and then I shall open it; and the tumults, which are, perhaps, the flames of the last day, shall come from under the lid."

I did not reason with him that night, because his excitement was great and I feared to make him angry ; and when I called at his house a few days later, he was gone and his house was locked up and empty. I have deeply regretted my failure both to combat his heresy and to test the genuineness of his strange book. Since my conversion I have indeed done penance for an error which I was only able to measure after some years.

II

I was walking along one of the Dublin quays, about ten years after our conversation, stopping from time to time to turn over the books upon an old bookstall, and thinking, curiously enough, of the destinies of the little group of fellow-students who had shared so many speculations at the school in Paris, and particularly of the terrible destiny of Michael Robartes and his disciples, when I saw a tall, bent man walking slowly in front of me. He stopped presently at a little shop, in the window of which were blue and white statues of the Virgin, and gilded statues of St. Patrick and his crozier. His face was now half turned towards me, and I recognized in the lifeless mask with dim eyes what had been the resolute, delicate face of Owen Aherne. I walked towards him, but had not gone many yards before he turned away, as though he had seen me, and went hastily down a side street.

During the next few weeks I inquired of all who had once known him, but he had made himself known to no one, and knocked without result at the door of his old house. I had nearly persuaded myself that I was mistaken, when I saw him again, and this time in a back street behind the Four Courts, and followed him until he stopped at the door of his house.

I laid my hand upon his arm ; he turned round, and quite without surprise ; and, indeed, it is possible that to him, whose inner life had soaked up the outer life, a parting of many years was a parting from forenoon to afternoon. He stood holding the door half open, as though he would keep me from entering, and would, perhaps, have parted from me with no further words had I not said :

"Aherne, you trusted me once, will you not trust me again, and tell me what has come of the ideas we discussed ten years ago ? but perhaps you have long forgotten them."

"You have a right to hear," he answered ; "for having told you the ideas, it is necessary that I tell you the terrible danger they contain ; but when

you have heard, we part for good and all : I must be hidden away, for I am lost."

I followed him through the paved passage, and saw that its corners were choked with dust and cobwebs ; and that the pictures were shrouded with cobwebs and gray with dust ; and, when he opened the door of the chapel, I saw that the dust and cobwebs which covered the ruby and sapphire of the saints in the window had made it very dim. He sat down wearily, not seeming to notice whether I was standing or sitting, and pointed to where the ivory tablets glimmered faintly in the deep gloom. I saw that they were covered with very small writing, and went up to them and began to read them. The writing was an elaborate casuistry, illustrated apparently with many examples, but whether from his own life, or from the life of others, I do not know. Before I had done more than read a sentence here and there, I turned from them, for Aherne had begun to speak in a low monotonous voice.

"I am outside the salvation of Him who died for sinners, because I have lost the power of committing a sin. I found the secret law of my life, and, finding it, no longer desired to transgress, because it was my own law. Whatever my intellect and my soul commanded, I did, and sin passed from me, and I ceased to be among those for whom Christ died." And at the name of Christ he crossed himself with that involuntary gesture which marks those who have crossed themselves from childhood. "At first I tried to sin by breaking my law, although without desire ; but the sin without desire is shadowy, like the sins of some phantom one has not visited even in dreams. You who are not lost, who may still speak to men and women, tell them that it is necessary to make an arbitrary law that one may be among those for whom Christ has died."

I went over and stood beside him, and said :

"Prayer and penance will make you like other men."

"Not," he replied, "unless they can take from me my knowledge of the secret law."

I used some argument, which has passed out of my memory, but his strong intellect, which seemed all the stronger and more active from contrast with the weary monotony of his voice, tore my argument in pieces. I had gone on to heap argument on argument, had he not risen and led me from the chapel, repeating, "We part for good and all ; for I must be hidden away."

I followed, intending to come to him again the next day ; but as I stood in the door of the house a sudden hope came into my mind, and I said :

"Will you lend me the *Liber Inducens in Evangelium Æternum* for a few days, that I may have it examined by an expert?"

"I have burned the book and flung the box into the sea."

When I came the next day with a Jesuit Father from the College of St. Francis Xavier, the house was locked up and apparently empty once more.

W. B. YEATS.

EPILOGUE



ET us go hence : the night is now at hand ;
The day is overworn, the birds all flown,
And we have reaped the crops the gods have sown,
Despair and death ; deep darkness o'er the land

Broods like an owl : we cannot understand
Laughter or tears, for we have only known
Surpassing vanity ; vain things alone
Have driven our perverse and aimless band.

Let us go hence somewhither strange and cold,
To hollow lands, where just men and unjust
Find end of labour ; where's rest for the old,
Freedom to all from fear and love and lust.
Twine our torn hands ! O, pray, the earth enfold
Our life-sick hearts and turn them into dust !

ERNEST DOWSON.