

# The Cock-Crow

By H. Pease

A cloud hung over the bishopric—the ancient patrimony of Saint Cuthbert.

Bishop van Mildert had died and, *sede vacante*, great changes were impending, for Parliament was about to shear off a large portion of the privileges of the ancient franchise, to reduce the endowments, and to hand over the mines to the Ecclesiastical Commission.

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The Reverend Arthur Egglestone—the youngest of the ‘Golden Canons’ and Lord of the Manor of Midhope, high up in Weardale—sat in his spacious, oak-panelled dining-room above the Wear, discussing the situation with his two companions over a very *recherché* supper prepared by the French chef of the Dean and Chapter.

The time was Lent, the eve of Good Friday, but the ‘Golden Canon’ had forgotten the season in his perturbation and his desire to show hospitality to a distant cousin newly arrived from America, who was full of curiosity and admiration of the city and cathedral of Saint Cuthbert.

His other guest was a Minor Canon who had just been appointed to instruct and train the choir-boys of the cathedral.

The ‘Golden Canon’ was of an imposing figure, a fine type of the English country gentleman of the old school—admirably fitted for the post of Chairman of Quarter Sessions.

It was not that he had mistaken his vocation so much as that his vocation had mistaken the canon, for owing to the death of his two elder brothers—one by an accident out hunting, one by drowning at sea when admiral—he had unexpectedly succeeded to the family seat and rich possessions.

On this very day he had driven himself into his prebend’s house in the close in his four-in-hand to welcome his young American cousin.

The ‘Golden Canon’ was of a sturdy build, fair of complexion, a lover of field sports, and an excellent judge of a horse and good claret.

An admirable host, he sat in his arm-chair looking after the comfort of his two companions, passing the *Château-Laffite*, and discoursing learnedly of the ancient glory of the bishopric.

His American cousin was an undergraduate of Harvard, eager as a hawk, keen-faced, avid of every form of life: he drank down his *Laffite* with evident enjoyment, listening to the music of the water on the weir below, and eagerly following the wisdom of the ‘Golden Canon.’

The Minor Canon, on the other hand, was not entirely at his ease, for he was divided between his reverence to his host and his consciousness that it was Lent, for hitherto he had always prided himself upon mortifying the flesh during the Lenten fast.

He was of a delicate and distinguished appearance; not much more than a lad yet,—sensitive and impressionable—one whom the Jesuits of the sixteenth century would have trained to be a ‘staff’ in their hands to be turned this way and that in the interests of the Church.

Gradually, however, he forgot his scruples in the charm of his surroundings, the good cheer, and his superior’s conversation; he helped himself joyfully as the claret went swiftly about, and joined with delight in converse about the great past of the cathedral.

“’Tis a thousand pities,” said the ‘Golden Canon,’ ‘to diminish in any way the dignity of the bishop and the dean and chapter, since reverence for the established order of the State is fast dying out.

‘Now just as it is thought well to maintain the dignity of the judges on assize by the attendance of the High Sheriff with his javelin men and trumpeters, so it is needful to keep up the estates of the bishops and the deans and chapters.

‘In the old days of the great prince bishops,’ continued the ‘Golden Canon,’ ‘the successor of St. Cuthbert was in reality a greater power than the successor of St. Augustine. For myself I had rather have reigned and ruled between Tees and Tyne than have lived in Lambeth Palace. I should have had regal powers in regard to jurisdiction, coinage, Chancery, Admiralty dues, and so forth, and when I journeyed to London, on my way to my palace in the Strand, would have lain at my various palaces on my way up.

‘Then again as lord of many manors throughout the Palatinate I should have had all the old feudal dues coming in to my treasury—waifs and strays, treasure trove, deodands.—’

‘And merchet of women?’ queried his cousin mischievously.

‘Ay,’ replied the ‘Golden Canon’ with a responsive twinkle in his eye, ‘“merchet of women” also, but as an antiquary I must tell ye that it’s not what you two young men would wish it to be—’

He glanced at the blushing face of the Minor Canon and the eager visage of the undergraduate, and bade them fill their glasses yet again, while they had the chance, for the Capter’s binn of *Laffite* was now running very low in its deep cellar.

‘No,’ he went on regretfully, ‘’twas not the *Droit de Seigneur* which we have all read of, and perhaps envied, but a fine upon marriage—a feudal due exercised over women, as over all property on the feudal lord’s manor. Not but that I take it occasionally the Prince Bishop may have indulged himself in what Richelieu styled “the honest man’s recreation,” yet the *jus primae noctis*, of which also you will have heard, was not the privilege of the seigneurial bishops, but the fine or compensation paid to the Church by the impatient bridegroom, who in early days of clerical discipline was enjoined to mortification of the flesh for the first three nights of marriage.

‘A lawsuit ’twixt the mayor and corporation of Amiens and the bishop before the Parliament of Paris in the fifteenth century is still on record, and proves this clearly.’

‘St. Cuthbert, sir,’ interposed the blushing but now emboldened Minor Canon, ‘would have severely reprehended Cardinal Richelieu in that event, for ’tis said that the saint had a perfect horror of women; we know of the line drawn beside the cathedral beyond which no woman was allowed to pass.’

‘Ay,’ responded his host, ‘st. Cuthbert was a great saint doubtless, but an extremely ungallant man. He would allow no cow upon Holy Island, for where there was a cow there was a woman, and where there was a woman there was the Devil.’

‘Luther and the Reformation changed all that,’ said the young American, with a laugh.

‘“Who loves not woman, wine and song,  
He is a fool his whole life long.”’

Which of the two is in the right?

‘Luther!’ replied the Minor Canon, somewhat unexpectedly, flushed with *vol-au-vent* and generous claret, who was now beginning to look upon himself as a gay Lothario. ‘Asceticism for its own sake is mere vanity.’

‘Here’s then to Luther!’ cried the ‘Golden Canon,’ with enthusiasm. ‘Fill and drink a bumper to his memory!’

‘Not but what I regret the Reformation myself, since had it not been for Anne Boleyn, the bishopric might still be a Palatinate and the estates of the canons inviolate.’

Curiously enough the Minor Canon had not on this especial occasion filled up his glass; on the contrary he was now staring in dismay towards the window recess opposite, which was suffused with a pale light. On the right hand there hung a crucifix, and the moonbeams gently illuminated the cross with its burden.

The two cousins continued their gay converse, but the Minor Canon was completely absorbed in his contemplation of a vision which was being unfolded before his affrighted eyes in the recess opposite. A figure took shape in the misty light—the form of an old man rugged of aspect, with grizzled locks like a fisherman’s, appeared before his eyes; he held forth his hand and pointed manacingly to the crucifix with fiercely gleaming eyes.

At that very moment there rose up from far away to the ears of the stricken gazer the sound of a cock-crow. The gazer wilted back in his seat; turning white, he held his hands to his eyes, his whole frame trembling. His two companions, who had now been aroused by his movement, looked upon him with astonishment.

‘What’s the matter, my dear fellow?’ inquired the ‘Golden Canon.’ ‘You look as if you had seen a ghost.’

‘I thought,’ stammered the gazer—‘I thought I saw St. Cuthbert—I mean some apparition—in the recess there.’

‘It’s only the moon,’ the ‘Golden Canon’ replied, after a cursory glance in that direction. ‘If you don’t like it just draw the curtains.’

But the Minor Canon had already risen from his seat, and, with unsteady footsteps, passed to the door murmuring brokenly to himself, ‘*Peccavi, peccavi,*’ as he withdrew from the dining-room.

‘A nice fellow,’ commented the ‘Golden Canon,’ ‘but he has, I fear, a rotten digestion.’

‘Help yourself to that white port, cousin; then we’ll finish our talk over a pipe of tobacco.’