

The Concealed Confession

By C. W. Leadbeater

The second story which the bishop related to us was of a different character, and its events took place at a much later period of his life, when he was already in charge of a diocese. It appears that on the day on which its events occurred he had accepted an invitation to dinner at a certain country-house in one of the midland counties. Happening to arrive somewhat earlier than usual, he found, on being shown into the drawing-room, that the hostess was not yet down, the only occupant of the room being a Roman Catholic priest, a complete stranger to him, who was seated upon a sofa intently reading a large book. As the bishop entered the priest raised his eyes, made him a courteous but silent bow, and again resumed his reading. He was a strongly built, active-looking man—apparently rather a muscular Christian; but there was in his face an expression of weariness and anxiety that attracted the bishop's attention, and he wondered much within himself who he could be, and how he came to be invited to that house. Soon other guests appeared, and the hostess came down so full of apologies for not being in readiness to receive her principal guest on his arrival, that the questions he had intended to ask about the stranger-priest were forgotten for the time. When seated next to his hostess at the dinner-table, however, they recurred to his memory, and turning to her he remarked:

“By the way, you did not introduce me to that interesting-looking priest whom I found in the drawing-room; who is he?”

Then, looking along the table, he continued with some surprise:

“He does not seem to have come in to dinner.”

A very strange look passed over the hostess's face as she said hurriedly, almost in a whisper:

“What, did you actually see him, then?”

“Certainly I did;” replied the bishop; “but I beg your pardon; I fear I have unintentionally mentioned a subject which is unpleasant to you—perhaps intruded upon some family secret. I had no idea but that the priest was a simple guest here, like myself, and his appearance interested me so much that I wished to ask for an introduction; but if you are anxious for some reason that his presence here should be concealed, I need hardly assure you that you may depend upon my silence.”

“No, no, my lord,” answered the hostess still in a low tone, “you misunderstand me entirely; there is nothing which I wish to conceal, though this is a subject which my husband does not like to have mentioned. I was surprised to hear that the priest had shown himself to you, because until now this has never happened except to a member of our own family. What you saw was no visitor, but an apparition.”

“An apparition?” ejaculated the bishop.

“Yes,” continued the hostess, “and one whose supernatural character it is impossible to doubt, for during the two years we have lived in this house it has shown itself perhaps a dozen times to my husband and myself under circumstances in which either self-deception or imposition were quite out of the question. Since we cannot explain it, and are well assured that it is due to no natural causes, we have decided not to speak of it to any one. But since you have seen it—my lord, will you do me a favour?”

“Most certainly, if it be within my power,” replied he.

“I have often thought,” she resumed, “that if any one could be found who had the courage to address it, we might perhaps be relieved from its presence. I have always feared that some day the children may see it, or that the servants may be terrified and insist upon leaving the house. Can you—will you—make some trivial excuse for going back into the drawing-room for a few minutes, see if the priest be still there, and, if he be, speak to him—adjure him to depart from this house—exorcise him, in fact?”

After some hesitation the bishop agreed to make the proposed experiment. His low-toned conversation with the hostess having been apparently unobserved, he excused himself to her in a louder voice for a few moments’ absence, and left the room, waving back the servant who would have attended him. It was with a strange thrill of awe that, on entering the drawing room, he perceived the figure of the priest still seated in the same spot—still diligently perusing his great breviary, if such it was; but with unshaken resolution he walked slowly forward, and stood directly in front of the apparition. As before, the priest greeted him with a courteous inclination of the head, but this time instead of immediately returning to the book his eyes rested, with a look of infinite weariness, and yet with a kind of suppressed eagerness also, upon the bishop’s face. After a moment’s pause, the latter said slowly and solemnly:

“In the name of God, who are you and what do you want?”

The apparition closed its book, rose from its seat, stood confronting him, and after a slight hesitation, spoke in a low but clear and measured voice:

“I have never been so adjured before; I will tell you who I am and what I want. As you see, I am a priest of the Catholic Church. Eighty years ago, this house in which we now stand was mine. I was a good rider, and was extremely fond of hunting when opportunity offered; and one day I was just about to start for the neighbouring meet, when a young lady of very high family indeed called upon me for the purpose of making a confession. What she said, of course, I may not repeat, but it affected very closely the honour of one of the noblest houses of England; and it appeared to me of such supreme importance that (there being certain complications in the case) I committed the grave indiscretion—the sin even, for it is strictly forbidden by our Church—of making notes of the confession as I heard it.

“When I had absolved and dismissed her, I found that it was only barely possible for me to reach the *rendezvous* in time, but even in my haste I did not forget the supreme importance of guarding carefully my notes of the terrible secret just committed to me. For purposes which I need not now detail, I had had a few bricks loosened in the wall of one of the lower passages of this house and a small recess made—just the place, I thought, in which my notes would be perfectly safe from any conceivable accident until my return, when I intended to master the intricacies of the case at my leisure, and then at once destroy the dangerous paper. Meantime I hurriedly shut it between the leaves of the book I had held in my hand. ran downstairs, thrust the book into the recess, replaced the bricks, sprang upon my horse, and rode off at full speed.

“That day in the hunting field I was thrown from my horse and killed on the spot; and ever since it has been my dreary fate to haunt this earthly home of mine and try to avert the consequences of my sin—try to guard from any possibility of discovery the fatal notes which I so rashly and wrongly made. Never until now has any human being dared to speak to me boldly as you have done; never until now has there seemed aught of help for me or hope of deliverance from this weary task; but now—will you save me? If I show you where my book is hidden, will you swear by all that you hold most sacred to destroy the paper that it contains without reading it—without letting any human eye see even one word of its contents? Will you pledge your word to do this?”

“I pledge my word to obey your wish to the letter,” said the bishop with solemnity.

The gaze of the priest’s eyes was so intense that they seemed to pierce his very soul, but apparently the result of the scrutiny was satisfactory, for the phantom turned away with a deep sigh of relief, saying:

“Then follow me.”

With a strange sense of unreality the bishop found himself following the apparition down the broad staircase to the ground floor, and then down a narrower one of stone that seemed to lead to some cellars or vaults. Suddenly the priest stopped and turned towards him.

“This is the place,” he said, placing his hand on the wall; “remove this plaster, loosen the bricks, and you will find behind them the recess of which I spoke. Mark the spot well, and—remember your promise.”

Following the pointing hand and the apparent wish of the spectre, the bishop closely examined the wall at the spot indicated, and then turned to the priest to ask another question; but to his intense astonishment there was no one there—he was absolutely alone in the dimly-lighted passage! Perhaps he ought to have been prepared for this sudden disappearance, but it startled him more than he cared to admit even to himself. He retained sufficient presence of mind to draw a penknife from his pocket and make a scratch upon the wall, and also to leave the knife itself at the foot of the wall to guide him to the spot; then he hurried up the stairs, and presented himself, still breathless with surprise, in the dining-room.

His prolonged absence had caused some comment, and now his agitated appearance excited general attention. Unable for the moment to speak coherently, his only answer to the earnest questions of his host was a sign which referred him to the hostess for explanation. With some hesitation she confessed the errand upon which her request had despatched his lordship, and as may easily be imagined, intense interest and excitement were at once created. As soon as the bishop had recovered his voice, he found himself compelled to relate the story before the entire party, concealment being now out of the question.

Celebrated as was his eloquence, it is probable that no speech he ever made was followed with closer attention than this; and at its conclusion there was no voice to oppose the unanimous demand that a mason be at once sent for to break down the wall and search for confirmation of this weird yet dramatically circumstantial tale. After a short delay the man arrived, and the whole company trooped eagerly downstairs under the bishop’s guidance to watch the result of his labours. He could hardly repress a shudder as he found himself once more in the passage where his ghostly companion had vanished so unceremoniously; but he indicated the exact spot which had been pointed out to him, and the mason began to work upon it forthwith.

“The plaster seems very hard and firm,” remarked some one.

“Yes,” replied the host, “it is of excellent quality, and comparatively new; these ‘vaults’ had been long disused, I am told, until my predecessor had the old brickwork repaired and plastered over only a few years ago.”

By this time the mason had succeeded in breaking away the plaster and loosening a brick or two at the point indicated, and though perhaps no one was actually surprised, yet there was a very perceptible stir of excitement among the guests when he announced the existence of a cupboard or cavity about two feet square and eighteen inches deep in the thickness of the wall. The host pressed forward to look in, but instantly recollecting himself, drew back and made way for the bishop, saying:

“I was forgetting your promise for the moment; to you alone belongs the right of the first investigation here.”

Pale, but collected, the bishop stepped up to the cavity, and after one glance put in his hand and drew forth a heavily bound, old-fashioned book, thickly covered with dust or mould. A thrill ran through the assembled guests at the sight, but no words broke the silence of awe-stricken expectation while he reverently opened the volume, and, turning over a few leaves, drew from between the pages a piece of writing paper, yellow with age, on which were some irregular, hastily-written lines. As soon as he was certain that he had found what he sought, he averted his eyes from it, and, the others falling back to make way for him, bore it carefully up the stairs and into the nearest room and cast it reverently into the fire burning on the hearth, almost as though he were laying a sacred offering upon some ancient Zoroastrian altar.

Until the last scrap of the mysteriously found document was reduced to cinder, no one spoke; and even then, though a few disjointed exclamations of "Marvellous! wonderful indeed! who could have believed it?" broke forth, the majority were far too deeply impressed for words. The bishop felt that none who were present on that occasion could ever forget its lessons—he himself least of all, and indeed he could never tell the story, even after years had passed, without the profoundest emotion. The figure of the priest, he added, was never seen again in the house where he had so long guarded his guilty secret.

We can readily realise what that priest's feelings must have been when the accident threw him suddenly out of his physical body, and he knew that he would be unable to repair the consequences of his indiscretion. An added difficulty was that the very nature of his secret was such that there was scarcely anyone to whom he could trust it; and he must have had perpetual anxiety lest it should be discovered by the wrong person, while he was waiting for the right one to whom he could entrust its destruction.

This again, like the previous story, is an example of a well-attested and not infrequent class of phenomena, and is specially remarkable only from the high position of the principal actor, and, perhaps, for a certain perfection of detail—an artistic finish, as it were—which, if this account were a fiction, would be supposed to do credit to the conceptive powers of the writer. The person from whom, and the circumstances under which, I heard it, precluded, however, the slightest possibility of its having acquired a romantic tinge, as might be the case had it passed through many hands instead of coming direct from the fountain head; and for my part I can only say that I have been, as ever, scrupulously exact in its reproduction, using in many cases, I believe, even the exact words in which it was originally told.