

THE CONVERSION OF SIMON FISH.

BY JOHN KNIPE.

I. THE CHRISTMAS GAME AT GRAY'S INN.

IN the reign of Henry VIII there was kept up merrily the pleasant and venerable Yule-tide custom of holding of Mumming Plays, Masks, and Lords of Misrule and the Election and Sermon of the Boy Bishop at Paul's. Some saucy mockery of the great was winked at in these privileged "Christmas Games." Now Christmas, 1526, saw the Great Cardinal's power waning over the King, and the Londoners, who hated his Eminence, were quick to perceive signs of coming fall, while the Thames Watermen, great gossipers all, had whispered how in the dog-days the Cardinal, taking his barge at the King's Bridge, Westminster, answered the Bishop with him who mopped his brow and complained of the heat—"Aye, my Lord. And had ye been so shrewdly chafed as I at the Council this morning ye might well feel hot!" All men knew that his Eminence glanced at the King himself in this saying, and other tales passed from lip to lip until certain daring spirits—young Law Students of Gray's Inn—resolved to take advantage of the Christmas Game for some subtle and witty attack upon Wolsey himself in a manner which he could not well resent openly for fear of public ridicule. The chief instigator in this bold business was one Simon Fish, a student in his Second Year, whose barbed wit and liveliness in his ready retorts had made him popular and feared, and already he excelled his seniors at the Inn. He was betrothed to a fair and well-dowered maid, Margery, daughter of a City wine merchant, and he looked to be married in perhaps four to five years as soon as he received his Call to the Bar. By his brilliant studies young Fish attracted the notice of the authorities of the Inn, especially of Master Edward Hall, a graduate of King's College, Cambridge, who was in the Rota of the Serjeants, and the Master-Serjeant Roo, his tutor, who greatly favoured Simon Fish, for he even admitted him to his private chambers and let him make free with his cherished books.

Thus ranging over parchments and volumes, Simon discovered an old pamphlet written some score of years ago, which he opened in idle curiosity, seeing it was an unknown work of more than common interest. And he was soon deep in reading this work. After supper-time Master Roo returned to his chambers laden with sheepskins and papers, and his weary deep-lined face lit up at the sight of his favourite pupil seated on a stool reading under an oil lamp.

"Ha! Simon!" he said—and he clapped him familiarly on the shoulder—"What hast thou there, lad? Been a-browsing in my poor library? Take heed, my son, there may be forbidden fruit on those shelves. Here's the Cardinal swearing he's a mind to burn all heretic books for a public example before the Northern Rood o' Paul's."

Young Fish smiled and tossed back his thick brown hair.

"Why, Master-Serjeant," he said modestly, yet speaking freely as one who knew his privileges, "I could scarce be accused of reading a heretic book when 'tis one of your own making."

Master-Serjeant flung aside his coif and took his greasy skull-cap from a peg by the door.

"So! Mine, ha?" he chuckled. "Let me see it, boy . . . Aye! Ye've found my old *Interlude*! Saint Mary! How long is't since I wrote that! . . ." He coughed and read aloud in high delight—"A Merry and Pleasant Interlude of Good and Evil Governance"—Aye! 'Twas in 1505—the days of his Grace's father—King Henry Seventh—that I wrote this. I think it glanced at the misgovernment of the late usurper Richard of Gloucester . . . Well! Well! Times change, *tempora et mores*, ha? Like it, lad?"

"Very well, sir," replied Simon. "I could not put it down until I finished it, and I had just begun to read part over again."

Master Roo nodded and dropped his short, fat body into a chair.

"Why, I thought it good myself at the time," he said complacently. "But with Richard gone 'twere flogging a dead horse to play it."

"There are other discontents," replied Simon subtly.

Master Roo smiled and wagged his head.

"Now, lad, what mischief lurks in your secret heart?" he inquired indulgently. "Ye mean?"

Simon's narrow finger sketched a capital letter in the air. "So!" muttered the Serjeant, his eyes gleaming under his thick grey brows. He shook his head slowly—regretfully, as Fish saw. "Dangerous," he said. "The man has much power yet."

"Power over our Christmas Game? Here in our own Hall?" asked Fish.

"By Saint Paul!" gasped Master Roo, half in protest and half in the author's quick rapture. "Nay! My modest *Interlude* is not worthy to be lifted to such perilous place of honour."

"Listen to me, sir," begged Fish. "I found your play soon after dinner and read in it until near supper-time. Then I returned to ask your leave to borrow it since ye allow not your books to be taken from your chambers. Well, ye found me here—still reading this *Merry Interlude* and I did laugh heartily over it."

Roo stretched his thick legs and smiled. He observed his pupil. Simon Fish was taller than most men in Gray's Inn and a personable youth, his features regular, his blue-grey eyes large, wide and flashing, his brow broad and thoughtful, and his mouth had a sardonic, humorous twist, while his long nose was finely shaped and his chin jutted sharply under the sensitive lips. The eyes were set too wide apart for perfection of line, and the chin was over-sharp, but the fire in his eyes and the clear, pleasant ring of his voice surely marked him out to dominate his fellows. His dress was neat and plain.

Master Roo, easy, good man, somewhat slovenly and untidy, had the sudden hot temper of the scholar which sparked when he was

roused, but was soon appeased. He had been chafed that day, as Simon was quick to observe. His pupil's deference and admiring manner gratified him, and he began to yield the point towards which he saw the skill of Simon's arguments tended.

"Well," he mused, rubbing his finger over a stubbly chin, and his broad red face had a considering look. "'Twould need to be altered, Simon, and made over anew. I've scant time for such toys."

Young Fish bent insinuatingly over his tutor.

"Sir, if I helped ye—in the copying out of the Parts—and as your humble scribe."

"Faith! Simon, ye make bold to tilt against dignitaries. I may be doing ye a shrewd turn if I consent. Hum!"

Master Roo's plump hand went out for the pamphlet and Fish slid it gently before him as the Serjeant pulled his chair in at an ink-spotted table of oak. The lawyer turned pages lovingly and he nodded.

"'Tis a pleasant piece—Satire or no," he commented. "Maybe as the ill-governors are in couples my Lord Cardinal would have no private jealousy, ha?"

"Surely his Eminence could have no cause," argued Simon, "when he learns how it was written by yourself some twenty years back. And we can turn it into a gamesome play with music and dancing."

Master Roo meditated awhile, scanning his play, torn between doubt, prudence and the author's proud longing.

Suddenly he smote the table with his heavy fist.

"My Lord Cardinal slighted the Inns of Court and us the lawyers—he called us 'picking crows' yesterday at York Place before my good Lord of Canterbury's face. Have at the butcher's dog, Simon, but cunningly so that he can spy no offence!" . . .

"By your good leave, if we change the title or add some words——"

"Aye! And add to the cast—there be seven Principals, my lad. For the new title . . ."

"Call it thus . . ." proposed Simon.

And they worked at the *Interlude* until near midnight.

Simon Fish had joined a circle of First and Second Year men who shared in the growing discontent of Wolsey's rule, and they were all agog to help forward in rehearsing and dressing the new Christmas *Interlude* by their popular Serjeant-Master Roo. So eager did they become that the flattered tutor hastened to obtain the sanction of the Reverend Master of Gray's Inn. This was readily granted and every facility was offered for the production in their Hall on Twelfth Night. Relatives and friends loaned rich and costly stuffs, masks and instruments of music. The authorities invited a splendid company of guests, including the Lord Mayor and the City Fathers, with noblemen of the Court and leading merchants.

Young Thomas Moyle, a great friend of Simon Fish, accepted the second-best rôle, for Master Roo's choice of Simon as the chief

player all thought his bare due, after his hard work and diligent assistance of lesser players. Roo himself agreed to deliver the Epilogue. Simon threw himself heart and soul into the production, and he enjoined strict secrecy on his actors, which was marvellously well kept, for the elder ones feared the lash of his bitter tongue and as Roo observed humorously: "No wenches were among 'em save the smooth-faced boys whom Simon and Moyle would swinge if they prattled." But the threat of losing their parts kept order without trouble. The whole company revelled in the work. One person alone showed some aversion. Mistress Margery disliked to see Simon so little on Sundays and she cared nothing for such things. She was of a grave, sweet disposition, affectionate and truly devoted to the lively youth, and of high courage, for she belonged, young as she was, to the proscribed Society of the "*Christian Brethren*" which had been founded about a year ago to give Wyclif's Bible to the common people. The members were enrolled, had their password, paid their agents, and kept audited accounts for modest but steady supplies of money. They accepted such as were willing to join them, and dared risk the horrible penalties of heresy.

A week before Christmas Margery sent word to her betrothed begging him to meet her at the house of Master Humphrey Monmouth, the rich clothier who lived in All Hallows' parish, hard by the Tower. Simon went there to dinner, and he soon showed his sweet-heart that he was not turned cold as she half-feared.

Being Margery's godfather, Master Monmouth took a keen interest in the proposed play, and he promised to attend it when Simon offered to obtain him an invitation as his guest.

"Bring Margery, I pray you, Master Monmouth," he proposed.

She was reluctant until her lover frowned and kindly Master Monmouth winked and nodded that she ought to accept.

"I love not these new stage-plays," she said primly; "but if it will please ye, Simon."

He laughed, well-pleased at her yielding to his will.

"Why, sweeting, 'tis no new play. I found it in Master Roo's old folio script of the last reign. 'Tis a kind of Morality on Good and Bad Government of a Realm, Master Monmouth. They have chosen it for this Year's Christmas Game."

"And so ye'll take the chief part, ha?" asked the genial clothier. "There was a wind that it would aim a shaft or so at a certain lord in a red hat, and this scared our gentle wench, I think."

Simon laughed heartily and he glanced round the cosy prosperous parlour, and Madam Monmouth, a quiet kindly hospitable soul, said that she thought there could be no harm in a Christmas Game allowed by the Master and Benchers and she would go and so none could blame Margery for being present.

And after dinner Simon persuaded his betrothed to promise her troth should be given before witnesses, at a solemn Plighting at her widowed mother's house on Christmas Eve.

Margery was not a beautiful girl, but her clear brown eyes were tender and kind, and she was fresh complexioned, young and active

and very pleasant to look upon, for she dressed becomingly and had dainty ways that pleased Simon's fastidious taste.

In spite of secret qualms of doubt Margery was happy and excited as she sat in a good place, a front side-bench, and gazed at the red curtains from behind which Simon was presently to appear.

"The Lord likes His People to be merry," she thought as the singers and musicians came before the curtains and struck up sweetly the ancient Carol, "God rest ye merry, gentlemen," and all the fine company in the Hall joined in the refrain.

The curtains parted and a slender child in white, wearing a garland of silver roses—Innocence—stepped forward, and he piped out a pretty Prologue, begging their gentleness to favour this "*Goodly Disguising*" which was "merry and pleasant for the Christmas Game." Smiling Innocence vanished and a troop of maskers in green and blue—Shepherds and Shepherdesses—ran in waving their crooks garlanded in young green and driving their sheep—which baaed and gambolled finely as they danced for spring—summer followed, youths and maids clad in cloth of gold and wreathed in red roses—autumn, with men, lads and gleaners who bore grapes and sheaves of corn—and winter came in merrily, young and old alike dragging in the yule-log. All danced until a huge black Wolf with ravening red jaws rushed in and scattered the pretty show, rending and devouring those who had not fled. And again the curtains closed.

They rose upon a splendid room—and the *Lord Duke Governance* (Simon) sat upon his throne, and his gracious Consort *Lady Public Weal* at his side. But *Dissipation* (Thomas Moyle) and *Negligence* as humble black-gowned clerks crept in and whispered slanders and the sweet *Public Weal* was put away, and she wept until her people rose, headed by *Inward Grudge* and *Disdain of Wanton Sovereignty*, bold nobles in glittering armour, and *Rumor Populi* raised a tumult and joined them, and then they came to the *Lord Governance*, who listened to their humble remonstrance, and repented, so both his *Evil Counsellors* were judged, raging and defiant and casting insults at Judge and People, and seized, and put in chains by the *Lord Governance's* command, and he condemned them in a mighty fine speech, and took back sweet *Lady Public Weal* to bed and board and sent *Dissipation* and *Negligence* to the common gibbet as traitors to his Laws. And a grand Rejoicing followed, *Lord Governance* leading his *Lady Public Weal* in a stately maze, and a splendid Chorus ended the "*Merry and Pleasant Interlude.*" The Wolf himself returned alone and recited his new Epilogue—hitting shrewdly in elegant Latin at "One whose blacks turned red."

Such a magnificent show had never been seen before in the Inns of Court, and Simon's brave, witty and fiery speeches rang boldly through the Hall, loudly applauded by everyone, from the Lord Mayor and Reverend Master of Gray's Inn to the humble porters of the gates.

Thomas Moyle was a desperate and crafty *Dissipation*, and he had a look of the hated Cardinal which was more apparent in his

purple and furred Counsellor's robe, while Master Roo himself played the *Wolf*, and rent and slavered in a very savage fashion while the Hall rang with shouts of mirth. He came and ducked and bowed with the wolf-skin hanging from his fat neck, and Simon in his Ducal robes and Tom Moyle in chains followed. But it was Simon whom all admired most, and the Reverend Master whispered the Lord Mayor that he was a young man of great parts and would surely rise high in the world.

Margery clapped until her palms were sore, and Master Monmouth laughed loudly at each witty word or merry jest.

At supper Simon could not sit beside them, for his place was next Master Roo, but he snatched a minute to say a parting word.

"Well, sweet, didst like the *Disguising*?" he whispered in her ear.

Margery's eyes were shining proudly and she nodded. "It was a brave, noble piece and ye were much the best there," she answered.

Simon demurred, but he looked well pleased.

The Cardinal said nothing for some days until the Season of Mirth ended, then suddenly he let out his hoarded-up spite in great fury and bitterness. Master Roo was sent for and he went to York Place and did not come back. A word arose that my Lord Cardinal had got the King's ear—that good easy Master-Serjeant had been committed to the Tower for a Contempt. Gossip ran that the Reverend Master had been himself severely blamed and both Simon Fish and Thomas Moyle were arrested. They had disappeared in the night after Master-Serjeant was taken.

The Master called benchers and students into the Hall and one of Wolsey's clerks—Master Thomas Cromwell—sat by his chair, and he listened while the Master told them all how he was sorry the *Interlude* had offended the Lord Cardinal, and worse, and he read out a list of names of all those young gentlemen who had played in the *Disguising*, and they were bidden stand up and answer and prepare to follow Master Cromwell to York Place, and appear before my Lord there. Thomas Moyle was in the Hall but not Simon Fish. It was whispered he was in the Tower with Master Roo.

The offending players were kept waiting in the Lobby more than an hour before they were called into the Council Chamber, and brought before the Cardinal sitting in state on a gilded chair, and he eyed them sternly enough. Wolsey rebuked the young gentlemen harshly and told them that their insolent *Disguising* had highly displeased his Grace the King. They were forced to beg pardon of his Eminence on their knees. But he refused to forgive Thomas Moyle, whose mimicry had stung Wolsey's pride, and he sent him to the Fleet for an example to the rest. The young men were thunderstruck, for Wolsey declared he had the King's command.

Young Moyle implored mercy and swore he meant no offence, but he was harshly silenced. They learned how Master-Serjeant himself had had his coif taken from him. The rest were told to conduct themselves gravely and humbly and not rail against dignitaries or the King's Grace. Wolsey demanded for Simon Fish to be brought—

and examined the law-students closely, but they all replied that he was gone and none knew whither, so the Cardinal let them go.

But late that night Margery heard a-tapping on her window-pane and a serving-man of Master Monmouth whispered her to open a casement. She pushed back the bar softly—the house was in Candlewick Street—and she leaned out, thinking it was some business of the Christian Brethren which she was pledged to help. But to her grief she heard how Simon had hardly escaped the Cardinal's clutches and he was now on board a ship in the Pool and would sail at morning tide.

She longed to go down to the Customs Wharf and watch for a glimpse of his face on the deck ; even perhaps row in a swift wherry across the Pool and cry out a farewell word of love. But the home discipline was strict, and girls who ran off to bid loving farewells even to their betrothed husbands, if they dared venture beyond the door without their parents' leave, knew what to expect ; when the rod hung over the wall-shelf, for parents thought it protected best a girl's honour, and courting was kept to settle or bench under their eyes. She hesitated awhile, between love and her sense of duty. She longed to go so much that she would willingly have borne a whipping after for Simon's sake, but her mother stirred in the next room from the great bed with the younger children and called her sharply by name. Margery shut the window noiselessly and slipped back into bed, and kept very still ; she lay awake the rest of the night weeping and praying for him, but though her pale cheeks and heavy eyes betrayed her, the widow only looked keenly at her daughter and said nothing. Later she heard the news of Simon Fish and was highly indignant, and forbade the girl to think or talk of him more.

" Good mother, I will obey your will," Margery said in a soft little voice, " but I have promised to marry Simon, and given him my solemn troth, and he has plighted his to me. I cannot do less than remain his promised wife until he releases me from my bond. For I vowed it before God and our friends. So be not angry, sweet mother, that I must keep faith with the man whom I love."

Widow Necton, a kindly good-humoured soul by nature, was nonplussed.

" The young man is a good-for-nothing rebel," she returned, " and he would doubtless make ye the same. I ought to take the rod to ye for at seventeen ye defy your own mother ! But I allowed the trothplight and it may hold for the year. Ye'll not write to Simon Fish nor receive his letters. Let him forget ye and if ye've sense, forget him."

Diplomat in her love Margery answered only by kissing her mother's hand, who relented so far as to embrace her daughter and assure her—most exasperating of words—she was strict for her good.

And Simon himself, sailing down Thames Mouth in a trading brig, had time to reflect in the cold grey January mist whether his brief splendour in the " Goodly Disguising " was worth such humiliating flight, the wrecking of his profession, since he knew that

he would never be suffered to enter the gates of Gray's Inn once he fled, and added contumacy to his offence—and the loss of his devoted promised bride. Within a couple of hours acute pangs of seasickness in an exceedingly rough passage further increased his misery, while the master of the brig sent him some horrible-tasting and evil-smelling Dutch *schnapps*, and the seaman who offered it said bluntly that he was lucky to cheat the gallows.

After a dreadful tossing the ship reached Flushing that night and Antwerp the next day, where Simon, feeling more dead than alive, crawled ashore, and was fortunate enough to meet a friendly merchant who pitied his wretched forlorn state and for charity took him back to his house. He was called Christopher van Endhoven and spoke English very well, while Simon discovered to his great comfort that his host knew by repute Margery's godfather, Master Humphrey Monmouth. Now Van Endhoven was a printer by trade and he printed English books, so he offered young Fish a small place as reader and reviser, finding that Simon knew Latin and French. And humbled by adversity the young lawyer was glad to accept, and being by nature honest he made a clean breast of the trouble which had driven him into exile. He found Van Endhoven a sympathetic listener and as Simon worked zealously, and his neat ways pleased the Vrow Endhoven, he settled to his new life in Flanders and won the confidence of his master by his skill, ability and quickness to learn, until after some months Endhoven called Simon into his private parlour and inquired if he would help him in printing forbidden books.

"The Scriptures?" asked Simon quietly. "Yes, willingly, for both Master Monmouth and certain good friends of mine have told me of this great longing at home to read the Gospels in English."

Endhoven said Master Fish should first read the book.

"I am willing," repeated Simon.

He was very curious to read this heretic book which the Cardinal and his bishops hated and condemned. He knew that Tunstal, Bishop of London, had said such books ought to be burned, for it was not good to give Holy Scripture to be read by common unlearned folk in the vulgar tongue.

Then Van Endhoven gave young Simon Fish the proscribed book, telling him to lock it up and keep it safely in his own bedchamber, and Simon thanked him and took the black leather volume, which was rather small as books were then, and he locked his door and lit his lamp and got into his bed to keep warm, for it was March and the nights were cold.

So Simon Fish, the disgraced student of Gray's Inn and fugitive exile from Cardinal Wolsey's anger, opened a book which was thought tenfold more dangerous than any Satire or *Interlude* of Master Roo, or any other man—indeed he read that night a book of which he knew but a little in the Vulgate—and had never seen or heard of in his mother tongue—the book which the prudent Van Endhoven was ready to risk his life to print and to publish for Englishmen to read.

Until a very late hour Simon read eagerly the Book of the Gospels—for it was indeed the New Testament of William Tyndale. And as he read the whole world changed for him, since he himself was becoming a changed man.

(To be continued)

The Historic Jesus in the New Testament, by R. H. Strachan, D.D. (Student Christian Movement Press, 7s. 6d. net), deals with the influence of the Pauline conception of Christ as emphasising the Risen Lord rather than the Sayings and Doings of Jesus of Nazareth. Dr. Strachan finds a reaction in primitive Christianity from the Pauline attitude, as it was found necessary to give the story of the human life of Jesus a central place in the Christian Gospel. He traces the movement in the Epistle to the Hebrews where the life on earth is a prelude to the heavenly activity of Christ as High Priest, and in the Fourth Gospel where the human life becomes the full Revelation of which Jesus had come to be in the faith of the Church. The distinction between these two conceptions is indicated by the use of the term "The Historical Jesus" for the former, and the "Historic or Human Jesus" of the latter. A careful and close examination is made of the Pauline doctrine of Christ, and its value is noted, especially in regard to the exalted Christ and the pre-existent Christ. The teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews is subjected to a similar examination, and the Logos doctrine of the Fourth Gospel is treated at considerable length and the Gospel is shown as the final revaluation of the Historic Jesus. The book is full of useful suggestions although there may not be absolute agreement with some of the author's presuppositions. On such points as the authorship of the Ephesians and the Pastoral Letters as well as of the Fourth Gospel itself his view may not appear well grounded, but his central purpose of emphasising the value of the Life of Our Lord on earth will be fully appreciated by all his readers.

CHILD LIFE AND RELIGION. By Ilse Forest. London: Williams & Norgate, Ltd. 4s. 6d. net.

What shall I tell my child? This is a question with which parents are constantly confronted. Here is an interesting and suggestive treatment, on modern lines, of this vital problem of the upbringing and education of children. It is mainly concerned with religious training, but sex instruction is not passed over and a chapter on "Fact and Symbol" will be found most useful and suggestive. We commend this thoughtful book to the notice of parents and teachers. The Bibliography gives a list of useful books on religion in relation to child-life.