

A VICTIM TO THE SEAL OF CONFESSION.

A TRUE STORY. By REV. JOSEPH SPILLMAN, S.J.

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CHAPTER III.

Meanwhile Father Montmoulin had installed his mother in the large easy chair, and submitted to be minutely questioned by her as to his health and general well-being. The result of the interrogatory was on the whole satisfactory; the old lady thought her son looking rather pale and thin, but otherwise fairly well. She told him he must take more care of himself, take the greatest care of himself, and not sit up studying at night, and above all not think of fasting. The young priest smiled good humoredly at these motherly injunctions, and quieted her with the assurance that he felt quite well and strong. And in future, he added, she would be able to look after him herself, as soon as she had rested a little, and had a cup of coffee, he wanted her to go and choose the rooms she would like fitted up for her.

"Let us go at once," she rejoined. "I really am not tired, and the children will be here afterwards, and one can say nothing before them. Of course I should like to be as near as I can to you."

Father Montmoulin accordingly showed his mother the two nearest cells in the left wing, which, as we have said, were parted from his own rooms by a narrow passage, for the sake of admitting light to the corridor. The rooms had a pleasant look out upon the hills, and were comparatively in good repair. Yet Mrs. Montmoulin preferred the two on the other side, adjoining her son's bedroom. "We must provide for all needs," she said. "An old woman like myself ought to think seriously of death; if I am here I should only have to knock on the wall if anything unexpected happened. And see what a delightful view there is from these windows, all down the valley!"

"Just as you please, mother," her son replied. "The other rooms are rather large and more airy, but we will furnish these up nicely for you; the ceilings shall be whitewashed and the walls papered afresh. I have got a book of patterns, so you shall select the paper for yourself. To-morrow I will see about getting the whitewashers and paperhangers, and about mid-day it will be ready for you to move in. Then I hope you will have tranquil, happy time, after all the storms it has pleased God that you should pass through."

"How kind you are, Francis," exclaimed the happy mother, wiping a tear from her eye. "I never doubted your affection for me. But how will you manage, with your scanty income, to do all this?"

"Do not let that trouble you, mother," Mrs. Blanchard, the President of St. Joseph's Guild, a wealthy and charitable widow, somewhere about your age, (who, by the bye, is looking forward with much pleasure to make your acquaintance and with whom I doubt not you will pass many a pleasant hour, working for the poor) had the excellent idea of presenting you with a good round sum to make your rooms more comfortable, and add a few books to my small library. So you may be at ease on that point; mother, but come along now, the office must be ready; I think I hear Julia calling us."

They turned into the dark kitchen, where the little girl had just made the coffee. "You see how good it will be, grandmother," she cried triumphantly. "But the table is not laid yet, and there are such a lot of books on it! And Charles has not come back from the baker's. Do please help me!" The books were soon cleared away, a white cloth laid on the table, and the cups and saucers set out. "This one with the gold rim is for Uncle," the child said, as she passed the cups in review; "Grandmother shall have the one with the motto. I will have the pretty one with the flowers, and this cracked one will do quite well for Charles. I wish the stupid boy would bring the bread!"

"Here I am," said Charles, who entered at that moment with a bag of sweet cakes and another containing rolls. "I don't see why you should call me stupid! Here is your change, Uncle, and the baker said a penny was for me."

"Is that to buy sweets, my boy?" his Uncle rejoined as he gave him back the penny.

"No Uncle, I shall put into the box for the neaten, that the poor children may be baptized, when I go as a missionary to the foreign lands you have told me of."

"Well done, my boy! you shall have another penny for that," the priest rejoined.

"And please a penny for me too, for making you such nice coffee," Julia put in.

"You shall have it," replied her Uncle. "Is that to go into the collecting box too?"

"Oh, good Heavens, I shall never go out to the islands where the horrible cannibals live! perhaps I will put a half-penny in."

"Well, well," said the priest, "do as you please, only do fetch your wonderful coffee, we are more than ready for it."

Soon all four were sitting round the table, enjoying the refreshing beverage, with which no fault could be found, and munching the crisp cakes. Charles claimed an extra cake as his guerdon for having fetched them, besides he remarked that his sister had kept the best cup for herself.

"Very well," said his Uncle, "justice demands that Charles has another biscuit, and Julia another cup of coffee. Now when you have done, children, you may make a tour of inspection of all the empty cells, and select bedrooms for yourselves when you come to spend your holidays with your grandmother and me."

"Hurrah, that will be jolly!" the boy exclaimed. "Make haste Julia, finish your coffee."

"If I come with you you must promise to stay with me, for I should be quite afraid to be left alone in the dark passages and empty cells," the girl answered. "But I shall not want a room for myself. I may sleep with you, Grandmother, in the holidays, may I not, I should die of fright, if I was alone at night. Don't you know the last nuns who were here, were all guillotined in one day, twenty-two of them, in the courtyard down below. And old Susan says that on moonlight nights, they walk in procession up and down the corridors, with their heads in their hands! That is the reason why she persists in sleeping down at the 'Olive tree' inn; for nothing in the world would she pass a night here, she says."

"The old woman ought not to fill your head with such rubbish, child," the priest rejoined. "The good religious were not executed here, but on the market place in Aix, and they will do you no harm for they were martyrs and are now in heaven. They were put to death because they prayed for good King Louis XVI., and he died the death of a Saint."

The children having finished their coffee ran off on a voyage of discovery through the deserted cloisters, leaving the mother and son to have a conversation together concerning the prospect of happier times to come after all the troubles of the past.

"I do not know how it is," Mrs. Montmoulin presently remarked "whether it is the gloomy impression made on me by this almost untenanted convent, or the timidity engendered by past misfortunes, that makes me unable to believe that there are any tranquil and joyous days in store for me in my old age; on the contrary, I seem to feel as if some new trial threatened to fall on us."

"We are in the hands of God, whatever happens," her son replied, "and if it please Him to send us fresh troubles we must bear them with the help of His Grace. But really I see no cause for apprehension at present. I have a good appointment here; the greater part of my parishioners seem fond of me; I have no personal enemies. The party who are hostile to the Church are of course a thorn in my side, but so long as I do my duty, they cannot injure me. Beside I am very careful to keep clear of mixing in politics. My ecclesiastical superiors are satisfied with me; only yesterday I received a very flattering letter from the Vicar-General, expressing his approval of some essays I had published in the Clerical Journal. I tell you this to set your mind at rest. He offered me at the same time a Professorship in the Greater Seminary, to which a very good salary is attached; but I prefer to remain here and occupy myself with reading and the care of my flock. If I went to the Seminary, I should be compelled to relinquish the pleasure of having you with me, and requiring you in some measure for all the cares and privations my schooling and subsequent training cost you. So keep up your spirits, mother."

At this juncture the door bell rang, and Father Montmoulin put his head out of the window to see who was there. It was a boy in the costume of the peasants of that part of the country; he made a sign that he wanted the door opened, which Loser had closed behind him on taking his departure. "A sick-call, probably," said the priest, with a shade of impatience; "these people always send for me at such inopportune times." Stepping out into the corridor he called Charles, and bade him go down to the door; in a few moments he returned with the messenger, who had in fact been sent to summon the priest to a distant hamlet among the mountains.

"Mother said, would your Reverence please come quick, or father would die without the Blessed Sacrament and the Holy Oils," said the boy as he told his somewhat incoherent narrative. "He fell off his chair all of a sudden, as we sat at supper, and since then he has not spoken a word, only makes a strange noise in his throat, like our farm-servant, when he gets drunk. But father had taken nothing but a bowl of soup. Please come at once, Father."

"I will come, my little man. Your father seems to have had some kind of a stroke. I hope it will not be so very bad. That sort of thing often passes off. However, I will make haste. You see mother, I must bid you good-bye at once. Dear me, I have just remembered all that money of Mrs. Blanchard's, it will never do to leave the house unprotected. St. Joseph, give me good counsel. I cannot go a mile out of my way to take it to the Mayor, or get some neighbor to come and act as care-taker; that would want such a long explanation, and the sick man might die before I got to him. And the salvation of a soul, perhaps quivering in the balance, is more important than the safety of this sum of money. I know what might be done. Could you oblige me, mother, by staying here for the night with the children? I have a large sum in my keeping, here in this desk, and you can understand that I do not feel justified in leaving it unguarded in an empty house. You can make yourselves comfortable for the night—you see I must attend to my pastoral duties."

"Yes, I will stay, if there is no other alternative," said the old lady, a little flustered. "But would it not be better to put the money into your bedroom, and then we can lock ourselves in, and it will be much safer than in the sitting-room."

"True; do whatever you think

right. Here is the key—no, where have I put it? I had it in my hand when you arrived. Never mind, there is not time to hunt for it now. We will move the desk and all into the bedroom, it is not heavy." Then a sudden suspicion passed through the priest's mind—was it possible that Loser had—"We must first ascertain," he said, "that it is really here. Quick Charles, fetch me the key of my wardrobe, it fits this desk."

The few moments that elapsed before the child returned were moments of painful suspense for the priest; at length the desk was unlocked, and to his great relief, the handkerchief in which he had wrapped the money lay there just as he had left it. "Again I was wrong in my suspicions," he said to himself. "Now we will not lose a moment. Come Benny, you go with me to the sacristy, and I will get the Holy Oils, and to the church, that I may take the Blessed Sacrament, and you must carry the lantern. And you Charles, take the keys of the church—you will find them on the kitchen table, and lock the door of the church after us; I have the key of the house door in my pocket. Now mother, make whatever arrangement you like." Then turning to the boy, he asked how far it was to the hamlet where he lived?

"I can go in about an hour, Father."

"Well yes," the priest replied, "but you run over the hills like a chamois, and along paths that are too steep for me, especially at night. I may not be back before midnight, or even before morning. So you settle yourself comfortably for the night; leave this rug here for me in case I return; I have often slept in an armchair. Now good-night, and God bless you! May His holy Angels watch over us all!"

So saying, Father Montmoulin accompanied by the two boys, hurried along the corridors, through which they could hardly see their way, to the church. From a tribune at the end of the corridor, whence a view of the choir and chancel with the ever-burning lamp could be obtained, availing staircase led down into the sacristy. There the priest took the Holy Oils and all that was necessary for administering the sick, and put them into a bag which he placed round his neck. Then going up to the altar, he opened the tabernacle and took from the ciborium a Host, which he adored, and placed in the small silver-gilt pyx upon his breast. He then left the church in solemn silence, bearing his God and future Judge hidden under the sacramental veil, preceded by the boy with the lighted lantern. Charles followed reverently to the church door, which he closed carefully, as soon as the priest with his little companion had disappeared in the fast falling twilight.

Passing through the church, lighted only by the flickering rays of the lamp suspended before the tabernacle, the boy re-entered the sacristy. In the church, he was not afraid, for as he bent his knee before the altar, he said to himself, "our Blessed Lord is there." But in the sacristy a nameless terror took possession of him, he could not summon courage to mount the dark winding stair to the tribune, and traverse the gloomy corridor to the priest's apartments without a light. He remembered that there was a taper on the altar by the Missal; this he took, and lighting it at the lamp, he began, not with considerable trepidation, to ascend the stairs, shielding the light with his hand. About half way up he passed a door which he had not observed on his way down, and taking it for the door of the tribune, he pushed it open and went through. It led into a small room, a kind of outer sacristy, in which all manner of church furniture, frames for holding candlesticks or lanterns, processional crosses, candles, vestments, and all the various services used from time to time for the services of the church were stored. But the first object that caught the eye of the trembling boy was the pall, upon which a large skull and cross bones were painted. With a shriek of terror he let the taper fall, turned and rushed upstairs into the tribune, whence he fled along the corridor until he gained his Uncle's rooms.

The old grandmother had no little difficulty in soothing the child, who burst into the room pale and trembling in every limb, as if he had seen a ghost. His sister too was so frightened by what he told her, that she begged her grandmother to let them go home. Mrs. Montmoulin, on whom

the deserted convent made anything but a pleasant impression, would gladly have acceded to the children's wishes, had she not promised her son to take care of the house and the sum of money for which he was responsible. She decided however to send the children down to the place where they were to meet Mr. Lenoir, and to remain in the house herself for the night. "Quick children," she said, "run as fast as you can down the hill to the 'Four Ways' inn where we got down. You cannot miss your road, and Mr. Lenoir will not have gone, ask him very politely to be so kind as to take you with him. Tell him I am obliged to stay here to take care of the house, but mind you do not say a word about the money."

Thereupon she put the rest of the biscuits that were standing on the table into the children's pockets, tied a scarf round their necks, and took them down the wide flight of stairs to the door. Then she kissed them both, and stood looking wistfully after them, as hand in hand they raced down the hill, till the village street hid them from sight. Then she fastened the door, and with a heavy heart wended her way back to her son's apartments.

"I am almost as much of a coward as my little boy," she said to herself as she began to clear the table. Then she opened the desk and took out the handkerchief containing the money. "What a weight it is!" she ejaculated, and unable to refrain from looking at the contents, she unknotted the handkerchief. The good old woman had never in her life seen so large a sum, gold, silver, and a whole packet of banknotes. She felt quite alarmed, and glanced voluntarily at the door, to see whether it was properly closed; then wrapping it up again, she carried the treasure into the next room, and concealed it in her son's bed.

"I hope all will turn out well," she soliloquized. "If some unprincipled man knew that I was all alone in this lonely house, with all this money in my charge—well, I had better not think too much about what might happen!"

Slowly pacing up and down the sitting room, the old lady recited the Rosary for the holy souls, whilst the shades of twilight deepened into night. She did not light a candle, but laid down without undressing on the bed, thinking she would keep awake until her son returned. The door of communication between the two rooms she carefully bolted, that being the only means of access to the chamber, but she left the door of the outer room unlocked, in case he should come back before morning. For a long time she lay there without closing her eyes; at length, however, she fell into a doze. A sharp gust of wind rattling the window, startled her into wakefulness; she sprang up. Was someone trying to get in through the window? No, the weather had suddenly changed; the mistral, the biting north-east wind which in the valley of the Rhone often breaks in upon the early spring of Provence with icy breath and heavy showers, had banished the softest breezes of the Mediterranean and covered the heavens with dark rain-clouds. Already the first large drops beat upon the panes. "My poor Francis! I only hope he will not contract some illness in this terrible weather!" sighed the anxious mother. She struck a light; it wanted an hour to midnight. She lay down again, and soon fell into an uneasy slumber. Before long she again started up, aroused this time by a peculiar sound, as if some one in the next room were trying the door. "Is that you, Francis," she exclaimed aloud.

The sound ceased immediately, and all was again quiet. The old lady listened for a few moments, then she laid her head back on the pillow. "I must have been dreaming," she said, and fell this time into a deep sleep, from which she did not wake until morning.

(To be Continued.)

THAT INTERNATIONAL YACHT RACE.

The forthcoming race between the new yachts Shamrock and Columbia is creating more interest on both sides of the Atlantic than ever before was aroused by a contest of this kind. From the time the keels of the vessels were laid, paragraphs have been appearing in the newspapers professing to give some items of news regarding the shape and dimensions of the craft while on the other hand it was announced that in the yards where they were being built the greatest possible care was being taken to prevent outsiders from getting even a momentary glimpse at them. This desire for secrecy on the part of their designers was intelligible while the vessels were in course of construction, but when the hulls of both were completed and about to be launched one cannot see what object could be served by hiding them from the public eye. The Shamrock was sent into the water enveloped in a sort of a bathing dress; the Americans were not quite so strict with regard to the Columbia.

Since the vessels have got their sails bent and begun to take trial trips with friendly craft, the Press paragraphs have become more numerous and interesting; their every movement is watched, each day's work is reported, and speculations are cautiously put forth as to the result of the great race. The paragraphs are quite like what one sees in the Press when two pugilists are in training for a battle; and as each principal has an attendant to keep him company, test his points, and try his mettle, so has each of these wonderful yachts a companion vessel to test its qualities and enable it to develop its best form. The Columbia is coached in this way by the Defender; the Shamrock is to have the Britannia for its "sparring partner." From what has already been seen of her performance it is believed that the Shamrock is a very fast boat and stands a good chance of bringing away the cup.

Sir Thomas Lipton has done all in his power to give an Irish character to his vessel, but as he desired to win the prize he had no option but to get her built by one or other of the fam-

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ous English or Scotch yacht-building firms. He has called his craft the Shamrock, he has entered her as belonging to the Ulster Yacht Club (being a North of Ireland man himself), and his racing colors are to be green and gold. He has acted spiritedly throughout, and if he does not achieve success he certainly has done a great deal to deserve it.—Dublin Nation.

THE PARIS EXPOSITION.

Notwithstanding the grave diplomatic and political crises that have convulsed her during the past year, it is gratifying to note that France's great International Exposition will be opened on the day originally fixed—the first of May, next year. By that date says Mr. Picquart, the Director-General, "every nail will have been driven home, the last coat of paint will be dry, all the flower bushes will be in bloom, and all the flags unfurled."

Mr. Picquart ought to know; for he has to his credit the successful organization of 1878 and of 1889. An idea of the immense amount of work which will have to be performed from to-day until the end of April next, owing to the numerous delays caused by the downfall of cabinets, and the consequent postponement of bills, expropriations, etc., can be formed when it is stated that it will be on a still grander scale than that of Chicago.

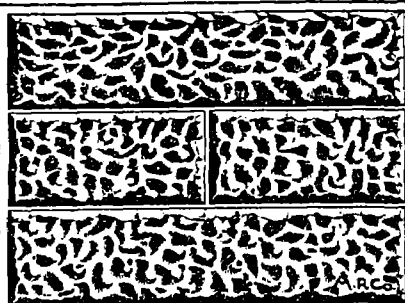
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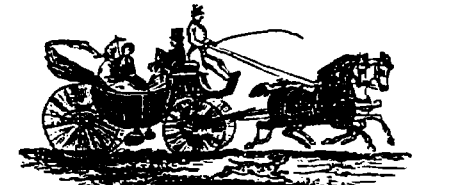
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