

## THE RESCUE OF THE MADONNA.

BY PADRE COLOMA.

And in their feasts they were groat for doing them, little for tolling them.—*de Mariana.*

I.

Extraordinary activity was to be seen, on the 8th of April, 1579, in the main body of the troops encamped at the foot of the walls of Maestricht, on either bank of the Meuse. Germans, Burgundians, Irishmen, Italians, and Spaniards were everwhere astir in their respective quarters, with that well ordered movement which always discloses unity of command and faithful execution. The light cavalry of the curassiers was dragging branches and earth from the river bank. From this some were preparing fagots for leveling up the fosses; others were occupied on the earthworks to protect the manoeuvring of the artillery, and on sacks of wool and hops, which had grown for the beer of Flanders, to repair the intrenchments. And there were some bringing forward on their gun-carriages the cannon for demolishing the walls. These were to be placed on strong bastions raised to an equal height with the city's defences. Everyone was making ready for the assault, which after a siege of three months was at last to be given at dawn of the following day.

Guiding and directing all was a cavalier who, accompanied by various others, trotted along on his bay horse, visiting the different quarters. He was without arms of any kind, and wore simply a blue mantle trimmed with marten skins, and a bonnet of the same on his head. It was Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma and Piacenza, the Governor General of the Low Countries in the name of His Catholic Majesty King Philip II. the Prudent.

In the background stood out the black walls of Maestricht, a city in mourning, afflicted by the triple scourge of war, famine, and heresy. The heretic soldiers had sacked the Catholic churches and torn down the sacred images, some of which they had placed on the batteries and along the walls, where there was most to fear from the arquebuses and cannon of the Spaniards. One of these, of great size and beauty, represented the Virgin Mary holding her Divine Son in her arms. They had suspended it from the bastion nearest to the Catholic entrenchments; and soldiers, robed in the priestly ornaments, traversed around it the ceremonies of worship, carrying their daring so far as to march along the very edge of the fosse, decked out in their sacred finery. This sacrilegious challenge awoke throughout the Catholic camp a holy wrath, which is ever the mother of great deeds. The cowardly indifference of our days does not understand such wrath, and so calls it intolerance and fanaticism; but the very spirit of truth counsels and justifies it—*Be angry and sin not.*

Drum taps had already sounded, telling the Catholic soldiers the hour of retiring to their quarters. With the twilight they withdrew to their barracks at a second signal; they could then no longer pass through the encampment without giving the sentinels the Saint and countersign of the day.

During this time, in one of the quarters where the famous Spanish infantry of the *Tercios* was encamped, a spectacle was going on, ordinary enough in that age, but strange nowadays. It would have made more than one undisciplined soldier smile in our day of revolutions and *pronunciamientos.*

In an open place left free by the rows of tents, a multitude of soldiers had thronged together, some seated, others on foot, forming a great circle. In the midst was a man of short stature and slender mien, mounted upon a drum covered by a board. He wore the Jesuit's cassock, and lifting up his crucifix was preaching to the redoubtable warriors, preparing them to die in order to teach them how to conquer.

The crowd of men, trained and hardened to war, many of them fierce and not a few petulant and ill-humoured, real rivals of the Maccabees, of the highest bravery and staking their all on their courage, listened with lowered heads to the tremendous truths, while more than one tear furrowed grimy cheeks and was lost in grizzled mustaches, and more than one iron gauntlet beat against the steel coat of mail, underneath which was hidden a contrite heart. For the characteristic trait of that period, so exalted by some, so calumniated by others—that which removes it so far from our own, inasmuch as its glory has been clouded and its power lessened—was, that faith was still living in every heart; that reverence for the priesthood gave resistless force to Christian correction; and that easy-going morality had not yet turned from their true meaning the names

of good and evil. On this account many who did evil knew that they were evil-doers, and feared public censure; and conviction and fear left an open door to the shame that becometh of humility of spirit when the soul is to be purified, and to repentance which asks and obtains pardon and insures amendment.

Many soldiers and officers strayed away from the circle, slowly directed their steps to various tents distinguished from the others by the cross which crowned them. They were to make their confession to the missionaries of the Society of Jesus, who had been summoned by the Duke of Parma to the camp and were now in readiness for that purpose.

A young man of noble presence was just returning from guard at one of the two bridges of boats which kept up communication between the army on either side of the river. He had the showy red and yellow uniform of the infantry of the *Tercios*, and the absence of the corselet showed his grade of ensign. Young, wanton, and of habits much too free and easy, he had undergone various reproofs on the part of the Jesuit missionaries, which had irritated his mind against them. He stopped, however, in a group of cavaliers who, seated on bundles of forage, were listening to the word of God only a few steps away from the preacher.

The sun, which was never again to rise for many, had already set, and the walls of Maestricht were gradually taking the aspect of an immense black profile standing out against the pale red tints of the horizon. The heretics had kindled the fires on the walls, one on each side of the statue of the Madonna on the bastion. In the ruddy splendor could be distinguished the sacred image, its back turned to the apostate city, and presenting to the Spaniards the Divine Child as asking the protection of their faith, which he had sealed on Calvary.

The Jesuit turned to the walls, and pointed toward the statue with his finger.

"Who has the heart to rescue it?" he said with simplicity. "Do this, and at its feet we will give thanks for the taking of Maestricht."

As he heard this the ensign threw his gauntlets to the ground and exclaimed, with an arrogance born rather of his former spite than of insolence:

"May I never set foot in Castile, if this Juan Fernandez doesn't think it easier to scale a bastion than to give his solutions!"

His words reached the ears of the Jesuit. He stepped down from the drumhead, with uplifted crucifix, and came straight toward the group of soldiers. His low stature seemed suddenly to have grown lofty; his lowly aspect had disappeared, giving place to an imposing majesty which had something of the superhuman.

"Do you know me?" he cried to the arrogant ensign, taking him by the arm.

"Yes!" answered the latter, troubled and surprised.

"Know you that I am a priest?"

"Yes!"

"Then kneel at my feet, and kiss this hand which absolves and blesses in the name of Christ!"

And as he who had been called Juan Fernandez said this, his voice was of such power, so masterful his tone, that the abashed cavalier slowly uncovered his head, bent his knee to the ground, and kissed the hand which the Jesuit held out to him.

All around were mute. The soldier rose, and then—suddenly—Father Juan Fernandez threw himself at the other's feet, and bowed his head to the dust.

"You have satisfied the minister of God, sir knight!" he said. "The man—the wretched rustic Juan Fernandez—is not fit to kiss the dust of your feet. If you trample on him, Senor Alvar de Mirabal, you will only tread on a heap of many miseries!"

The soldier burst out sobbing. The drums gave at that moment the second signal, and the circle slowly broke up, the soldiers entering their tents.

Two hours later deep silence reigned in the camp, broken only by the shrill challenge of the sentinels. A man, wrapped in a long black cloak, then issued forth from the tent of Father Juan Fernandez. It was the ensign Alvar de Mirabal, who had made his confession to the Jesuit and sworn at his feet to die in the assault or to rescue the image of Mary which the heretics profaned.

(To be continued.)