

A VICTIM TO THE SEAL OF CONFESSION.

A TRUE STORY.

By REV. JOSEPH SPILLMAN, S. J.

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CHAPTER XX.

ONCE MORE IN THE RUE DE LA COLOMBE.

On Good Friday Mrs. Montmoulin and her daughter were released from detention, as the Prosecutor deemed it unwise, seeing how little ground there was for suspicion, to prefer a charge against them, for inquiry had in fact been advantageous rather than disadvantageous to them. "The prisoner," he said to the magistrate who made the examination of the case, "must have concealed the stolen money somewhere in the old building, or perhaps buried it in the garden. Either he has told his mother already where it is hidden, or he will do so at the last interview before his execution. Let the old woman and her daughter be strictly watched, and believe me, before very long you will have the evidence of their complicity, which is now wanting, marked out before you as plain as it can be."

The period of detention, combined with anxiety about her children, and heart-rendering suspense concerning her brother's fate, had quite undermined Mrs. Jardinier's health. Her hair had become gray, and grief traced deep lines on her kind and comely countenance. As to her aged mother, she was so broken down as to appear almost decrepit. On hearing that she was to be set at liberty she could only throw her arms around her daughter's neck and between her sobs ejaculate the words: "My son—your brother—condemned to death!"

"O mother," the daughter replied, "he is less to be pitied than we are. All will soon be over for him, but for all the remainder of our lives we shall be branded with the mark of his shame.—What is to become of us?"

"How can you think of us," the mother answered, "it will be with us as God pleases. But he, a Priest, condemned to death as a murderer!" "He will die innocent. But how are we to get along with this disgrace attaching to us? How am I to keep and educate my poor children?"

The Governor and other prison officials who witnessed this scene were evidently touched, though they were pretty well hardened to tears and lamentations. The Governor endeavored to console the unhappy women by informing them that the prisoner bore himself with serene, almost cheerful resignation. "And after all," he continued, "the guillotine is by no means a painful death, not nearly so much as many a natural death. How one sees poor creatures writhing in agony on their beds, until death comes to deliver them from their sufferings. Now with the guillotine it is one, two, three; a man is strapped on the plank, and before he has time to think about it all is over. Hullo, what have I said? The old lady faints; bring some water quick and a glass of wine."

When Mrs. Montmoulin had recovered, she still felt so weak that a cab had to be fetched to take her and her daughter to their home in the Rue de la Colombe. On the way they stopped at the house of the kind baker, who had been so charitable as to take the children up, to inform their good friends of their release from prison. The children were at church, and Mrs. Lenoir invited their mother to come in and wait their return. But she declined, saying that they had better go home at once, and asking her to send the children as soon as they came back. With heartfelt thanks for the great kindness that had been shown them the two women went their way to the home they had left a month before, the key of which had been given them when they left the prison.

When they got there all looked desolate enough. Mrs. Jardinier told her mother lie down on the couch in the sitting-room, while she opened the windows and took down the shutters, so as to let light and air once more into the rooms. Then she hastened into the kitchen to light the fire, in order to make a cup of tea for her mother.—But when she looked around there was nothing of all she wanted. In the shop the police had turned everything upside down. In the money-box there were a few shillings, and the poor woman did not know what to do. Now for the first time she realized the full extent of the calamity which had come upon them through their brother's misfortune. They would lose all their friends, all their customers, for who would frequent the society or come to the shop of the sister of a priest who had been executed? She would be ashamed to look anyone in the face. She wanted all manner of provisions—a little wine for her mother, but she could not resolve to show herself out of doors. People would point their finger of scorn at her in the street. And then the money she had on hand was barely sufficient for present needs. Who would in future let the sister of a felon have the necessities of life on credit? Overcome by a sense of her misery, the poor woman sat down on a chair in the shop, and covering her face with her hands wept bitterly.

Her mother heard her in the adjacent room, and calling her, attempted to comfort and encourage her. "We must bear the cross with Francis, my dear child," she said. "Remember this is Good Friday; Easter will come in its turn." "There will be no Easter for us

on earth," her daughter answered amid her sobs.

"Who knows but there may?" rejoined the mother. "And if not, think how short time is compared with eternity. What if here on earth we have to bear the cross and shame with our Lord and His saints, all will soon be over!"

"I would sooner have died with him. It would have been easier than to bear the misery and disgrace that his death brings upon us and our innocent children. It is more than I have strength to endure!" and her tears burst forth afresh.

She had dried her eyes and set to work again, when the door opened, and in came Mrs. Lenoir bringing the two children, and a large, well-filled basket. "There children," she said, as she set the basket down, "go and comfort your mother and grandmother, and if I can be of any service you just come round and tell me." Then she turned to the two women, and expressed her sympathy in a few kind words. Before bidding them goodbye she promised to come again that evening or next morning, and bring a bottle of old Bordeaux, which she said was the medicine Mrs. Montmoulin most needed. "Do not thank me," she concluded, "I have been such a pleasure to have the children with me, that I feel myself the obliged party."

So saying the good little woman slipped away, thinking her friends would rather be alone just then, and also because she could scarcely restrain her feelings on seeing the sad plight they were in. For meeting the children again under such circumstances was almost more pain to them than pleasure.

"O mother, how old you have got!" Julia exclaimed. "You look almost as old as grandmother, your hair is quite gray, and grandmother's hair has turned perfectly white." "I wonder my hair has not turned white," Charles gravely remarked. "They say anxiety changes its color, and I have been in the greatest anxiety about uncle and all of you the whole time."

The two women could not help smiling at this, and the boy's mother said he was now relieved of a great part of his anxiety. Then she busied herself with Julia's help in getting the dinner. In the basket Mrs. Lenoir had brought they found everything that was wanted. The children ate the simple meal with great appetite, but their mother could hardly swallow a morsel. For many years she had struggled to keep herself, and it went hard with her to be beholden to the charity of a baker's wife. During dinner Charles gave an account of his visit to the President of the Court of Justice, and announced his intention of paying him another visit, to beg him not to have his uncle executed. But his mother told him he must not think of taking such a liberty; besides the Judge could not alter a sentence that was once passed.

By this time it had become known in the neighborhood that the mother and sister of the condemned priest had been released from detention and had returned home. They appear to have had no part in the crime, said some. Others shook their heads and said nothing had been proved against them, but one could hardly believe good of the mother and sister of a priest who had been found guilty of murder and robbery. Many however felt for them the profoundest compassion. But all were curious to see the neighbors after their return, and hear what they had to say about the execution.

Thus under one pretext or another all found their way to the modest house in the Rue de la Colombe. Some expressed their sympathy with the clergyman who was unjustly condemned, or with the relatives who had to suffer on his account through no fault of their own. But whilst they spoke thus, their cold and contemptuous looks belied their words, and showed the true feelings that actuated them. Others repeated what they had heard this one or that say about the unfortunate priest and his relatives, while they professed to be themselves convinced of his innocence, and only wanted to know if it was quite certain that he would be executed.

One can imagine what Mrs. Jardinier felt when questioned on this

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painful subject by these heartless people. At length she could stand it no longer, and withdrew to the room where her mother was lying down to rest, leaving her little girl to serve the customers and satisfy their curiosity. But soon she found it necessary to protect herself from their ill-timed intrusion, so she put up the shutters, and fastened a paper outside with the words: "This shop will be closed for a few days," denying herself to all visitors on the plea of her mother's indisposition. "Our position here is intolerable," she said to herself. "I can remain here no longer, we must leave Aix. Yet what can I do? We must either beg or starve. Have compassion on us in our trouble. O merciful Father of the widow and orphan!"

Towards evening two visitors came, against whom the door could not be shut. The first was Mrs. Lenoir. No one who looked at her could doubt that her sympathy was unfeigned, and she expressed it by deeds as well as by words. She took in the situation at once, and understood how severely her friends were tried. She asked Mrs. Jardinier if she did not think it would be well for her to leave Aix for a time, until this unhappy affair had blown over. There were some relatives of hers living in Lambesc, who were good Catholics, and who she was sure would be pleased to help Mrs. Jardinier, if she could open a little business there; and she herself and her husband would willingly lend her a few pounds on very low interest, or without any interest at all. She would very much like to take the children to live with her permanently, as she had got very fond of them, but she thought it would be better for them to leave Aix for at least a few weeks.

Mrs. Jardinier thanked the good baker's wife most gratefully, both for her past kindness, and the generous offer of help for the future; she said she should only be too glad to escape from her present surroundings, but she feared what had happened would be known in Lambesc and indeed everywhere, and she would be shunned in consequence. Under these circumstances she could not venture to accept the loan, as she saw no probability of being able to repay it.

"There is nothing for me," she said, "but to earn my bread by the labor of my hands. Mother is so broken down by grief, that she cannot carry the cross much longer. But the children—I know that I cannot support them if I have to go into service and yet I do not know how I shall bear being separated from them."

The two friends were still in consultation when the door bell rang and almost directly Charles came in to say Father Regent was there. Mrs. Lenoir took leave at once, begging that her proposal might be thought over, and the reverend gentleman was shown into the little room. He inquired first in the kindest manner after Mrs. Montmoulin, and on hearing how very much she felt the blow, he said: "I expected that it would be so. And for you too, this trial is a very heavy burden. I should not have intruded on you in your affliction were it not that I hoped to be of some comfort to you, if only by assuring you of my heartfelt sympathy."

He then asked if he could see Mrs. Montmoulin, and on Julia's being sent to ask if her grandmother was well enough to receive him, the old lady came down, leaning on her granddaughter's arm, for she said she could not trouble so honored a visitor to climb the steep stairs to her little room. Father Regent began by telling her that he and all his clerical brethren were fully and entirely convinced of her son's innocence, nor had the Archbishop the least doubt on the subject. They all took the deepest interest in the fate of the unfortunate prisoner, and also in what concerned his mother and sister personally. For himself, he said, he was persuaded that Father Montmoulin was not only innocent of the crime laid to his charge, he had not the slightest doubt that he was unable to clear himself because the obligations of his sacred office sealed his lips. How it was, he could only conjecture, as he knew nothing for certain, but he could confidently assert that if his friend—her son—were put to death through this unjust sentence, he would die a martyr's death and the crown of martyrdom would be awarded to him. Though his fellow-men might regard him as a murderer, the day would surely come when earthly shame would be changed into heavenly glory, and a cruel death would open to him the gates of eternal life.

Then the pious priest spoke to them of him who for our sake was unjustly condemned and put to a cruel and ignominious death, a death of expiation which they commemorated on that very day in common with the whole Church. His words, inspired by faith and charity, fell like soothing balm on their wounded hearts; with tears in their eyes they thanked him for the solace he had afforded them, and they promised to bear the suffering and shame that must be their portion patiently in imitation of their crucified Lord.

After this Father Regent spoke of the future, and Mrs. Jardinier told him how dark a prospect it offered. "I thought," he replied, "that after what had occurred it would be impossible for you to remain in Aix. But do not be down-hearted. I spoke to the good old priest of La Grange, about you, and he said I was to ask you if you would like to go to him as his housekeeper; and as his presbytery is large, he would allow your mother to occupy a small room in it. I think it would be the very thing for you; talk it over, you need not decide to-day. As for the children, you must make up your mind to part with them, almost all parents must, when they send their children to school. I hope to get Julia taken free by the Sisters of St. Joseph at Arles, a good education will be given her there, suitable to her station. And my little friend Charles, of whom his teachers give an excellent report, would doubtless be delighted to go to the Missionary training col-

lege at Marseilles. He is too young but at a word from the Archbishop an exception will be made in his favor. What do you say to this proposal?"

What could the two women say, but that they were truly grateful to the kind priest. The children too, when they were called were delighted with the prospect. Julia said she would go anywhere, so long as she could go out of Aix, for she was ashamed to be seen out of doors. Charles said he should be a missionary very soon, and being at Marseilles, he told his mother, he would be able to embark on one of the ships going out to the West Indies, whenever his Superior considered him to be sufficiently prepared.

Just as Father Regent rose to leave Mr. Meunier, the solicitor, came in. He begged the kind priest to stay a few moments longer, as he was very desirous to hear what he thought about a matter which he had to lay before the two ladies.

The matter was this: Mr. Meunier stated that after consulting Father Montmoulin, and asking the opinion of some of his colleagues, he had decided against appealing to a higher court, as it would probably be useless, and would involve great expense. Father Montmoulin had negatived the proposal most emphatically. If the appeal were granted, he said, I should have to appear again in Court, and that I have no wish to do. It is high time that nothing more should be said or written about this scandal with which I am connected. A fresh trial, if an adverse sentence were given, as is most probable, would only give the affair greater publicity and greater importance. I will not speak of the torture that a second trial would inflict on me. I would rather die than appeal against the verdict; circumstances render it a matter of impossibility to prove my innocence. Some weight may perhaps be attached to my assertion when on the scaffold. "That," Mr. Meunier continued, "is what our poor friend said, and I really think he is right. I asked him if he would not petition for a pardon, we could get many signatures here and in the neighborhood. He would not hear of this, but I have come to hear what you say to it, and I consider myself very fortunate to have found Father Regent here, as I should certainly have gone to ask his opinion."

Father Regent said he should like to hear first what Mrs. Montmoulin thought about the suggestion. After a moment's reflection, she said: "If the pardon were granted, what would be done with my son?"

The solicitor shrugged his shoulders and said: "Of course he would not be executed, and if his life was spared, we might hope that some fortunate chance might render his innocence apparent. Anything is better than death."

"Would he be imprisoned for life?" again inquired the mother.

"I hardly think that," Mr. Meunier replied. "It is most likely that his sentence would be commuted to penal servitude for life, or transportation."

"To see my son in a convict's dress dragging a chain, with fetters on his wrists, doing the hardest most degrading work with a gang of the lowest convicts, and hear people pointing him out as a priest, is more than I could bear. No, it would be worse than death for my Francis. I do not call that pardon. What do you say, daughter; should you like to meet your brother in the streets under such conditions?"

"No, Mother, I think as you do about it. We will not petition for a pardon, especially as Francis himself does not wish it."

"I should not wish it in his place," Father Regent said. "As I told you, I look upon his as a martyr's death. Who would refuse the crown when it is placed almost within his grasp?"

"From what Father Montmoulin said to me," the solicitor rejoined, "he appears to take the same view as his mother. Very well, as your Reverence approves of the refusal to appeal, we will abandon the idea, not avert, or postpone the sacrifice of which her son is the innocent victim."

(To be Continued.)

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um of Vesta, one may imagine that he sees the image of the Vestal who forsook the temple of Vesta to enter the Christian Church.

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