

Man and His Illusions

BY KONRAD KUEMMEL

Part First

UNHALLOWED SOWINGS

I. In the Council Room

The directors of the Church Endowment Fund were in session. At the head of an oaken table in the vestry sat the Reverend Pastor and the mayor, next to them the secretary and the treasurer; farther down, near the stove, as was their custom during winter, sat the two oldest members; a little removed from them, in the dusk near the door, the schoolmaster, the headle and the warden.

"Before we proceed any further," the Chairman presently remarked, "I propose that we consider the complaints against Sparr, the sexton-assistant. Our teacher and organist, who is the real sexton, whom I have invited to the sitting, is now at greatest leisure. First of all, then, let us hear Mr. Obermiller, Senior."

The gray-haired man, observant as ever of what was going on, arose and said: "There is general talk about Sparr, the sexton-help and dissatisfaction with him. He is rough and loud-mouthed and a disturber of devotion. If perchance someone without fault comes late, he fusses and scolds as if it were part of his duty. With the people at weddings and baptisms he deals insolently, nor is he particularly choice at times in speaking of the pastor. He is contentious, proud and no good, and some have said, he disgusts them with the church. Day before yesterday, just before the evening Angelus, the maid of my daughter-in-law had lighted a candle and had begun the Rosary for her mother deceased. Sparr on the opposite side stood facing her; at last in her fright when she asked him what he meant, he brutally answered: 'To guard the altar-box; thereupon weeping loudly she left the church. He has acted similarly towards others. Sometimes, it is true, he has sided with him those who enjoy a laugh, as when he told a grocer-woman it were better she ill-treated her step-daughter less than go to Mass daily and sit half an hour on her heels in church.' When the laugh incident to these words had subsided, Obermiller, Senior, continued: 'Such things are not becoming. A sacristan should conduct himself as such, by modestly serving, not by angering the people. My opinion is that he should be sternly advised accordingly.'

All agreed to this, excepting the tavern-keeper of the Brook Inn, who made a wry face but said nothing.

"Why bother with much thinking and counseling," the mayor interposed, "simply discharge Sparr and there will be peace in the church."

"We have that as a last expedient any time," the priest rejoined. "Professor, what is your opinion; after all, you are Sparr's immediate superior?"

The teacher, a strong, youthful man, whose look gave evidence of calm deliberation, replied: "As to his diligence, I cannot complain. Sparr is the first in the sacristy and the last one to leave it; zealously, perhaps with an undue haste and eagerness, he attends to everything; I can rely upon him absolutely. He is on time no matter how cold the day. It is true, he is as sensitive as an egg without shell and, moreover, of a quarrelsome temper; however, until now I have got along with him."

"Good, good!" the innkeeper muttered approvingly.

The Reverend Pastor then continued: "In view of what the teacher has testified, it would not be right without further ado to dismiss the assistant, for I can

confirm all that he has said in his favor. On the other hand he must cease to annoy and to disturb the worshippers and members of the church. I propose that the mayor and myself call him before us; to confront him with the charges and to advise that he mend his manners. If he relapses, we will summon him before the whole Chapter; his dismissal will then be optional with the council. I beg you to consider, moreover, that Sparr did not receive exactly the proper education. Having lost his father in his infancy, he, an only son, was thoroughly spoiled by his mother. She loves no one but her boy. I believe she never once dared even to slap him. Consequently he has always been a self-willed boy. All this must be taken into consideration."

The pastor's motion was carried. "In disposing of this first matter before the board, an allusion was made to education," said the priest; "permit me to say a few words upon this subject to help you towards a proper understanding of the term, which sooner or later, tho I hope not, we may be obliged to consider officially." After having spoken on the theme for about a quarter of an hour, he concluded: "Gentlemen, you know that my mother and sister, twelve years ago, adopted Agnes, an orphan, now eighteen years of age, brought her up and kept and treated her even as a member of the family; she is as good a child, innocent, pious, and industrious, as one would wish to find. Three years ago, when mother died, she made my sister and me promise to keep the girl until ready for the vocation to which God would call her. We promised this the more readily because in doing so we complied with our own wishes. Her grandmother, who all this while bothered nothing about the child, now of a sudden requests to take her in charge, so that the girl, as she says, might make her fortune in the world. Agnes refuses positively to go, in which refusal I will uphold her to the utmost, for the reason especially that the old woman has not the best reputation. Now, then, it might come to this, that her guardian might interfere—" "There he is," some one remarked, pointing at the innkeeper, who somewhat embarrassed was looking at the table.

"I am convinced," the priest continued, "nor do I fear but that mine host is embarrassed simply because he cannot favor the child as he would wish—" the taverner gave an emphatic nod—"cannot give her the best as he would like. If, however, in spite of persuasion, the grandmother will not yield her claim, then, as a matter of course, the question will have to be decided not only in the judicial court but before this council as well. These preliminary remarks suffice, and I hope that ends the affair."

The tapster, landlord of the Brook Inn, got up to speak. Somewhat abashed he said: "As her guardian, I wish merely to thank the pastor for all that his blessed mother and his sister have done for Agnes. She could hardly have been brought up better. Still she cannot forever remain at the rectory. Now that she is grown a strong and handsome girl, let her earn big money; in a tavern—"

Insensibly the priest raised his head with a sharp look at the fellow. Interrupting his line of thought, the latter in a faint voice proceeded: "Your Reverence, I know very well that from her sixth year upward you cared and provided for Agnes gratuitously; nor could anyone hold it against you accordingly, if you look for some compensation. However, since her fourteenth year, the child has served you gratis, and during her schooldays has done her share of work—hm, hm—in consideration

of which I think the account might be said to balance,—hm, hm, hm; but—don't take it amiss, it is my opinion merely, and then, too, we can talk the matter over again."

The innkeeper had barely dropped to his seat, when the priest, tall and commanding arose and said: "Surely, such words need an explanation—I give it unwillingly, but it is due to my people—I say, then, that Agnes did not serve me gratis. For the last six years Agnes has her Book of Deposit in which her earnings in my service are credited. She knows nothing of it; but if her guardian wishes, he may see and be convinced that the girl has not worked without compensation."

"Your Reverence, as guardian of Agnes, I would like to take charge of her bank-book." The priest replied: "I will show it to you when you choose to call, but it will not leave my hands until Agnes is of age. Till then I will overlook and safeguard her money as my very own. Nor will it be a disadvantage to her even in a financial way to continue for the meantime with my sister. This however, I emphasize, the house that has been a home to her for so many years, she shall not leave against her will."

The taverner, to have the last word rejoined: "Yes, yes, Your Reverence, I surely do not doubt that her money is as safe with you as with me—but I think— the grandmother argues the girl has it too nice at the rectory, and this will spoil her for after life, hm, hm."

Quite seriously the priest replied: "Landlord, in my house the rising hour is as early as in any house of the village. Nor need Agnes and my sister, after putting in order the rectory from top to bottom, after attending to two large gardens, the one in vegetables, the other in fruit trees, want for work. Neither have they time for trifling at the rectory, at least much less so than in a tavern; nor for gossip or mischief-making. If obliged to leave us, Agnes will fit in anywhere; she will be able to fill any position, for she has been taught to be conscientious and dutiful. The world has nothing to teach her, excepting perhaps what is strictly barred from my house, vulgarity, bad words and bad manners; and of these things it is well if she forever remains ignorant. Be glad, then, that the maiden has a place where she is appreciated and her virtue protected. Virtue, which is beyond all price, will be her dowry."

The guardian having nothing more to say, the Chairman proceeded: "The second point being disposed of, let us take up the last. I beg the secretary to inform the Chapter of the financial condition of the Church Endowment Fund and what the available surplus will be for this year."

2. An Important Resolution.

Chuckling and nudging one another the directors listened to the statement of the secretary that the receipts overbalanced the expenses by five hundred marks. In spite of the fact that the parish church hardly ten years ago, had been totally renovated in and outside, that an organ had been purchased in the meantime, and that only recently an increase of salary had been allowed the organist, the choir-director and the sub-sexton, the savings of the last eight years amounted to about five thousand marks.

"The assets and the obligations are here before you and also the statement of cash on hand." The treasurer unlocked the coffer and laid the money on the table.

The Reverend Pastor after thanking the two members, the one for his statement, the other for his care of the moneys, added: "It will now be in order to decide whether to allow this money to rest and

draw interest, or whether it were better to invest it for some good purpose; I call for suggestions which may afford a basis for an agreement."

The schoolmaster got up to go. The pastor intervened: "Gentlemen, I propose that the teacher remain for this final matter also; upon one point especially I would like to have his opinion; it might be helpful to us." The Chapter agreed to this, while the teacher, laughing, said in an undertone to the pastor and to the mayor: "Then will I neatly have to play the scapegoat, for any unpopular measure that may be passed."

The mayor spoke: "I advise the money be kept intact. The times are deceptive; it is hard telling how soon the money may be needed. However, I am not committed to this view; perhaps some better proposition may be offered."

The innkeeper got up next and said: "In behalf of a number of townsmen I would like to make a suggestion. Our place is not among the smallest; we have fine societies, who are often visited during the summer by others from the neighboring towns. We have Veteran-Day, a Turner-Fest, a School-Day, Banner-Day, Flag-Day, King's-Day, Emperor's-Day, Kermess. But we have no pleasure grounds. The Linden-meadow would do, only for being unfenced; access to it, moreover is hard and it has no entertainment-hall, which might serve as a protection against the heat and rain. The people say that this must be changed if we are not to continue a laughing-stock for strangers. This meadow could be made serviceable and be known as the 'Parish Park.' From the bridge a direct roadway could be built thither."

"Any field will do, just so the taverner lives close to it," some one muttered; "he would never have opened his mouth in favor of a Parish Park if the meadow were not in his vicinity."

"You're right," another whispered. The innkeeper continued: "Now, I think the whole could be bought for the five or six thousand marks which the church has and does not need; that is my advice." During this speech the members were getting restless. Finally the mayor rose: "Let me remark first of all, that the foundation money cannot be expended for any or all purposes. It must be used in accordance with the will of the founders, who expressly determined that the money is solely for church purposes and not for speculation in parks and festival halls. Therefore the suggestion of the taverner is out of order and cannot be voted upon."

"Why not?" the taverner blustered; "are we not masters of our own property?"

"Of your personal property you are unlimited master," the mayor replied, "and so is each of us; but in regard to foundation-moneys, we are only stewards and strictly accountable to use it as specified in the deed, namely for church purposes."

"But if we unanimously agree to do otherwise?" the innkeeper persisted; "the founders are dead, the living have their authority; we can amend the deed." "This will never happen," retorted the mayor. "Indeed not," assented the others, "and if it were done, the Government would nullify our action; the bishop also; they watch and see that the money is used according to the intentions of the founders."

"It is as you say," the treasurer affirmed. As accountant and treasurer he was privileged to speak next: "The High Altar is not liturgical," he explained; "it is in the antique convolute style, and old and worn-eaten; the statues are graceless; something more artistic is wanted; a new altar, up-to-date."

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