

HOW PIERRE CHAUTARD Carried the Cross Unto Death

Not far from the venerable sanctuary of Vals, the birthplace of the Apostleship of Prayer, on a gray, rugged and moss-covered rock, rises the ancient castle of Polignac, the renowned manor of the princely of that name, who, for many a century, lorded it over the surrounding country.

It is now but a pile of noble ruins. Its shattered walls and crumbling towers, tattered by the winds of heaven, loudly proclaim that nothing is mortal which is raised by mortal hands.

Around these time-worn relics of former splendor cluster the low, red tiled and stone-walled dwellings of a sturdy race of deeply Catholic farmers. Seen from a distance, the village of Polignac presents to the tourist a most picturesque scene. Perched on steeply rising squares of projecting rock, the houses rise up the shagged sides of the noble castle like children climbing up the rugged legs of a mighty giant.

Polignac is the centre of a large parish, which numbers not less than twelve villages, scattered over the rocky and woody mountains which bound the horizon on every side. The church is an old stone structure, renovated and enlarged of late years, with three lofty naves and a red-tiled spire. Three priests are hardly sufficient to attend to the spiritual wants of a community so widely scattered.

It was on Tuesday of Holy Week, some twenty years ago, that what we are about to narrate took place. The day was cold, very cold, at Polignac. Over the black hills and through leafless trees, a biting north wind whistled songs of suffering and misery, while it moaned dolefully in the ruined halls and dismantled towers of the castle above. A sullen canopy of grayish clouds overspread the sky. Birds had not yet returned from their more genial southern homes, and wolves still hold sovereign sway over the desolate and frozen mountainsides. The cattle were snug in the barns, the harvest garnered in the stalls, and the farmer sat by his cosy fire, smoking his pipe and listlessly looking through wreaths of blue smoke at the desolation which reigned supreme without.

On the northern side of the volcanic pillar upon which stood the castle was the hut of Pierre Chautard. It was a low, thatched and weather-beaten structure. It consisted of only one room, which served as parlor, bedroom and kitchen. In a word, poverty throughout her vast kingdom could not have made choice of a more suitable abode. But under this very roof there breathed a soul which possessed a nobility wanting to many who boast of a line of glorious ancestry.

By dint of hard labor Pierre managed to keep the wolf from the door and to give bread to two puny boys and a sickly wife. And even then, had it not been for the Christian charity of neighbors, the dreary and bitter winter of these mountains would have long ago sent the inmates of this poor dwelling to a colder and drearier home. Yet never was a word of complaint heard to escape the poor man's lips. Winter days and summer days did not alter his sentiments and Providence was ever to him a kind mother.

Pierre Chautard was a stonemason by profession, but he was always willing to do any odd job which might bring bread and wood to his home. He divided moreover the duties of grave-digger and bell-ringer of the parish with two other men of the place. At the time of our narrative he was about fifty years of age, but he was hale and strong. Inured from childhood to the hard labors consequent on poverty, he was reckoned the strongest man of the village. Reckless where duty called him, fearless when others would have trembled, ever ready to do a good turn to a neighbor, loudly proclaiming as his only political tonic that he cared not who ruled, provided freedom and protection were granted to religion.

Such was Pierre Chautard as he sat that Holy Tuesday's wintry afternoon before a cheerless fire, with his two boys on his knees and his wife hid in the chimney corner, mending one of the two pairs of stockings wherewith Pierre kept his feet from being bitten by the frost.

It was about six o'clock in the evening when Pierre rose from his seat, placed one of the boys at the edge of the hearth-stone, the other on the chair where he had been sitting and put on his boots.

"Where are you going now?" inquired his wife.

"I am going to see M. le Cure," replied Pierre.

"It is too cold, dear, to go out."

"No, no, I have to see him to-night, Louise. Holy Thursday is at hand and I have to find out what I will have to do in the procession. Last year I carried the cross, and I mean to do the same this year."

"A snowstorm is coming, Pierre, and, if I am not mistaken," said Louise looking out, "it is on the mountains now. Thursday, from present appearance, will be a very cold day. You imagine that because you are

strong you can trifle with your health."

"The one who first carried the Cross," solemnly answered our hero, "did not reason in this way, Louise. So, good-bye; I will be back in less than an hour. Anyhow, I would have to go out at half past seven to ring the Angelus and I may as well kill two birds with one stone."

So saying, Pierre strode out into the northern blizzard as it riotously charged down the deserted streets. The air was dense with eddying wreaths of snowflakes which the storm-spirits flung by handfuls over withered grass-plugs, leafless trees, bleak roofs and frozen sidewalks. The cold was biting and the way uncertain, for the wind which played and whirled in nooks and corners seemed over on the watch to fling a snowy spray at the face of the poor benumbed wayfarer. But Pierre kept on, his gait somewhat slower and more irregular than became his age, yet not dismayed at the fury of the elements. He knew the road by heart, and his mind was just then far too deeply engaged in arranging the arguments which were to further his cause with M. le Cure to heed the mischievous foxy things that danced about him.

As Pierre with his head bent low was thus proceeding on his way, his name was carried on his ear, on the wings of the howling storm. He looked about and behind him but saw nothing; so thick was the falling snow. Again he heard some one calling him, and this time he discovered dimly on the threshold of a house on the right the tall figure of Jean Balais the tailor, his cousin, and with him the bell-ringer and grave-digger of the parish. He stopped his hurried walk and shouted back: "Hello! Jean!"

"Where are you bound, Pierre, in such freezing weather?" inquired his friend.

"To see M. le Cure," came the answer.

"Come in and take supper with us. My wife says that when there is enough for three there is enough for four."

"I haven't time, Jean. Louise would be uneasy at home if I were gone too long."

"It's not a banquet I invite you to, Pierre, and it won't keep you till midnight."

"Well," said Pierre at last, "I'll just stop in for a few minutes."

After having shaken the snow from his boots, he entered and was welcomed by the whole family. A warm supper was already laid on the table and our poor quarryman felt his appetite to be of the best.

"Sit down, Pierre," said Jean. "Is some one sick at home that you have to call on M. le Cure at such an hour?"

"No, Jean, but Thursday is coming. Last year I carried the cross in the procession, and I want to do the same this year."

"Oh, I see, I have been assigned to carry the cross: M. le Cure told me so this morning. As for the cross I think some one has secured it."

"Who?" asked Pierre in a tone of surprise and disappointment.

"Thomas Platte," replied Jean.

"The ideal! Well, I'll not get angry with him, but I won't give up my visit. I'll see M. le Cure and so many and so powerful are the reasons I yield to give him that he will have to yield to my demands, or I won't ring a bell for him, and the dead will have to go unburied, as far as I am concerned."

"Don't lose your temper, Pierre; what I told you was only a rumor."

Our hero dispatched the hot supper which had been placed before him with the hurry of a man who has pressing business on hand.

"Excuse me, Jean, if I leave you so abruptly," he said, hastening to the door, "there is nothing like besting a city when the storm is raging. Your supper was most welcome, and my poor wife and children would have looked upon it in the light of a Christmas dinner. Good-bye. The way I ring the Angelus to night will tell you whether I gained my point or not."

And Pierre ventured again into the cold, stormy, winter night. A few moments after he was knocking at the presbytery-door. It was immediately opened by a venerable priest with a crown of white flowing hair and a face where kindness had stamped itself.

"Good evening, M. le Cure," said Pierre as he stepped into the dimly lighted hall.

"Oh, it is you, Pierre," said the good priest, "what brings you here so late and in such a storm?"

"Excuse me, your Reverence, but I have to express my views on the matter. I have my likings as well as other people, and on this subject I have made up my mind."

"But look here, you have to ring the bells during the procession."

"Your Reverence," said Pierre with a mischievous smile playing over his honest face, "your Reverence forgets that our bells go to Rome as far as their ringing is concerned on Thursday morning and do not come back until you sing out the Gloria on Saturday."

"I intended to give the cross to Thomas Platte to carry."

"Did he ask for it?"

"No."

"Well, then, look here M. le Cure, I am stronger and healthier than Thomas. He would faint under the load, I am sure. As for myself, I know how to go about it, and last year, after the procession, I felt strong enough to begin again."

"But, Pierre, if you get sick Thursday, then you will blame me and so will everybody else."

"If I get sick, I know who sends sickness. If they blame you, M. le Cure, send them to me, and I'll give them a few clear ideas about the ways of Providence in the world."

"Your reasons are pretty good."

"So good that Reverence has no objection and says yes."

"Not so fast, Pierre. I have still one objection."

"Let us hear it."

"The other day I saw you doing something which I did not like, and I have a mind to punish you for it."

"You may punish me after the procession, M. le Cure; what what was it?"

"I saw you when you knocked down poor Richard Brisson in front of the church near the Mission Cross."

"Yes, and I'll do it again if the ever dares to repeat in my presence what he said then."

"And what did he say?"

"He asserted that processions and such religious things are more nonsense and ought to be done away with."

"And what did you reply?"

"Your Reverence saw how I argued with the villain. He belongs to that society you mentioned in one of your sermons."

"Well, it is not so bad as I thought."

"It is not bad at all, and I deserve to carry the cross for that."

"Very well, Pierre. And how is everything at home?"

"Pretty cold and hungry, M. le Cure. But the good God knows what He is about. He will straighten everything in the other world and not forget I carried His cross."

"You are right, Pierre: courage and confidence. Life is short and heaven awaits you."

"And excuse me, M. le Cure," said Pierre looking at the clock on the mantel-piece, "but I have to go and ring the Angelus. A thousand thanks to your Reverence for the favor granted. Good night."

And Pierre, with joy thrilling every part of his sturdy frame, dashed out, and, it is said that the Angelus bell never gave forth such joyous notes as it did that night, Jean Balais next day, remarked that it seemed as though angels were in the air.

The only angel there was myself, said Pierre, and a very poor one at that; but thanks for the compliment."

As soon as the Angelus was rung, Pierre hastened home to announce the glad tidings. But his fatherly heart was still more rejoiced when he saw his wife and two children in the very act of helping themselves to a warm and plentiful supper set by his cousin Jean.

Next-day the storm had abated. Towards noon a southerly wind having sprung up, the clouds which canopied the sky, were torn asunder and the shreds flung to the four quarters of heaven. Then the winter sun revealed itself to the eye in all its dazzling splendor. Its hot rays soon began to play havoc amid the goms and radiant peaks with which King Frost had decked the snowy mantle which the storm had cast over the naked shoulders of poor mother earth. The snow vanished beneath the burning darts of the mighty warrior of heaven, and towards night the battle field was but a dark scene of muddy roads and treacherous waterpools. When the moon rose she saw nothing to gladden her eyes but a few heroes in white who had withstood the fray and were ambushed in nooks and corners waiting for a renewal of the struggle.

Holy Thursday began as summer days do, with brightness and gladness. The sun pursued his relentless conquests and when he disappeared behind the hills he had in part repaired the sad consequences of his victories and dried up the tears of his conquered foes. But he left still behind him the cold and damp atmosphere of death.

In the morning, the whole parish turned out to assist at the imposing ceremonies which were held in the church and then returned to their homes, their minds engaged with the still sadder memories to be recalled by the procession at nightfall.

The procession which takes place every year in the parish of Polignac at sunset of Holy Thursday is one of the most touching and realistic scenes imaginable. But its grandeur and dramatic effect are chiefly derived

from the simple faith and fervent piety which animate both actors and spectators.

Towards four o'clock in the afternoon three or four boys were called by M. le Cure, given loud sounding clappers and told to go around the village and summon the people to the procession. The little fellows, followed by an ever increasing crowd of their playmates, went their round and fulfilled the duty laid upon them with all the solemnity and zest of men intrusted with an important office.

Just as the sun was sinking in the west and its dying rays were gilding the barren summits of the neighboring mountains, a mighty throng of children, men and women with rustic lanterns in their hands might have been seen entering the parish church. Within all was silence and prayer. The bare altars, the veiled statues, the gloom of the twilight pervading the aisles, everything, in a word, voiced sentiments of religious sadness. Each one felt as if he were about to assist at a scene of death, the death of a dear and cherished friend.

Suddenly the solemn notes of the *Vezilla Regis* burst forth through the silent nave; the sad pageant is on the march. Soon through the wide open portals issues with majestic tread the viceroy of the church, dressed in a bright uniform, with a broad cap tastefully knotted around his arm and one hanging from his long silver-headed halberd. He is followed by three acolytes in black soutanes and lace surplices; the middle one carrying the cross and the other two bearing flaming torches. Behind them walk with measured steps and in the most religious spirit two long lines of boys, girls, women and men holding in their hands lighted lanterns of all sizes and descriptions.

Now between two lines of red robed acolytes holding high in the air bright ly colored flambeaux advances the most dramatic and at the same time the most religious part of the procession. We mean the White Penitents, who constitute one of the most important of the sodalities of the parish of Polignac, and which is mainly composed of married men. The costumes in which they appear in the drama of the night consists of a long hooded white robe and of a long veil of the same color hanging over the face so as to hide the identity of the actors.

In the lead of this mysterious band a man walks barefoot, holding in his hand a halberd, which is meant to recall the one our divine Saviour begged so earnestly His Father to remove from His lips, but which He drank so deeply for our salvation. On either side of Jean Balais, for it is he, as our readers already know, walk the penitents whose duty is somewhat akin to that of the angel in the grotto of Getsemani: namely to sustain him in the arduous duty of holding the sacred symbol high in the air.

Behind them come other members of the confraternity each in charge of one of the many emblems of the Saviour's dolorous passion. There you may see the ladder of the Crucifixion, the column of the flagellation, the nails, the hammers, the crown of thorns, in a word a facsimile of all the instruments which figure in the awful tragedy enacted nearly twenty centuries ago. You may even remark a cook, to recall the one which crowded and thus called Peter, the renegade, to the thought of a deeply wronged Master and caused him to shed tears of bitter repentance.

But here comes a tall man carrying on his broad shoulders a heavy cross. He is barefooted and his veiled face would hide his name from all but our readers. To-night our friend Pierre Chautard's individuality seems to the eye of the beholder to have totally merged itself into that of the divine Being he had begged so earnestly to impersonate. The cross which weighs heavily on his shoulders deserves here a word of description. In length it measures from ten to twelve feet with arms in proportion. It is made of long planks of about a foot in width. In itself it is a heavy load, but this is nothing when you think of the amount of energy needed in the cross bearer, being required by custom to genuflect at every step he takes. The length of cross might also be a difficulty, but this is partly obviated by the fact that another barefooted penitent holds up the base of the cross and prevents it from dragging along the ground.

On either side of Pierre are two other men carrying also on the shoulders small crosses; they are the two historical thieves. Their load is such that, compared to that on Pierre's shoulders, the disproportion is so great that it does not fail to bring to the Christian mind the fact that the Saviour was far more cruelly treated than the criminals who died with Him.

The procession closes with the choir and the clergy. M. le Cure holds in his hands a reliquary containing a particle of the wood of the true Cross.

Let us watch this long serpent of lights as it winds through the narrow and unpaved streets of the village, now ascending a rocky steep, now descending through a muddy lane. It is a grand spectacle, and one which never loses its novelty. The stars above twinkle and seem to whisper to one another words of admiration for the faith of these simple people. Now and then the voices of the choir break upon the stillness of night with the mournful notes of a song, which tells of the sufferings of a God-man.

But what has happened down at the crossing of the road? Nothing to alarm, but much to edify you. There have gathered the men who are too old to take part in the procession, the women whom maternal duties have kept at home, the children whose age and weakness prevented from exposing themselves to the fatigues of a long march. They are waiting their turn to kiss, and pass under the cross which Pierre Chautard holds up for the purpose.

We read in the annals of ancient Rome that when they wanted to dishonor a soldier publicly they forced him in presence of his assembled comrades to bend low and pass under the yoke. But the inhabitants of Polignac see no shame in the performance of a similar act; they rather see in it an act of faith; the meaning of which they themselves do not fully realize. All they know is that, in this holy kiss and in this act of bending low under the shadow of the cross, they find untold consolations and increased strength for the trials of life.

Now the procession resumes again its slow and solemn march to stop again and allow a repetition of the touching scene above described. Finally, after two long years thus spent in the cold air of a wintry night, the procession enters the church, where in glowing words, which fall on well-prepared hearts, the priest tells his flock the old but ever new story of the sufferings and death of our Saviour on Calvary.

When the sermon was over the immense crowd which had filled the church to overflowing and had so religiously attended all the services of the evening, was at last free to return home and seek in sleep a much needed rest.

The White Penitents repaired in a body to the presbytery, where, under the direction of M. le Cure, something had been prepared to restore to them the heat and strength lost by them during the long and chilly march of the evening. When all apparently were assembled, the kind priest remarked that Pierre Chautard was absent, and he asked Jean Balais whether Pierre was present at the sermon or not.

"He was there at the beginning," Jean answered, "but soon he whistled in my ear that he felt unwell, and he went out."

"I hope it was but a passing spell of dizziness," said the priest, "and he may be here soon."

"Be quiet, Pierre," said Louise, gently reproaching the sick man's head on the pillow. "Be quiet, it is only M. le Cure, who has come to see you."

"Don't you know me, Pierre?" said the priest, taking hold of one of his hands.

The sick man took it at him for a while, then replied: "Yes—I carried the cross—I felt very tired, but I wanted to carry it to the top."

"Yes," said the priest, "and God will bless you for it. But, my friend, you are very sick. Would you like to make your confession?"

"Will I not carry the blessed cross again?"

"Oh, yes," replied the priest, "but it is prudent to settle our affairs with God in case of danger."

"I went to confession last night, for was I not to carry the Lord's cross?" said Pierre, while a heavenly smile spread over his face.

Just then the wife of Jean Balais came in loaded with all that she had been able to procure in the way of medicines. The priest, seeing that Pierre was delirious, and that for the present it was impossible to have him make his confession, having ascertained that what he had said was true, withdrew and left the poor man to the affectionate care of the two women with the promise of a visit early next day.

Three o'clock in the morning Jean Balais, followed by the doctor, rushed into the sick-room. After a long and careful examination of the patient's condition, the physician called Jean aside, and in whispered words informed him that the state of his friend was such that no human art could stay the ravages of the maledy, and that if the delirium lasted till noon all hope of recovery was to be given up. Having written a few directions, the doctor went away, followed by Jean.

Early in the morning of Good Friday, M. le Cure made his promised visit. He found Pierre in a very low state. The fever was raging as ferociously as ever, but the sick man, having just gone through a fearful fit of delirium, was now luckily in his right senses. He therefore made his confession with all the signs of the sincerest sorrow and repentance. When it was over, the priest began to tell him of the seriousness of his case, but Pierre stopped him, saying: "M. le Cure, I know it all. When I want to bed after the services, I know I would not rise again; but God's will be done. I have ever tried to do what I thought right, and during the procession I had a presentiment that it was the last time I was to carry the cross."

"Yes," said the priest, sadly, "Jean told me that the doctor had given you up. Don't wonder if I speak to you plainly; you are a Christian and for you death has no terrors."

"I care not for myself, M. le Cure, but my poor heart breaks at the thought of parting from my wife and my two little boys. What will become of them with no one to give them bread to eat?" And tears began to roll down his flushed cheeks.

"Don't be uneasy, my dear friend," replied the priest, "God is a kind Father and they will be taken care of."

Pierre began to make an appropriate answer, but soon his incoherent words and wild gestures told too plainly that he was delirious again. He fell his remains in this same state till his death; but even in his delirium words were spoken which clearly showed how he valued the privilege of carrying out Lord's cross.

When the bells rang out their blithe alleluias on Holy Saturday, the soul of Pierre Chautard had winged its flight to a better world, to the feet of Him whose cross he had so generously carried and in whom he had so lovingly trusted all his life.

The news of his death spread consternation and sorrow among the people of the parish, and his sudden departure was a terrible blow to his many friends.

Though Pierre lived and died a poor man, his funeral surpassed in magnificence and attendance those of many more favored sons of fortune. But the sympathy of the people did not confine itself to a mere outward show of affection and esteem. Pierre had left behind him a poor sickly wife and two very young boys.

The day after the funeral, the White Penitents held a special meeting, in which it was unanimously resolved that the family of their deceased member should be supported at the expense of the confraternity, and that a Mass should be founded for the repose of the soul of him who carried the cross unto death.

We know whereof we affirm when we state that Ayer's Pills, taken promptly, at the first symptoms of colds and fevers, assist further progress of these disorders, and speedily restore the stomach, liver and bowels to their normal and regular action.

A pretty good thing occurred in the experience and opinions of Dr. Palmer Hulbert's seven-year-old "Mamma," he said, "these boys out there abuse me. They say I am an animal." The mother asked in surprise: "What do they mean?" "Oh, I don't know what they mean. I suppose it is some more of that Higher Criticism."

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