

## THE SECRET OF THE CONFESSIONAL.

About the year 1790, Father Frank Fitzgibbon was parish priest of a large church in Dublin. His elder brother, who had resigned a captaincy in the French army to escape the terrors of the Revolution then breaking out, had taken up his abode with their widowed mother. The captain who had led a rather loose life, engendered, no doubt, by his army habits, about this time became enamored of a very charming young lady, and had about concluded to settle down, in which resolution he was encouraged by his mother and Father Frank. Unfortunately, there was a rival suitor in the way, and it was not long before a deadly hate sprung up between the two men.

What the result of this enmity was, we shall let Father Frank tell in his own words:

"One night my brother and his rival happened to meet at a club; words passed between them, and the intervention of friends alone prevented them coming to blows. They were separated, and two hours later the lifeless body of my brother's rival was found in a lone-ome street; he had been stabbed to the heart. As his sword was still in its scabbard he had evidently not been killed in a duel, and although his coat and vest were torn open, his watch and valuables were untouched, so it was certain that robbery was not the motive for the crime.

"What then could it be but revenge? Suspicion at once pointed to my unfortunate brother, who was forthwith seized and thrown into prison, and as the evidence was strong against him he was indicted for the murder, and bail was refused.

"I must confess that I myself was inclined to believe him guilty, the more so as it was found that the point of his sword was broken—although he denied all knowledge of it—but our dear old mother, although deeply affected, stoutly asserted his innocence, and had no fear of his acquittal.

"My brother bore himself with a Christian fortitude which was quite impressive, and steadily maintained his entire innocence of the crime.

"It was the Lenten season, and when I mounted the pulpit on Good Friday night to preach on the Passion my mind involuntarily reverted to the coming Easter term of the Court. In my fancy I saw my brother standing before the jury as our Lord stood before Caiaphas and Pilate. The agony in the garden, the unjust accusations, the ignominy of a public trial, the terror of a shameful and horrible death, rose before me with the vividness of an actual occurrence. My soul was torn with anguish, and in that moment my brother's innocence was revealed to me. I was deeply moved as I described the sorrows of our Blessed Lady standing at the foot of the cross, for it was my mother's form I saw there, and it was her head that was bowed in grief. My voice choked with sobs, and as I left the pulpit there was scarcely a dry eye in the congregation.

"From the pulpit I went to the confessional, where I remained until late, and was just about leaving when another penitent entered and begged to be heard.

"Shall I ever forget that night, and the terrible story there revealed! After long hesitation my penitent confessed that he had committed a murder. He had been employed in a bank which was the agent of a lottery. Among the tickets, he had sold one to an acquaintance, whom he saw fold it carelessly and place it in his vest pocket.

"A few days after, the drawing of the lottery reached the bank late in the evening, and my penitent found that that ticket, of which he remembered the number, had drawn a prize of £2,000. The lust of gold seized on his soul, and that night, before any one knew of the prize, he waylaid his friend, and after murdering him, robbed him of the ticket, which he presented to a bank through a broker, under pretext that the owner did not wish to be known.

"After this horrible confession, I began to question my penitent of the time and circumstances of the murder, until it gradually dawned upon me—slowly at first, then surely and unmistakably—that I was face to face with the murderer of my brother's rival.

"My first impulse was to thank God fervently, but the next moment the thought of my duty rose before me, and I felt the awfulness of my position. I

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was worn out by the fatigues of the day, and the strain was too great. I uttered one cry of anguish and swooned.

"When I recovered my senses I found myself supported by my penitent. We were alone, all alone, in the church, and in almost utter darkness. I turned my face towards him and cried out: 'Unfortunate man! My brother is suffering for your crime.'

"What! he almost shrieked, 'you—you are a brother of Captain Fitzgibbon?'

"Yes, I replied, 'and the son of his mother, whose aged head is bowed with sorrow almost to the grave.'

"Merciful heaven! he exclaimed, 'and I have confessed my guilt to you! But you will not betray me! You dare not, for you are bound by the seal of confession.'

"Alas! I replied, 'I know it but too well, but I cannot see my brother die!'

"And I, he answered, 'do you think I want to die, now that I am rich? Oh no! Swear to me by the Blessed Sacrament which now rests in the Repository that you will never reveal what you have this night heard.'

"He laid his hand on my sleeve as he spoke, but I disengaged myself, and seizing him, held him firmly in my grasp as I replied:

"I have taken an oath before God, and that I will keep. But I owe you none, nor will I take one for you.'

"He was but a child in my grasp; and feeling his helplessness, he began to tremble and to weep. I pushed him towards the door of the church, saying at the same time:

"Meet me here to-morrow night without fail. In the meanwhile I will learn what I must do to reconcile my duties as a brother and a priest. At all events you will be safe to go and come.'

"He was gone; and I staggered to my room, where I threw myself on my bed, but not to sleep. The one thought was constantly before me: What could I do? How could I keep my priestly oath and at the same time save my brother from the scaffold? At daybreak I arose and wrote to my Bishop, relating all the circumstances—without giving my penitent's name—and asking for advice in my great trouble.

"The answer came promptly: See your penitent again; point out to him that he is about to commit another and more dreadful crime. Beg him to acknowledge his guilt or at least to make such a declaration as will save your brother. How or before whom such a declaration is to be made, I leave to your discretion, but it must be voluntary and without compulsion. But should the man refuse, should Almighty God not give you the grace to move his heart, it will be because he has other ends in view for both you and your brother, and we must bow to His holy Will. No one, much less a priest, has the right to question His action. In this case, my dear son, your duty is the more painful, but none the less plain: You can only pray and be silent."

"I read this letter again and again, and resolved to follow the advice as that of our Lord Himself.

"I was all impatience to see my brother, so greatly did my conscience reproach me for the unjust suspicions I had previously entertained. I hastened to the prison and even before we were alone, I threw myself into his arms. 'Pardon me, my dear brother!' I cried, 'that I should have doubted you. You are innocent! I know it now, I know it.' 'Thank God!' he exclaimed fervently and bowing his head the strong man who had endured my suspicions without murmuring wept like a child.

"When he had somewhat recovered he began to ply me with questions. 'How

has my innocence been established? When shall I be released?'

"Need I say what anguish these simple questions caused me? I ought to have been prepared for them, but now I knew not what to answer. I mumbled, I know not what, about being able to prove, and finally withdrew, leaving my brother depressed and helpless by my imprudent words, which had raised his hopes only to dash them to the ground again. I dared not go home, as I feared to face my mother, so I spent part of the day in church and then walked the streets until the hour appointed for meeting my penitent. I had to wait some little time, and began to fear he would not come, when I saw him enter the church. He looked furtively about him, as though suspicious of some trap, and when I called him, he started and his hand unconsciously sought a hidden weapon under his cloak. When assured we were alone he wanted to enter the confessional.

"Come to my house, I said. 'There we can talk more freely and without interruption.'

"He looked at me suspiciously, 'I prefer the confessional,' he replied; 'it is more sacred.'

"A priest is the same everywhere,' I continued; 'had I wished to betray you, you would have been arrested ere this.'

"But you have a brother to save!"

"True, but I have also a soul to lose."

"He looked at me steadily, seemed to hesitate a moment, then took my arm, and we left the church together.

"What passed between us at my house it were hard to tell. No two men, probably, ever had a similar conversation. I began to speak of my brother and the terrible injustice for an innocent man to die on the scaffold. He admitted it was undoubtedly very sad, but at the same time inevitable, as he was not disposed to suffer for the crime he had committed. I described our aged mother, and spoke of her anguish; he remained so unmoved that one might doubt whether he ever knew what it was to have a mother. The man was a brute with two instincts; greed and self preservation. As I found him susceptible to fright the previous evening, I now spoke to him of hell, and of the terrible reckoning he would one day have to give. That moved him, and he at length broke into tears, and offered me one, two, three hundred pounds if I would give him absolution.

"It were vain to try to persuade him to give himself up; besides, I was not sure that my conscience would allow me so to advise him. I therefore tried to persuade him that he might save my brother without risk to himself, and proposed that he should go to some foreign country, and there, in presence of witnesses, make a declaration in which he avowed his guilt, giving such particulars as would carry conviction to the mind of the judge. But no, the man had no faith in any one, and feared the witness would betray him, and in some way deliver him up to justice.

"What I suffered at that interview it would be impossible to tell. I argued and pleaded, and listened with a patience of which I would not have believed myself capable. But I was playing for a heavy stake, and would attempt anything to win it.

"Once—for a moment only—I lost sight of my holy office. Wearied with fighting this selfish nature, I turned on him, and threatened to give him up. He drew a knife, but I wrenched it from his grasp as if he were a child, and threw it into the street, but the next minute, covered with shame, I cast myself at his feet, and begged his pardon.

"It was all of no use; the man had no more heart than a wild beast!

"At daybreak we parted, after a night

of unavailing effort on my part. Then I threw myself on my bed, utterly exhausted; for I had not closed my eyes for forty-eight hours. It was not long before tired nature succumbed, and I fell asleep.

"When I awoke my mother was standing by my bedside, pale and agitated. I feared that I might have talked in my sleep and trembled lest my fatal secret had escaped me. Thanks be to God, it was not so! But I had said enough for her to suspect that I knew something. I had spoken of my brother's innocence as certain; I had talked with the real murderer, but without revealing his name or how I made his acquaintance. My mother began to question me, but finding me dumb to all she asked, she at first heaped on me the most bitter reproaches, and then, breaking down, begged me, while the tears coursed down her cheeks, by all that I held dear and sacred, to restore to her her darling boy. How long this painful interview might have lasted I cannot say, but it was happily interrupted by a call from the Bishop, and my mother withdrew so that we might be alone.

"I told him all that had happened since the previous night; he listened with tears in his eyes, holding my hands in his, and speaking words of encouragement. Suddenly he cried out: 'Thanks be to God! my son, you are in a high fever. Almighty God, who values your sacrifice, sends this sickness to spare you for a time from mental anguish. From this moment you are no longer responsible for what you say, but I, to whom you have confided your secret, am, and since you cannot keep guard over yourself, your Bishop will remain and watch you.'

"It was true; and for more than a week, day or night, he never left my bedside, and while I was in the delirium of fever, he allowed no one to enter my room, not even my mother. When the delirium left me and I recovered consciousness, I was so weak that I had scarcely strength to suffer. The Bishop called on me every day, and when, at length, the fatal morning of the execution came, we passed the time on our knees repeating the prayers for the dying. We were often interrupted by the cries of the populace and the roll of drums, for a large military force was ordered out on duty. The Christian resignation of my brother and his repeated assertions of innocence had gained him many friends, and there were fears of a revolt for which Ireland was then ripe.

"But nothing occurred to interrupt the fatal proceedings, and my poor brother was hanged in chains, as a nobleman unworthy of his rank. Before the execution his sword was broken before his eyes and our family arms destroyed.

"My mother did not long survive him; she seemed completely broken-hearted, and a week later she was united to her martyred son. At the last, when her soul was about leaving its earthly tenement, the Bishop, who had been most attentive to her, leaned over and whispered something in her ear; joy lit up her face as she raised her eyes to heaven. Then she beckoned to me, whom she had refused to see since the day of the execution, she pressed me in her wasted arms, covered me with caresses and tears, called me her saintly boy, her blessed one, her martyr, and begged me to bless her, and passed from earth breathing thanks to God for all His mercies.

"Some years after my brother's innocence was fully established, as the murderer on his death-bed made public acknowledgment of his guilt. Had he not, I could not now be telling the story of his crime.—*Catholic Home Annual.*

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