

A VICTIM TO THE SEAL OF CONFESSION.

A TRUE STORY BY THE REV. JOSEPH SPILLMAN, S. J. CHAPTER XXII. NEW CALEDONIA.

Father Montmoulin had not reproached him to himself in very brilliant colors on the way to Marsailles; but on arriving there, he found the reality far worse than he anticipated. In the prison at Marsailles, where he remained a few days awaiting the departure of the ship, he had a foretaste of what he would have to endure on the voyage. Till then he had been in solitary confinement, and nothing had interrupted his thoughts and prayers. Here he was penned in a common room with over a hundred other convicts, and was not alone for a single moment. And what company was he in! The scum of society: thieves, burglars, forgers, murderers, anarchists—the lowest and vilest of mankind. Even the sight of all these countenances bearing the stamp of vice and moral degradation was painful in the extreme. And then to hear their filthy conversation, the oaths and blasphemies whereby they gave utterance to their hatred of God and man!

With the quick perception of the criminal, his fellow convicts knew instantly that the fresh arrival who, pale and horror-struck, was thrust in among them, was not one of them. Consequently everyone felt him to be an enemy.

"Hullo!" cried a brutal-looking fellow from Lyons, who had killed his wife in a fit of intoxication, staring at him with vulgar curiosity, "what a sweet creature we have got here! Look at his smooth hands, I bet he has never earned twopenny in all his life! And look at his face! It is like the saints one sees in the prayer-books!" "It makes me sick to see him," interposed a burglar from Toulon, "he smells of incense and wax candles! Dence take me if he is not a scapristan or even—"

"A priest, sure enough!" exclaimed a Paris pickpocket, who had got behind the new corner. "Do you not see the place where his tonsure has been? What a joke! His Reverence shall preach some of his sermons to us, and sing a High Mass for our benefit."

"A priest, a parson!" they roared and shouted. One began to bawl a requiem, another knelt down and began a mock confession for the entertainment of his fellows, saying such horrid things that the priest, in shocked astonishment, put his fingers to his ears; others inquired of him what good work he had done, to be rewarded with the honor of their society. In a word, the oaths and revellings on all sides resembled nothing, the unhappy Vicar of Ste. Victoire thought, but the torture a lost soul endures in the company of the damned. "This is hell upon earth," he said to himself with a shudder.

He spent five days in the prison at Marsailles before the convicts were embarked on board the transport ship Durance. Chained together in couples, they marched through the streets, with a strong escort of police, down to the harbor. On the way thither, Father Montmoulin saw a priest with whom he was acquainted, coming out of a church. The priest scanned the ranks of the convicts as they filed past him with a sorrowful expression; he was evidently looking to see if the priest of Ste. Victoire was among them, for his supposed crime and his pardon were known far and wide by means of the daily papers. At length his eyes fell on the object of his search; he recognized him more through his timid, shamefaced demeanor than from his features, for the calamity that had overtaken him had altered and aged him sadly. The priest's countenance changed, and he raised his hands with a gesture of dismay. A blush of shame dyed Father Montmoulin's cheeks; he cast down his eyes; that was the last expression of sympathy that he would meet with for many a long day.

On board the Durance the convicts were confined in the hold, packed closely together, and chained at their benches to rings in the side of the vessel. As long as the vessel remained in the harbor they were not allowed to go on deck. Fancy all these men full of hatred and every evil passion, shut up together in this narrow, and almost dark space! And when after many weary hours had elapsed the engine began to throb and the screw to revolve, and the steamer, getting into open water began to roll as the waves, driven by a stiff south-west wind, broke against its sides, sea sickness, miserable enough under any circumstances, made itself felt in the crowded hold, the state of things became deplorable indeed. What Father Montmoulin had to suffer in the company of these degraded criminals' beggars description.

Happily, after a few days of almost insupportable misery, calmer weather set in, and the convicts were allowed to go on deck for at least several hours. The Durance had passed through the Isthmus of Suez, and was steaming south down the Red Sea. The heat increased day by day, and in the hold of the steamer it was hardly to be borne. Whenever the order was given to the prisoners to go back to the ill-ventilated, unsavory place of confinement, Father Montmoulin felt as if he could endure his lot no longer. Already three of his unfortunate fellow-sufferers had thrown themselves overboard, in order to escape from their misery, and if the priest's faith in God, the sole disposer of life and death, and his belief in a life to come had been less firmly rooted, he also would have scarcely been able to resist the temptation of self-destruction.

Presently, when the vessel had reached the Indian Ocean, and was pursuing its course over the wide expanse of waters towards the south coast of Australia, Father Montmoulin became seriously ill, so that the ship's doctor ordered him to have a better berth assigned him, apart from the other convicts. For weeks he hovered between life and death in high fever. The doctor watching by his side when he was delirious, was astonished at the

pure and pious fancies that flitted across the diseased brain of his patient. He thought he was preaching in his parish church on the subject of the seal of the confessional; or he was catechizing the school children, and again confession and the secrecy to be observed was the theme of his instructions; or he was talking to his mother with filial affection and simplicity; once in his wanderings he fancied himself in court, and cried excitedly: "They will condemn me, and I cannot, I dare not say who did it." The doctor felt convinced that the man was innocent and intimidated as much as the Captain, very emphatically. The Captain shrugged his shoulders, and said: "Number 5,348 is the parish priest of Ste. Victoire, who was tried for murder. I read the whole account of the trial in the Figaro, and no doubt of his guilt was left on my mind. I confess it seems highly improbable that a man could keep up the part of a deceiver in a state of cellium. But granted that he were innocent, we could do nothing to alter his lot. You could not induce a Court of Justice in France to try the case over again on your psychological grounds."

"But we ought perhaps do something to make his lot less hard," the doctor replied.

"I can do nothing. I have the command of the ship, and I do not meddle in other men's business. If you chose, you can speak to the Commandant of the jail on the island, to whom I have to hand over the convicts, but I warn you, you will do so at the risk of being laughed to scorn." Then the Captain turned on his heel, and went off to his own cabin.

The Durance was nearing the straits which separate the southeast point of Australia from Tasmania. They had got in sight of Cape Wilson, which stretches far out into the wide passage, when Father Montmoulin, leaning on the doctor's arm, once more came up on deck.

"Is that the coast of my future home?" he asked with a melancholy smile.

"That is the most southerly point of Australia. We are a good distance from New Caledonia yet. I thought for some time, you would not reach your destination, but your strong constitution and your vigor have done well in this invigorating sea breeze."

"Much better, thank you. But for your kind care I should now be lying at the bottom of the blue water."

"And you think it would be all the better for you if you had died? I can understand your feelings."

"I think it is all for the best as God has ordained; but I cannot deny that listening only to the voice of nature, I should infinitely prefer death to my present lot."

"Yet I am glad that I succeeded in pulling you through," the doctor rejoined. "The fact is I believe in your innocence, and I trust it may be made apparent some day."

The prisoner's countenance brightened. "God bless you for saying that," he replied, pressing the doctor's hand gratefully. "It is the first word of human sympathy that I have heard for weeks. I cannot venture to entertain the hope of obtaining justice on earth, but I look forward to it all the more confidently hereafter."

The doctor turned away, to hide the emotion that these words awoke within his breast. In common with many other medical students he had made shipwreck of his faith through the pernicious teaching of unbelieving lecturers. Now he was compelled to acknowledge that there was something sublime in the courage wherewith belief in the justice of God and in the immortality of the soul inspired a man. What would an unbeliever have done in the place of this priest? he asked himself. He would long ago have made away with himself in utter despair.

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After this speech, which was uttered in a lower tone, but every word of which reached Father Montmoulin's ear, as he stood by the Commandant, the latter turned to the convicts, and said in a loud voice: "Attention! I give you all to understand that you have not been sent over here from France in order that you may live in idleness at the expense of the State, and I promise you, that if one of you fails to conform to the strict regulations of the place, I will lead him in the life of a dog. He shall be put out in the yard, and feet chained together, till he thinks he is in a frying pan. Do you understand? But those who are docile and willing to work, will have it made easier to them. So you can choose for yourselves. One thing more: It may occur to some of you, as it has to others before now, to make an attempt to escape. Now I tell you as a warning: First, all the sentries carry loaded muskets and have orders to shoot down any convict who is out of bounds. Secondly, the nearest land lies thousands of miles away to the west; and how many a man can swim from this shore to that, without a boat and without provisions, is his lookout, not mine. Thirdly, there are some skilful swimmers here, who sometimes contrived to make good their escape. Well, I wish a pleasant voyage to those who imitate them. Most of the fugitives came back to the coast in a pitiable state of starvation, and gave themselves up at one or other of the French stations. I can assure you the reception they met with took away all desire to make another little holiday trip. Do you all understand? Right about, march!"

The Durance now lay alongside the landing-place, and the convicts marched one by one, under military escort, past the Commandant to the barracks, which were shut in by high palisades. There more than a thousand convicts were to sleep on the bare boards. Some who happened to be on the spot when the new arrivals marched in, greeted them with curses, scornful looks, and muttered oaths. And when evening came, and the whole body of the convicts already on the island, who during the day had been at work in companies in the gardens and on the public buildings under the surveillance of the guards, returned to their quarters, and discovered the unwelcome accession of their numbers, occasioning a further restriction of elbow-room and breathing-space, a regular storm broke out. There was an outburst of anger and spite such as only those who were hardened in vice and crime were capable of exhibiting, and scenes similar to that which marked Father Montmoulin's entrance into the prison at Marsailles were enacted. "His Reverence" was singled out as a special object of persecution, and even some of the warders did not scruple to manifest their hatred of religion, by victimising the innocent minister of religion who was now in their power. And this life—this hell on earth—would last on and on; for how many years?

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But it was not so. Every day he was better able to bear the life to which he was condemned. His vigorous constitution accustomed itself to the climate and to hard labor, and he fared better in this respect than some men of stronger build, whose health had been undermined by an irregular life. When the rainy season set in, he had several attacks of fever, and was obliged to go into the infirmary for a few days, where the Sisters of St. Joseph from Cluny acted as nurses. But his recovery was rapid, so rapid in fact, that his cherished wish, to receive Holy Communion, was not fulfilled. He confided to one of the Sisters the fact that he was a priest, but she had so often been deceived by convicts, that she had learnt not to believe what they said of themselves. How could it be possible that a priest should be sentenced to transport into his charge. He inspected each one singly, man by man, or rather number by number, and No. 5,348 came in his turn.

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ping his voice: "He is a priest, and I fully believe him to be innocent." The Commandant knitted his brows angrily, and said (frigidly): "Number 5,348 will receive the same treatment as the other convicts. Those who have been pronounced guilty by the verdict of the French court of justice, we consider to be guilty. A priest who disgraces his sacred office has the least claim of anyone to lenient treatment. I shall have him examined by the medical official at the hospital, and act according to his report."

After this speech, which was uttered in a lower tone, but every word of which reached Father Montmoulin's ear, as he stood by the Commandant, the latter turned to the convicts, and said in a loud voice: "Attention! I give you all to understand that you have not been sent over here from France in order that you may live in idleness at the expense of the State, and I promise you, that if one of you fails to conform to the strict regulations of the place, I will lead him in the life of a dog. He shall be put out in the yard, and feet chained together, till he thinks he is in a frying pan. Do you understand? But those who are docile and willing to work, will have it made easier to them. So you can choose for yourselves. One thing more: It may occur to some of you, as it has to others before now, to make an attempt to escape. Now I tell you as a warning: First, all the sentries carry loaded muskets and have orders to shoot down any convict who is out of bounds. Secondly, the nearest land lies thousands of miles away to the west; and how many a man can swim from this shore to that, without a boat and without provisions, is his lookout, not mine. Thirdly, there are some skilful swimmers here, who sometimes contrived to make good their escape. Well, I wish a pleasant voyage to those who imitate them. Most of the fugitives came back to the coast in a pitiable state of starvation, and gave themselves up at one or other of the French stations. I can assure you the reception they met with took away all desire to make another little holiday trip. Do you all understand? Right about, march!"

The Durance now lay alongside the landing-place, and the convicts marched one by one, under military escort, past the Commandant to the barracks, which were shut in by high palisades. There more than a thousand convicts were to sleep on the bare boards. Some who happened to be on the spot when the new arrivals marched in, greeted them with curses, scornful looks, and muttered oaths. And when evening came, and the whole body of the convicts already on the island, who during the day had been at work in companies in the gardens and on the public buildings under the surveillance of the guards, returned to their quarters, and discovered the unwelcome accession of their numbers, occasioning a further restriction of elbow-room and breathing-space, a regular storm broke out. There was an outburst of anger and spite such as only those who were hardened in vice and crime were capable of exhibiting, and scenes similar to that which marked Father Montmoulin's entrance into the prison at Marsailles were enacted. "His Reverence" was singled out as a special object of persecution, and even some of the warders did not scruple to manifest their hatred of religion, by victimising the innocent minister of religion who was now in their power. And this life—this hell on earth—would last on and on; for how many years?

The head physician, who examined No. 5,348, saw no reason why he should be exempted from the general rule. Consequently the next morning Father Montmoulin had to shoulder a spade, and accompanied by a detachment of convicts who were making a road up to the top of the highest hill, where a post of observation was established. Even the sturdiest laborers, horny-handed sons of toil, long accustomed to the use of spade and pick axe, could scarcely stand the hard labor under the scorching sun of the tropics. The first day proved almost too much for Father Montmoulin, panting with fatigue, bathed in perspiration, with bleeding hands, he returned in the evening to the barracks, too utterly exhausted to eat more than a mouthful of the coarse fare—some ill-cooked yams—provided for the convicts' supper. Aching in every limb, he stretched himself on the hard planks that formed his bed, and it was long ere he could relax into rest. The next day he managed to recite unobserved, while muttered execrations were heard around, was his only solace. When on the following morning the bugle call sounded, and he had to get up and turn out, and with blistered hands resume his toilsome labors, he comforted himself with the thought that this sort of thing could not last very long; merciful fever would surely soon deliver him out of his misery.

But it was not so. Every day he was better able to bear the life to which he was condemned. His vigorous constitution accustomed itself to the climate and to hard labor, and he fared better in this respect than some men of stronger build, whose health had been undermined by an irregular life. When the rainy season set in, he had several attacks of fever, and was obliged to go into the infirmary for a few days, where the Sisters of St. Joseph from Cluny acted as nurses. But his recovery was rapid, so rapid in fact, that his cherished wish, to receive Holy Communion, was not fulfilled. He confided to one of the Sisters the fact that he was a priest, but she had so often been deceived by convicts, that she had learnt not to believe what they said of themselves. How could it be possible that a priest should be sentenced to transport into his charge. He inspected each one singly, man by man, or rather number by number, and No. 5,348 came in his turn.

"This convict was very ill on the voyage," the ship's doctor remarked. "He does not appear to be accustomed to hard labor. I should advise his being given work in the hospital, for a time at least." Then he added, drop-