

A VICTIM TO THE SEAL OF CONFESSION.

A TRUE STORY BY THE REV. JOSEPH SPILLMAN, S. J. CHAPTER XXI.

A FRESH AND A HEAVIER CROSS.

The Easter festival was over, and the rest of Easter week had run its course. The prisoner in the condemned cell was prepared for death and daily, hourly, he expected the announcement that his sentence was to be carried out on the morrow.

He was perfectly calm and resigned to his fate. The warders declared that they had never known a man under sentence of death look forward with so little dread to his last hour; with such an utter absence of either braggadocio and feigned bravery, or faint-hearted despondency; of abuse of judge and jury, or stoical indifference, or again of complaining and lamentation. His demeanour was grave, and he spent a great deal of time in prayer, but he was not melancholy; on the contrary, he seemed to possess inward peace and even joy, incomprehensible to the prison warders. Could they have looked into his soul they would have seen that though nature shrunk from the manner of the death awaiting him, the cause of it filled his heart with consolation.

"I die a victim of my sacerdotal obligations," he said to himself. "My death will be regarded by the Church as equivalent to martyrdom, like that of St. John Nepomucene. The Church teaches that such a death washes away sin and removes the penalty of sin, and that the individual whose privilege it is to suffer it, receives the crown of a martyr and enters immediately upon eternal felicity. Regarded in the light of faith I am the happiest of mortals; I only fear that I am not worthy of this supreme happiness."

Such were Father Montmoulin's dispositions subsequent to his condemnation. He offered to God the sacrifice of his life, and prayed that it might be accepted. It was more the hope of obtaining this glorious crown than dread of a convict's life that actuated him in his unqualified rejection of Meunier's suggestion that he should petition for a pardon. The lawyer guessed the reason, and did not press him further.

So did Father Regent. "I understand your motive," he said, "and should do the same in your place. You are not bound to take steps to avert a death which will be attended with such great blessings for you."

This utterance of the venerable priest was a real consolation to Father Montmoulin, as it relieved his mind of a scruple which he had felt till then. He had a yet greater consolation in receiving Holy Communion, which Father Regent obtained permission to bring him several times. It was also a comfort to hear that his mother and sister had been set at liberty, and that their maintenance was provided for. He could now look forward tranquilly to the solemn hour when he should pass from the scaffold to the tribunal of the Great Judge, who knew his spotless innocence.

Low Sunday came, and the poor priest in his prison cell could not think without a pang of the children whom he had been preparing for their First Communion. He would never see them again, he said to himself. And what other members of his flock, would they really believe that their pastor was guilty of murder and theft? He asked for writing materials, and wrote a touching letter to those who were making their First Communion and all his parishioners; a letter which he desired to be read, if the Archbishop consented, on the Sunday after his execution. He also wrote to the Archbishop, to his dear friend Father Regent, and to the solicitor who defended him, expressing his gratitude to them and bidding them farewell. Finally he wrote a farewell letter to his mother and sister, begging them to spare him and themselves the anguish of a last interview. Death would not separate him from them in spirit, and instead a painful parting on earth, they should look forward to a joyful reunion hereafter. This letter he wished to be delivered at once; and the others after his execution.

On the following morning the prisoner was handcuffed and conducted from his cell into a larger apartment. "Is it for execution?" he asked the warders who came to fetch him, turning very pale. They replied that he would know presently. Father Montmoulin found the officers of justice assembled in the room to which he was taken. The clerk of the court again read the sentence of death; he then said that, as the fixed time allowed for petitioning for a reprieve or a pardon had expired, the sentence now had the force of law. The President next inquired of the prisoner whether his not having appealed against his sentence was to be regarded as a tacit acknowledgment of its justice.

Against this the priest emphatically protested, solemnly asseverating his complete innocence. He was perfectly willing to allow, he said, that his judges had acted in good faith and had been misled by circumstantial evidence through no fault of their own. But an any rate now, when he could no longer have any hope of saving his life by denying the truth, when he was in fact about to appear before the judge who cannot be deceived, they might believe his protestation that he had died innocent.

The calm and innocent manner in which he pronounced these words made a perceptible impression even upon the Public Prosecutor.

After a brief pause, the President drew a document from his pocket, explaining that with the unanimous concurrence of his colleagues upon the Bench, the majority of whom were of opinion that the guilt of the prisoner was not fully proved, and in consideration of the previous blameless life of the condemned man, he had thought it his duty to memorialize the Home Secretary on his behalf. His representations had had the desired effect, and the sentence of death was commuted to penal servitude for life, and transportation to New Caledonia. The clerk

would read the pardon, and the fresh sentence, now in force, to the prisoner.

But Father Montmoulin, who had listened unmoved to the sentence of death, was seen to change colour, and stagger as if he had received a blow. He would have fallen, had not one of the warders quickly stepped to his side and steadied him. They were obliged to let him sit down for a few minutes to recover himself; at length he so far regained his composure as to stammer forth a few words of thanks to the President for the trouble he had given himself on his behalf. "But whether this sentence that you have rendered me, my lord, is really a boon, God only knows," he added. "I thought to lay down my cross to-morrow, or even to-day; and now a yet heavier one is laid on my shoulders, one which I must bear for it may be many years to come."

The judge looked astonished and somewhat embarrassed. Addressing his colleagues, he said: "This is the first time in all my experience that a prisoner condemned to death did not wish for a pardon. I do not think he is bound to accept it so if the prisoner prefers death."

Father Montmoulin interrupted him. "I think I am bound to accept the pardon, because I am innocent, and life and death are in my hands. Were I guilty I should desire the utmost rigor of the law as a means of expiating my crime. As it is, I believe I ought not to refuse the prolongation of life which is offered to me, however heavy a burden it may be."

The President and the inferior judges discussed this point, and agreed that the prisoner was right. At the same time they felt more than ever the justice of his innocence. A guilty man would have overjoyed at obtaining a pardon; at any rate, it was out of question that anyone would dissimulate so far as to feign indifference. But their private opinion could do nothing to alter an accomplished fact. The verdict could only be reversed by another trial, and this would only be granted on the ground of new and incontrovertible evidence of the prisoner's innocence. Such evidence was not forthcoming. So the President once more asked the question: "Prisoner, do you accept the pardon offered you?"

"I believe my duty requires me to accept it."

Let the prisoner be handed over to the governor of the prison that the sentence of transportation may be carried out according to law."

The order was written out by the clerk, signed by the President, and stamped with the seal of the Court of Justice, to be delivered to the Governor. A sergeant of justice was deputed to accompany the prisoner to Marseilles, whence a vessel was to sail in the course of the week carrying convicts to New Caledonia.

Father Montmoulin bowed to the officers of the law, and trembling in every limb, followed the sergeant to an apartment where he was ordered to strip off his clothes and put on the convict's dress. Despite his entreaty he was obliged to do this with the sergeant and one of the warders looking on. Tears rose to his eyes as he took off his cassock. It was taken from him and tossed contemptuously into the corner. "There," the sergeant said, "we will give you a neat twill jacket instead of that black scare-crow thing."

The linen Father Montmoulin had to put on bore the convict stamp, and the number by which he was distinguished to be known. "Your name is not Montmoulin any longer," they said to him, "it is number 5,348, and lest you should forget it, it is marked on every article of your clothing. We had a rasal here from Paris who always pulled off his jacket if anyone asked him his number, saying: 'I have no memory for figures; you can look for yourself. What is that you look for on your shoulders?'"

"Off with it. I never in my life saw such a thing on a convict."

Therewith the man rudely pulled the consecrated pledge of our Lady's protection out of the priest's hand. "Now on with the striped jacket. What a fine fellow your Reverence looks in it! Only your beard is a little stubby still. Anything more you want?"

"I am under the obligation of reciting the Breviary every day, so I must ask you to let me keep the one I have."

The man laughed loudly. "I like that!" he said. "What next! Perhaps you would like to say Mass every day, and preach a sermon to your fellow convicts. It might be useful to them. Set your delicate conscience at rest; you will not see the inside of a Breviary again, and as for what you are pleased to call your priestly functions, you may say goodby to that to-morrow forever and a day!"

"I beg you will not speak so disrespectfully of the sacerdotal office," Father Montmoulin rejoined indignantly. "What the deuce! Just hear him! He thinks one ought to treat the like of him with respect! Are you ready now?"

"I am ready to own that appearances are against me," the prisoner sorrowfully replied; he then added in a tone of humble entreaty; "I may at least take my rosary with me, I have said it every day since my First Communion."

"Nothing of the sort! The rules do not allow convicts to carry anything with them."

"It is also a remembrance of my poor mother—"

and thrust it into Father Montmoulin's pocket. "You shall not be deprived of the thing, if it will comfort you," he said kindly, "even if it costs me my place. As true as I stand here, I believe you innocent of the crime for which you are condemned. Forgive me for putting these fetters on your legs, I cannot help it. I trust it will not be reckoned to me as a sin, because my calling obliges me to treat a priest in this way."

"You need have no fears on that score, my good man," Father Montmoulin replied. "God will reward you for the kindness you have shown me. Oblige me, if you can, by taking my farewell greeting to my mother and sister in the Rue de la Colombe. It seems to me as if I was to be hurried away so soon that I shall not have a chance of seeing them again. It is perhaps better that it should be so. How would I grieve my poor mother to see me in these clothes. Please tell them I shall remember them every day in my prayers."

The entrance of the sergeant put an end to the conversation. Father Montmoulin was conducted into the presence of the Governor, who read the rules aloud to him, and warned him that in case he should make his escape, and be taken again on French territory, he would be publicly branded, and condemned to compulsory labor for life. He was then taken by an escort of police to the prison van; one constable got in with him, the sergeant mounted the box by the driver, and away they went out of the prison courtyard to the railway station.

The news that the priest had been pardoned, and was to be removed to Marseilles, soon got abroad in the town, and a crowd of the lowest of the people collected at the station to indulge in a few parting insults, since they could no longer hope to see him on the scaffold. When the prison van drew up outside the station, it was greeted with groans and hisses. The police had some difficulty in getting the prisoner out in safety.

"String him up to the nearest lamp-post," the people shrieked, and a shower of stones was flung at the offending clergyman. One stone, thrown by a street arab, struck him in the face, so that the blood began to flow; the police were obliged to hurry him into the building by a side door, and across the platform to the carriage awaiting him, before the doors were opened to the public. A basin of water had to be fetched to wash the blood off his face; it chanced that the guard who brought it was the very man who at the trial had tendered evidence so disastrous to the prisoner, namely that he had fired a shot off by train on that momentous night.

The man started when he recognized the priest. "Sir, I said what I certainly believed to be the truth at the time," he said. "Since then I have had misgivings, I may have been mistaken. Forgive me, if my evidence injured your cause."

"I have forgiven you and everyone else long ago," Father Montmoulin replied, holding out his hand to the man.

The train soon started on its way. Through the iron bars of the narrow window of the compartment set apart for the transport of convicts, in which Father Montmoulin travelled, he saw the towers of Aix once more, and behind them the rocky heights of Ste. Victoire, at the foot of which his own parish lay, which, as he thought, he was never to behold again in his life.

He felt as if his heart would break so over-whelming was his grief. Till now, since he received the pardon, he had not had time to think over and realize his fate. Now he could do so undisturbed, for the sergeant opposite him sat silent, smoking a short pipe. He had imagined all so different for himself; the short passage to the scaffold, the last absolution pronounced by the priest, as he ascended the steps, a final declaration of his innocence before the assembled multitude; then a quick, almost painless death, and after that the entrance upon eternal felicity, on which the teaching of the Church permitted him confidently to count. And now, on account of this miserable pardon, just as he thought he was nearing the haven of peace, he was flung into a prison, and his life was to be a long and dreary one.

"I'm thinking' yer Reverence won't ha' heard tell of what's after happenin'," began old Pat. "Our Martin and her's quiet spakin' entirely now."

"Since when?" asked Father Hugh, perfectly aghast, as well he might be, for Martin had got the "lines" from him no later than the previous Saturday afternoon, and he was to marry the couple between the two Masses on the Sunday before Gandamas, in other words, "the Sunday eight days" from that glowing January evening when he and his mare found themselves at the door of the mountain smithy.

The clang of the anvil suddenly stopped and Martin himself appeared on the threshold. A regular giant of young fellow, he had to bend his black head as he passed under the lintel, but it was splendid to see how nobly he carried it and how unconsciously his shoulders squared themselves as he found himself in the spacious freedom of the evening, whose royal colors draped the mountain and the sky.

"Good evenin'," your Reverence," said Martin respectfully, but with a curious inflection in his voice which Father Hugh's ear was quick to catch. "So the Mare's after lossin' a shoe I see. Well, it might ha' happened on a worse road any way. Me father here 'll hold her up 'we'll hev her right fer ye in a jiffy."

"Perhaps I'd better hold her myself," said Father Hugh, "she's a little bit frisky, and—"

"An' is that all ye know about me father?" said Martin, with a comical look in his blue eyes. "Shure there isn't a playboy of a mare in the County of Derry, or in all Ireland maybe—an' that's a bigger word—but he'd settle her as fast as luk at her."

By the remembrance of the Redeemer, who for our sakes drank to his dregs the chalice of suffering, and endured the cruel death of the cross.

THE WELCOME OF BREEDYEN.

AT THE FORGE.

"Thon'll be Father Hugh comin' back again from old John Nell's," remarked Pat Brian Rudab, as the ring of the hooft, on the road—iron to iron, for the frost was hard—made him hastily tumble the armful of "clods" he had gathered into the turf-basket, and straightened his old back to listen away w'it ye," he continued—to himself evidently—for the hens on the roost above him after an indignant protest at the beginning of his soliloquy had all gone to sleep again—"it's the road we'll all hev to go, an' in 'thout our John had his time out of it as well plain!"

"Be the hokey-sticks," said he suddenly interrupting his philosophical reflections and making for the door, "if the mare's not after lossin' a shoe of her shoes. It's the height o' good luck that Martin's not yet. If it had ha' been a needin' wan a week ago I'm thinkin' his Riverine wouldn't ha' caught him in the forge so handy at this time of the evenin'!" It's down in the hollow he'd ha' been." Old Pat glanced involuntarily a few fields down, where from a snug, white washed farmhouse the smoke curled into the frosty, sunset sky. "An' more nor lecky it's where he'd be this very minit only for me—an' the hens."

A great big Orkney stirred on her roost, as Pat resumed the filling of the turf basket. "In troth you're the very lady," he chuckled, lifting his load with both hands, "only for your uncommon taste for 'sturshion seeds, Father Hugh's mare might go home lame fer all the chance there'd be of gettin' Martin to put a shoe on her."

Father Hugh was walking his mare carefully round the "Crooked Bridge" as old Pat carried his basket of turf from the shed to the kitchen. He built up the fire with the firm black clods ("Where'd ye get colud to bate them," Pat was fond of asking, from strictly rhetorical considerations) and then the old fellow came and leant over the half-door to watch his Riverine and his mount slowly climb the hill.

He had to shade his eyes as he stood, for the sky behind the sweep of moorland, which started from the bridge and lost itself on the curve of the mountain, was fiery red. Patches of it were caught again in the bog pools and patterned the brown sward. Behind the hedge on the other side of the road, he could see the smoke from the solitary house in the "Hollow." A scurry of white wings once or twice suggested a belated wild duck. Nothing broke the stillness except the rhythmic clang of the anvil. From the open door of the forge a shower of sparks fell on the mountain road like a cloud of seed from the sower's apron when he walks the brown fields in the spring.

"Good evenin'," Pat, "same the greetin' in Father Hugh's cheerful voice as he and his horse approached, in the ghostlike mist of their own breath. "I hope Martin's about, for Kate, as you see, has lost a shoe."

"He is then, yer Riverine, by good luck—an' good guidance, too, for that matter—for it's me's sayin, it that shudn't."

"Dear me," said Father Hugh, "I didn't think ye needn't much guidance now. It isn't so very long since I heard you braggin' him as the steadyest boy in the parish. An' now that you're gettin' him married—and that to the finest girl that comes to Glen, as I know to my own certain knowledge—I'd imagine he'd be even less trouble to you than ever."

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said the two listeners simultaneously. "I was thinkin'," said old Pat, "when I seen him about dinner time, that he wudn't last the day. I'm vexed I didn't go over again as I was aminded, but when I seen them Bredeys about the place—"

Martin was very industriously engaged on the shoe at this point, but he managed to telegraph a look to the priest, which the good man was slightly puzzled to interpret.

"What's come over you about the Bredeys?" a lil his Riverine at last, turning to old Pat. "I have always thought a good deal of Mrs. Bradley, but since I saw the beautiful charity of her and her to the poor lonely creature who lies dead there in that wretched level in the bog-road, my opinion has gone up beyond anything I could say. And as for little Breedyen—the man who doesn't appreciate the blessing that is in getting her for a wife—he doesn't deserve her, to say the least of it. Do you mean to say, Martin Convery," said the priest turning, sharply on the young smith, "that you're going to throw Breedyen Bradley up—and she your promised wife, and miles too good for you at that."

"So me father says," said Martin. That peculiar inflection was again noticeable in his voice, and once more his eyes telegraphed a message. This time a sudden light had dawned on the priest. The corners of his mouth all at once relaxed and something very like a smile flickered under his lashes.

"The girl's right enough," said old Pat sullenly, "and I'm not sayin' that there was a time when there'd ha' been a welcome before her father's daughter in under this roof. Poor Mary, God rest her soul, her heart was set on it too." Old Pat's eyes suddenly softened and his heart turned to the Glen where Martin's dead mother was lying patiently—maybe waiting to hear the news. "But where's the god of talkin'?" he resumed, in the same sultry tone. "Do ye think I'd be apt to let a girl into me house, that her mother couldn't keep a civil tongue in her head? Threatenin' me poor hens with wizen, no less, because the cratshur loked up a when of her outl' rubbish o' seeds—common weeds I'd call them—no better nor a parcel o' benwodes you'd burn in a bell to get shut o' them—and so think of her even in me poor hen's to the lake o' thon."

"But surely—" began the priest. A sudden lurch of the mare stopped him just in time, as it would seem from Martin's painfully laborious effort to indicate by dumb show that it would be better to let the old man have it his own way—for the present.

The mare was shod by this time and waiting for her rider. "She smells the Glen wather," said old Pat. "I'm thinkin' she'll make the road home as fast as ye'll want her."

"I'll not want her to make it too fast, then," remarked Father Hugh; "for there's some directions I want to give Martin here about the funeral and I'd be glad if he'd come with me as far as the lower cross roads."

"If he'd come!" Old Pat and Martin were equally eager to oblige his Reverence. "Me father 'll square up whatever's his yin about," said Martin in that tone of easy companionship which seemed to exist between father and son. "An' if yer Riverine's ready, I'll not keep ye waitin'."

Father Hugh mounted, Martin put his stalwart limbs into a motion which, for all its ease, covered as much ground as Kate's gentle trot—and they were off.

At the foot of the hill they turned and saw the old man standing at the door, shading his eyes with his hand as his look followed them. Behind him gleamed the forge fire; the little whitewashed cottage looked cheery with the glow. Such a brave little house to be so contented all by itself in the great solitude of the mountain and the moorland and the frosty arch of the darkling sky.

"Well, now, Martin, avie," said the priest, "will you give me some explanation of the contortions you put your poor face through in the forge just now. What is it you're up to that you don't want your poor father to know about?"

"I'm thinkin' we'll hev to be botherin' yer Riverine on Sunday eight days after all," said Martin with comical sheepishness. Maybe it would be the better of bein' done a bit quarter nor we maned at first—for her mother an' my father are that mad about them misfortunate hens hokin' up the seeds and the old woman sayin' she'd set poison for them that they'll nayther of them hear tell of it now. But it wud take a good when of his, I can tell you, to make me give up Breedyen"—he said it with a warm, glad laugh whose rich echoes rang back from the mountains—"an' I'm thinkin'—"

"That Breedyen would rather have you than a handful of nasturtium seeds any day," said the priest, smiling in his dark blue eyes, and Father Hugh suddenly found himself examining with conscious admiration the noble build of his companion from the handsome black head to the well-shaped foot.

"Upon my word, I don't wonder at it," concluded his Reverence, gravely. "I think I must have married worse looking couples in my time."

Martin acknowledged the compliment only by his silence. "What had yer Riverine to say about the funeral?" he suddenly asked. "A corpse, me father an' me'll see to whatever's to be seen till. Poor old John, God rest his soul," he said musingly, "it was a poor life of it he had in thon we but of his—only for Breedyen and her mother doin' for the cratshur at the latter end what only a woman can do, he'n had been in a bad way entirely. I'm thinkin' he'd ha' been as well if he had ha' married."

It's—only Breedyen."

THE BOLD FARMER BOY. "O dyer." All the sadness of life, all the tender, wistful, beautiful thoughts which come wafled to us like a perfume from the lost garden—all the hopes and all the fears, all the strivings and yearnings of a soul created for a garden fairer still—why should they crowd on a man as if as the call of the wonder music? How should two words hold them all? "Only Breedyen." "Only Breedyen." But what if the two words set themselves to the gladdest of all glad music? The quick ring of Martin's shoe was echoing down a certain brook. The bare ash trees which rose here and there from among the brown network of the thorn hedges twinkled in unison as it passed. Something better than spring itself was in the air—something akin perhaps to the clear sparkle of the stars above Glensheen—or the love in Martin's heart—pure, strong, confident.

"Only Breedyen." He stopped for a moment, leaning over the half door to feast his eyes on her. The red fire-light leaping through the broom kitchen showed her bending over the balance-board. Here and there among the ratters and along the well filled dressers the shadows chased the fitted gleams of brightness almost as soon as they leapt from the heart of the turf—but where Breedyen stood, the bright hair of her head caught every little straying flash and framed her shapely head like a pictured halo. The sleeves of her blue homespun dress were turned up high on two adorable young arms, and as she skillfully kneaded the snowy dough she sang a quaint old song:

"My love he is as fine a young boy as ever you did see. He has his cheeks like roses and teeth like ivory. He has two eyes like diamonds, and he is my only joy. Let him go where he will, he's my love still. My darling farmer boy."

"My father came to the garden gate to hear what we would say. My love and I went him far away. He said he would transport my love and I. Let him go where he will, he's my love still. My darling farmer boy."

"And now we have got married, as you may plainly see. We are the happiest couple in the whole country. My love and I went him far away. He said he would transport my love and I. Let him go where he will, he's my love still. My darling farmer boy."

Another voice, very deep and rich and melodious, was helping her with the last verse. She stood for a moment, the scene she was carrying to the griddle balanced on her two small hands, her grey eyes all aglow—and Martin was beside her.

"It's singin' that last verse over again we ought to be," he said looking down on her with a look in his eyes which made hers drop and brought the black young woman to her cheeks. "We are the happiest couple in the whole country—or, or any way, we'll be it after Sunday eight days."

She had the scene on the griddle by this time and was bending over the bake-board again. (Why did the second scene need such a lot of patting?) And it seemed to Martin that something bright and round and silent fell on his white circle. It might have been a tear.

He was near her and comforting her in an instant. "Why, anusha, do you think we're goin' to let our lives be spoiled for a trifle between your mother an' my father? Do ye think that when we have spoke the word to Father Hugh we're goin' to draw back—brackin' our word to the praste o' God for an' all?"

There was silence for a moment broken only by the slow trick of the grandfather's o'clock in the adjacent room. A moment to be remembered for all their lives—nay, for all eternity which God created them to share together.

And then Martin raised his blushing face, and with trembling lips she sealed the silent promise.

"Poor old John," said Martin to himself, as he lifted the latch of the watchhouse half an hour later, "he was always a good friend of Breedyen's and mine. Only for him dyin' the day, how'd I ever have got her mother out of the house long enough for me to show her the rights of it all—an' where the dickens end we ha' made out our bit of a plan."

"A body wud think ye wur sturidin' about somethin'," said old Pat, handing his son the pipe he had prepared for him.

"Mebbe they wudn't be too far astray thin," said Martin, "for it's just come into me head about the 'Plan o' Campaign' now since the tintins has bought out?" said old Pat.

"Divil a mind," replied his son and heir, "there a niver no use in fightin' for what ye can get as easy without it. But suppose the 'Drapers' hadn't been willin' to sell, it might ha' come in handy."

Be the hokey sticks," chuckled old Pat, "if he's not turnin' out a politician or me hands. I still knowed he had brains—only for them—"

Mrs. Bradley emerged from the room at this moment with an empty teapot. The subdued murmur of the matrons' voices followed her through the open door, but in the kitchen, which was given over to the men, you could only hear the long-drawn sucking of clay pipes.

ON THE CROOKED BRIDGE. From where old Pat sat—on the Crooked Bridge, that is to say—you looked down into the nicest wee stream on the whole mountainside—golden in the shallows over the sand and as silver as a sixpence where it forces its way among the stepping-stones. The sun was shining on it very brightly this pleasant Sunday, and a furze bush had