

The Cure Of St. Michel

CHAPTER IV (Continued.)

With a murmured blessing Pere Justinien quietly withdrew, followed by M. Bourdoin. Those two young spirits, now husband and wife, remained locked in each other's arms in one tender, long, last embrace.

Jacques Cormot had been by the bedside of his sick wife all day, and it was not until toward evening that he left her to go into the village. He found everyone in a state of greatest excitement. In a few minutes his ears were filled with every possible detail of the theft of the night before.

'Yes,' old Philippe Marigny was saying. 'We don't like to think he is guilty, but you see he could not explain how he came by that money. I'm afraid that unless he can account for it there is very little hope for him. Poor fellow; and I like him so much!

Cormot was shocked. 'How much did you say they found on him?' 'Four hundred francs in gold.'

'Why, dear me,' commenced the little man, 'it's just the same amount—why that must have been the money—' he suddenly turned pale, and stopped speaking.

'What were you saying?' pressed Philippe.

Cormot gave a little gasp. 'Oh, nothing at all,' he murmured, 'only that I forgot something. Because me, I must go home immediately. And without waiting to take leave of his friends he walked off rapidly.

Poor Cormot's brain was in a whirl. Of course the money found on Francois was the money he had entrusted to him. It was just the same amount, and in gold, too. He had been on the point of telling this to old Philippe, when an awful thought had come to him. If he spoke of money it would involve the priest. It would get speedily to the ears of the government, and Per-Justinien would be found and put to death. How near he had come to betraying the priest! Of course, there was poor Francois Pellotier. But he had not spoken himself, so why should he, Cormot, say anything to betray his beloved priest?

No, he must keep silent at any cost! The day, which had been hot and sultry, was drawing fast to a close, and great, heavy banks of clouds were gathering ominously on the horizon. Slowly but surely a storm was also gathering over the head of the unfortunate prisoner. His life hung upon the spoken word of one man—but that man was silent!

CHAPTER V

HOW THE TRUTH WAS KNOWN

A month had passed, a long, weary month of waiting and suspense, and during this time no one had been allowed to visit the lonely prisoner. Mr. Bourdoin used all his influence to get Francois his liberty, offering to pay any sum within his power as bail. But the prison authorities were immovable. They could neither grant the prisoner personal liberty nor any further privileges. They had received special word from Paris, saying that the thief must be kept in the closest confinement.

Marie, whose nervous strength had been taxed to the utmost by the first shock of her lover's fate, was falling rapidly under the prolonged strain of separation and suspense. With growing anxiety her parents watched her one-time rosy cheeks grow pale, her bright, laughing eyes become dull and lifeless, saw her strength and vitality rapidly decreasing. During these days she often spent many hours alone, hours during which she prayed with all the fervor of her little heart, in which she poured out her very soul in supplication to her Creator. Sleep seldom came to her, and often the midnight hour would see her prostrate before the figure of her crucified Saviour, her tearful, anguished eyes raised in pitiful sorrow toward those heavens where dwells the eternal hope. At other times, during the day, she would seek out the solitary Pere Justinien, and after her talks with him she would return, wonderfully comforted, refreshed by new hope, and her soul greatly calmed by the quiet, sweet words of the priest. Her eyes would brighten on one more, a pale flush of color would return to her cheeks, and only the lines of suffering traced about her sensitive mouth would give the key to all that her heart had undergone. But with the coming of the long evenings, the deepening twilight, the deadly stillness of the night, her fears would return again, and her tender heart would nearly break with its burden of sorrow.

Then one day came the word that the trial was to take place within a week. The whole village was aroused by the news. There were very few who really believed Francois guilty, yet they were sorely troubled to explain the circumstantial evidences. One or two persons who had passed M. Bourdoin's house on the evening of the theft spread the news that they had seen Francois idling around the house in a suspicious manner, very late; in

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will rid you of it, radically and permanently, as it has rid thousands.

fact just a few minutes before the robbery took place. And then, too, there was the money, which was yet unaccounted for. If the boy had come by it honestly he could have explained easily, but he had refused to speak.

The short week rapidly drew to a close. The provincial judge arrived in his fine equipage—one which had formerly belonged to a Count, but which had been made over to the newly appointed Judge as a reward for his services in having brought two priests to— to death! The Judge took up his temporary residence with M. Rameaux, the banker, and late in the evening there was merriment, gaming, drinking, and other forms of gentlemanly entertainment, until, with a profound yawn, the Judge betook himself to bed, shortly before the appearance of dawn.

M. Rameaux had early taken advantage of the presence of a judicial person in the village to collect sundry rents and debts. After making the circuit of the town itself he suddenly bethought himself of the overdue rent owed him by that old miserly beggar Cormot. He found the latter in a state of the greatest grief, wringing his hands and moaning with dumb agony. His wife had died that morning! But the private affairs of the peasants did not have much effect on the prosperous M. Rameaux, and in a few sharp words he brought Cormot to betraying the priest!

'But good M. Rameaux,' pleaded the little man, 'for the love of the good God, I tell you I haven't a centime. I could not even pay for my wife's funeral. My neighbors will have to do it for me. Good sir, kind sir, you wouldn't turn me out when my wife is dead and not yet buried?' The old man broke down in a pitiful wail of tears.

'Have your wife buried tonight, if you can,' sneered the banker carelessly, 'and then get your kind and charitable neighbors to pay your debts for you, too. Work on their pity as you try to on mine and perhaps you may succeed better.' With these words of advice M. Rameaux turned upon his heel and stalked majestically down the road, stopping only once to call back to the trembling old man, 'Remember, you have twelve hours to do your work in!

For many minutes after the departure of his landlord, Cormot was too bewildered, too dazed to think. Then out of the confusion of his mind came one idea. If he could only secure the money which which he had given to Francois! It was true that he would have to betray the priest to do so, and tell what he had done with the money; but starvation, misery stared him in the face. He would be without a roof to shelter him, and the body of his wife was scarcely cold. Surely God could not hold him accountable now, if he did what after all might be right, if he kept an innocent man from death. But to betray the priest, who had always been so good to him—to betray that kindly, saintly man into the hands of merciless tyrants! Horrible idea! Before his mind came a picture of Pere Justinien, standing up before the muzzles of the guns. He heard the officers count, he saw the discharge of the muskets, he saw the priest sink to the ground, riddled by bullets, covered with gore. With a cry the little man put his hands before his eyes as if to avoid the terrible sight. Then the picture of his wife, lying so still and cold, came to him. He saw the soldiers come and take her from him, he saw them bury her in a great ditch, and throwing the dirt upon her corpse, trample roughly over the newly turned earth to make it firm. Then, to his distorted vision came the sight of money, money enough to keep alive, to keep alive, to have his wife buried as a Christian and not as a dog, a Money, yes, he could see the glitter of the gold, he could hear the clink as he counted it over piece by piece! Three hundred, four hundred francs

in gold! What a thought! Between him and the glittering gold arose the streaming, bloody corpse of Pere Justinien, and he fancied he saw a glare of reproach in those dead, glassy eyes. With a cry of horror he dashed from his house, and ran full into the arms of a tall, black-bearded man in peasant's clothes. It was Pere Justinien!

To Cormot the shock was almost too great. He staggered, bewildered, lifting his hands to his forehead as if trying to bring his mind back to realities. The priest placed his hand gently upon the man's shoulder and kindly but firmly pushed him into the house.

Once inside, he closed the door, and quietly asked the trembling little man to explain his actions. When Cormot had gasped his senses he replied, telling the priest about the landlord's visit, his wife's death, and his inability to even pay for her funeral, much less his debt to Pere Justinien felt deeply for the poor man, but there seemed to be very little that he could do. Spiritual consolation was of no avail, for Cormot's mind seemed to be wandering, and alternately he would cry for some money and the next moment almost sink to the ground, overcome by the tragedy of his wife's death.

'But Jacques,' inquired the priest suddenly, as an idea came into his mind, 'I thought you had saved up quite a sum of money. You were going to send it to me to keep for you what have you done with it?' Cormot hesitated. His dull mind saw no way out of the dilemma. 'Why, I did send it to you,' he said falteringly.

'When?' asked the priest in surprise. 'I never received it.'

'I sent it by Francois Pellotier,' said the poor man miserably.

Pere Justinien started. A thought had come to him suddenly. 'What day was that? Tell me quickly if he demanded imperatively.

Cormot hesitated and a smile came to his lips, only to die away under the stern gaze of the priest. He faltered, and then admitted the truth. 'It was the twelfth of August, mon Pere.'

'The night of the robbery!' exclaimed the priest astonished.

'For a instant Pere Justinien glanced at the cowering man before him in utter contempt and amazement. Slowly mastering his feelings he exclaimed, 'Then it was your money that was found on Francois's person, and you have never said a word about it! You were going to let an innocent man die! Anger, scorn, incredulity, were all struggling for the mastery in the priest's voice as he spoke.

'But Father,' wailed the little man 'I could not bear to betray you on the love of God, be so hard on me!—I can't stand it any longer. And Cormot broke down completely sobbing like a child.

Pere Justinien stood mute for a moment, gazing at this spectacle of weak humanity. Perhaps he realized in a small measure what must have been the struggle in the man's soul for his face softened a bit and laying a gentle hand upon Cormot's shoulder he calmed him down slowly.

'Look he said, 'Hear is the money you will need for the rent, I will see to the funeral myself if I am still alive; if not, I will see that you are provided for. Adieu.'

And with slow steps and bent head the priest walked forth into the gathering gloom.

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(To be Continued.)

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G. A. SHARP, Supt. P. E. I. Railway Railway Offices, March 23, 1912.

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