

A VICTIM TO THE SEAL OF CONFESSION.

A TRUE STORY. By REV. JOSEPH SPILLMAN, S.J.

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CHAPTER VIII. THE MAYOR ARRIVES ON THE SCENE

The three officials wended their way in silence to the ancient convent. They were followed by the innkeeper and the policeman, the latter carrying a lantern. As they turned out of the village street, and came in sight of the old building, they noticed that the rooms inhabited by the priest were lighted up. "Our friend is still up, at any rate," remarked the Mayor with a sneer. That is very surprising at this late hour, seeing that he did not wish to be disturbed on account of indisposition.

"He is restless enough too," added the Notary. "One can see his shadow on the window as he paces up and down before the lamp."

"That looks as if he was in a state of agitation or excitement. Do you think Susan may have gone to him after all, and apprised him of the old lady's disappearance?" said the Mayor.

"I hardly think so. The old woman would not venture herself in this gloomy place so late as this—it must be close upon eleven—for any consideration," replied the innkeeper.

"Well, let us go on. How are we to get in? Must we ring the bell? I confess I had rather have taken his Reverence by surprise," said the Mayor.

"O, I have Loser's key's," Carillon answered; and in a moment the old gate swung back on its hinges.

When, without finishing his confession, Loser hurried away out of Father Montmoulin's presence, the latter could for a time scarcely control his agitation. Could it be possible that Mrs. Blanchard was murdered? That her body at that moment lay in the room next the sacristy? And the assassin making his escape with his booty, he being powerless to prevent him? He could not even make any use of the revelation made to him in the villain's confession. But it was really a confession? Yes, undoubtedly so. The man had not the right dispositions, but he had the intention to confess, and had accused himself to him, as Christ's representative, of the crime he had committed. To make assurance double sure the priest took Lehmkul's Moral Theology from his bookshelves and read through the chapter of the seal of confession. There was no possible doubt about it; he had acquired the knowledge sub sigillo, and he was bound to secrecy whatever the consequences might be.

"My God!" he said to himself, they may even take me for the murderer! But no. Thou wouldst not lay upon me so terrible a trial. There is nobody who would believe me capable of such a deed. And yet, even if suspicion rested upon me, I dare not open my lips in self-defence. I must sacrifice my reputation, my life, rather than utter a word, as I declared only yesterday from the pulpit: O my God, let this chalice pass from me! I do not ask this for my own sake alone, although I cannot deny that personally I should feel such a trial most acutely; I ask it for my poor mother's sake, for such a blow would be her death; I ask it too for the sake of my flock, for the sake of the Catholic Church, the disgrace that would be brought on it, the terrible scandal that would be given through me to many weak souls, if they saw a priest accused of murder! No, it is impossible; such a thing could not be; my excited imagination conjures up these horrible contingencies. The holy Mother of God will take me under her protection!"

Father Montmoulin whilst uttering these words, had cast himself on his knees upon the prie-dieu, and raised his hands in supplication to his crucified Redeemer and the Mother of Sorrows. After that he took up his rosary, and walked up and down the room for some time, saying to himself: "Feeling more composed, he was deliberating whether he should retire to rest, although sleep was out of the question, when steps were heard in the corridor, and there was a loud knock at his door."

"On his answering 'Come in,' the town-clerk, with the mayor and the notary at his heels, entered the apartment. They had altered their first plan, and decided to present themselves all together, to observe the effect produced upon the clergyman, whom they hated for the sake of his office, by this unexpected visit."

Although they did not attach the slightest suspicion to him, yet they thought, if a crime had been committed, he might be in some way mixed up in it, and they were determined to make matters as unpleasant for him as possible. "Whether he shows signs of alarm or no," said the Mayor, "it will in any case give us a pretext for instituting a judicial inquiry and searching the house."

Father Montmoulin was not alarmed, at any rate he showed no outward sign of trepidation, when the three officials entered his room at so late an hour. In fact he seemed quite prepared for their coming; the involuntary twitching of his mouth betokened grief rather than astonishment; and he cast a quick glance at the crucifix, as if to implore assistance and support in this crucial hour. He was in fact, so poor an adept at dissimulation, that had he feigned surprise it would have been of little use. The expression of pathetic resignation upon his countenance could not fail to strike the authorities on their entrance.

"This late visit on our part does not appear to be wholly unexpected by you," the Mayor began. "You are perhaps cognizant of the unpleasant duty which compels us to intrude upon you at this unusual hour?"

The good clergyman felt extremely embarrassed. He must not disclose his knowledge of the crime, and his manner betrayed that he had something to conceal. He changed color and stammered out: "I really am not aware—I cannot tell what brings you here at this hour, gentlemen. What is there that I can do for you?"

The town clerk was going to ask him whether he knew what had become of his sister, when the Mayor stopped him. "One moment," he said. Then addressing Father Montmoulin, he continued: "So you really cannot guess the object of our coming, the question we have come to ask? Yet you did not appear in the least surprised to see us at this unaccustomed hour. At any rate that was the impression made on me—and on you too?" he added looking from one to the other of his companions. They both nodded their assent; and the speaker proceeded: "One thing more, if you please: we were told that you were unwell, that you had dismissed your servant, saying you wanted rest, and did not wish to be disturbed this evening, and yet we find you at eleven o'clock up and dressed. How do you explain this?"

"I was lying down all afternoon, so I do not feel sleepy now," replied the priest, who by this time had pulled himself together. "I ought rather to ask the object of these questions? It seems I am to undergo an examination."

The three officials exchanged glances. Then the Mayor said to the town clerk: "Since this gentleman cannot or will not—divine our errand, perhaps you will have the goodness to inform him of it, since the matter concerns you most closely."

The town-clerk, thus invited, explained, in no very gentle voice, that his sister had not come home all day long. He was informed that she had been to fetch a large sum of money from the priest, and he feared something had happened to her. It was his duty to make inquiries about her and he had come to him in the first place, as apparently he was the last person who had seen the missing individual.

Again from the time she left this room."

"Well, gentlemen," resumed the Mayor, addressing his companions, "since his Reverence either cannot or will not give us any information as to the whereabouts of the missing lady, although she seems to have disappeared under this very roof, we must proceed to search the house. Do you agree with me?"

"Unhesitatingly," said the other. "Will you accompany us through the house, Sir?" the Mayor said to Father Montmoulin.

"I beg you will excuse me. I am feeling very unwell," he replied not a little embarrassed and disconcerted by the Mayor's peremptory manner.

"It strikes me as a very strange thing," replied that official, "that you will not join us in our endeavor to clear up the mystery as speedily as possible. However, that need not hinder us in the discharge of our duty. Take the lamp," he said to the town-clerk, "and perhaps this reverend gentleman will be so obliging as to hold a candle for us, even if he declines to accompany us on our tour of investigation in the house he occupies."

Father Montmoulin saw too late that he had made a fatal mistake. Undoubtedly, had he been ignorant of the fate of his friend, he would have been the foremost, to search everywhere for her lamp in hand. The unconquerable dread that seized upon him at the idea of seeing the corpse which he knew to be lying in the second sacristy, had prompted his refusal to comply with the Mayor's invitation. He tried now to make good his error, by saying, as he took the lamp: "I will go with you. Far be it from me to put any obstacle in the way of your search. I beg pardon if I showed a little irritation at your somewhat brusque mode of proceeding, which the excitement of the moment rendered excusable. Will you commence with my bedchamber?"

"I see no reason for that at present," replied the Mayor, partly prompted by Father Montmoulin's last speech. "We will first of all look through the passages and staircases which lead from the door of your room to the gate of the convent, and through which the missing lady must have passed on the way back to her home."

CHAPTER IX.
THE DOMICILIARY VISIT.

Father Montmoulin accordingly, lamp in hand, preceded the little party of searchers along the corridor to the principal staircase, lighting up every corner. Not the slightest trace of any dark deed could be found, all was just as usual. They descended the stairs carefully examining each step; they held the light to the stone gutters of the cloisters, they searched every angle, they looked behind every post and pillar, but nothing extraordinary was discernible. At length they reached the vaulted porch before the gates of the convent. There stood the policeman, and the innkeeper with his lantern. At the side of the former the priest turned pale, and the man noticed that he did so, though he made no remark at the time.

"This is where the sacristan lives, is it not?" inquired the Mayor. On being answered in the affirmative he tried the door, but found it locked.

"Here is the key," said the innkeeper, stepping forward officiously. "I think I have already informed your worship that Loser went off to Marseilles yesterday evening, and left the keys in my charge."

"True. Were you aware of the sacristan's departure?" the Mayor asked, addressing Father Montmoulin.

"Certainly. He requested me to give him leave of absence for a week."

"And he has not been here since?"

Father Montmoulin hesitated a moment before replying. He had seen Loser come in his room, and that certainly he was not bound to conceal; but the reason for which he came was only to go to confession, and were he to mention the fact, it might under the circumstances, touch upon the seal of confession. On the other hand he could not but perceive what a weapon against himself he was putting into the magistrate's hand, by concealing Loser's return. However, he judged it best to do so, lest otherwise any danger should arise of betraying the reason which led the murderer to his room. So he answered: "Not to my knowledge."

"How very strange your behaviour is, Sir! Surely it was not necessary to bethink yourself to long before giving us a simple answer!"

Father Montmoulin tried to excuse himself on the plea of indisposition; his head ached, he said, and he was afraid of the draught under the open archway. The Mayor said it was useless to linger down there any longer, since the sacristan had gone away, and according to the priest's testimony was still absent. It was very cold and draughty there. He then inquired whether there was no other way out of the convent than by that gate?

There was another door at the back of the cloisters, the policeman replied, but that was locked, he had already been to see.

"Very good," said the Mayor. "But is there no other staircase leading from your rooms to the ground floor?" he asked Father Montmoulin.

"There is a back staircase at the far end of the other wing, which

takes down into what used to be the kitchen, it now contains an oil-press. But as that way is generally locked, it is most improbable that Mrs. Blanchard made use of it. She is much more likely to have gone through the tribune, and then descended by the sacristy stairs out into the cloisters." It was with the greatest difficulty that Father Montmoulin uttered the last sentence; for he knew full well, that it was there that the murdered lady would be found. The Mayor desired him to show him the way immediately. He accordingly proceeded along the cloisters in the direction of the church, the three gentlemen following him in silence. He meanwhile repeated the De Profundis to himself, trying to brace himself for the terrible sight which he knew ere long must meet his eyes. As they went along, they held the light to every corner, looked behind every column in the cloisters, but without discerning anything. From the old masonry fanciful heads of animals and grinning demons looked down upon them and the three visitors could not resist the weird influences of the dark silent, stone-flagged passages, in which no sound was heard but the echo of their footsteps. Each one felt he would not like to find himself alone, at that time of night in those desolate cloisters, but neither of them spoke his thought aloud.

"Is not that someone walking overhead?" inquired the Mayor.

"It is only the echo of your footsteps that you hear," the clergyman replied.

The oppressive silence was next broken by the town-clerk, who asked what the time was?

"It must be just midnight," said the notary, adding by way of a jest, "you surely are not afraid of ghosts?"

"As though any man of education was afraid of ghosts!" retorted the town-clerk scornfully.

The Mayor then asked what use was formerly made of the space enclosed by the cloisters.

The priest replied that it was in other days the nun's burying ground. "Along this way through which we are now walking, the bodies used to be brought out of the church, and this gateway, to which we are now coming, was called the gate of death. Look at the carving over the portal." He held the lamp aloft so that a death's head sculptured in stone might be seen, with the inscription: Hodie mihi, cras tibi, translating the words as he did so: Thy turn to-day; mine to-morrow!

"We know enough Latin at least to understand that," said the Mayor testily, for he was not very fond of hearing death talked about. Father Montmoulin opened the door, and they found themselves in the bellry.

"Is that door always unlocked?" inquired the Mayor.

"All the doors of the interior of the convent are left unlocked. This is where the Angelus is rung three times a day," the pastor answered. "Who rings it when the sacristan is away?"

"I rang it myself in the early morning to-day," replied the priest; "the other two times it was rung by a neighbor, who generally acts for the sacristan when he is absent."

"Then at midday all must have been as usual here, or he would have remarked it," continued the Mayor, looking about him suspiciously. He then crossed over to the door of the sacristy, opposite to the one by which they had entered, and endeavored to open it.

"That door is only open during the times of service. I closed it myself after Mass, this morning, and took the key with me up to my room, the clergyman explained.

"It is useless to look for our missing friend in there, then," said the Mayor, turning towards the winding stairs, which were so narrow that they did not admit of two persons going up abreast. Father Montmoulin went up first, holding the lamp aloft in order that the others might see their way; the Mayor came next, and the two others brought up the rear. And now the landing on the stairs was reached where the door of the sacristy-room was situated. Involuntarily the priest paused and cast a glance at the door, whilst an almost imperceptible shudder ran over him. The Mayor intercepted his glance, and immediately asked where that led to. "It is the door of a room where the sexton keeps his implements, and all sorts of lumber is put out of the way," Father Montmoulin answered. He was about to ascend the rest of the stairs, but the Mayor, seizing the handle of the door, threw it open. For one moment the light fell upon the body that lay there covered with the pall; the next instant all was darkness, for the lamp was extinguished by a gust of wind which came through an open window within, of the door being suddenly opened. A cry of horror escaped the lips of the men. The

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Major was the first to recover his self-possession. "What was that lying on the ground?" he demanded.

"There was a pall, and something under it," exclaimed the notary. "I believe this infernal old convent is haunted," ejaculated the town-clerk, no longer concealing the terror he felt. "We had better postpone our search until some more suitable time; I think I heard midnight strike just as we began to ascend these stairs."

"What have you to say, Reverend Sir? Did you see nothing?" said the Mayor, addressing Father Montmoulin.

"I did indeed!" was the comparatively calm reply. "And I greatly fear that what I saw was the object of our search."

"Merciful Heavens! And here we are standing in pitch darkness close to the lifeless remains of my poor sister!" cried the town-clerk in piteous tones. "We must go back, and fetch the police-constable and the lantern. For goodness sake, come with me," he said to the notary, "I am half dead with fright, and I could not for anything in the world venture alone in those dark cloisters."

"Yes, go and fetch the lantern," said the Mayor. "If you call out from the door to the cloisters the man will hear you."

During this time Father Montmoulin had entered the chamber of death into which a faint ray of light fell from the lamp of the sanctuary. He knelt down, and prayed silently beside the pall, the outline of which he could perceive, as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. He prayed for the soul of the woman who had been so cruelly murdered, as he had done already, and he felt himself thereby recovering to some extent calmness and fortitude, though every moment made it plainer to him that a terrible trial had overtaken him.

The Mayor remained standing on the stairs, turning over the events of the night in his mind. He was now convinced that it was no fatality, as he had till then imagined, but a serious crime with which he had to deal. If, as the priest suggested, that pall actually covered Mrs. Blanchard's body, whose hand had spread it over the corpse? and how was it that he seemed to know by intuition that she lay beneath it? Why had he looked with such a peculiar expression at the door of that out-of-the-way room? His whole demeanor had been very odd when the Mayor and his colleagues found him in his room, and when they proposed to search the house. Again how strange his manner was when he was questioned about the return of the sacristan. Everything seemed to indicate that he was privy to the crime. Was it possible that he himself—No, no, the Mayor could not entertain such a thought; that young priest, of hitherto stainless reputation, guilty of murder!—Yet after all, it might be so. Father Montmoulin was young and poor, and his relatives were poor also, might not the sum of money, which doubtless appeared large to him, have been a temptation? Besides on whom could suspicion fall but on him, since it appeared that no one but he was in the convent when the unfortunate lady went there. Such were the thoughts that passed through the mind of the Mayor whilst he awaited the return of his comrades, and he came to the conclusion that the priest lay under grave suspicion, at any rate, and that he must certainly be examined before the magistrate, we was almost glad to think of this being the case; here was the scandal that they had been talking about a few hours ago over their wine, and it would furnish them with a formidable weapon against the hated clericals. "Good use shall be made of this," he said to himself.

Voices were now heard in the cloisters, and almost immediately the glimmer of the lantern was discernible. A moment later and the police constable stood on the landing, lighting up the room as far as possible. The pall was now clearly visible, and from it, towards the door, the feet of a woman protruded. Father Montmoulin was kneeling immovably by the side. All the others broke out into cries of dismay and horror. There was no longer any room for doubt; Mrs. Blanchard had been cruelly assassinated. It might have been imagination before when in the flickering light of the expiring lamp they fancied they saw a human form under the pall, but there was no possibility of illusion now.

"Give me the lantern," said the Mayor, when the necessary silence was obtained. "Now lift up the cloth carefully, so as not to disarrange anything."

The man raised the pall so far as to allow the face and shoulders of the corpse to be seen. The spectators shuddered at the sight of the ashy countenance and glazed eyes.

"She has been strangled," said the Mayor.

"She has been stabbed," said the policeman, pointing to the blood on her dress, and the pool of blood on the floor in which the corpse lay. "I suppose there can be no doubt



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that she is really dead?" inquired the notary.

"Cold and stark," replied the policeman.

"You can identify this as your sister?" said the Mayor, addressing the town-clerk.

"Only too surely! But pray cover up the body again. I cannot bear the sight of it."

"Yes, cover it up," urged the innkeeper, averting his countenance. "This will haunt me in my dreams. If I had anticipated the horrible sight that awaited us here, I certainly would not have been one of the party."

"Wait a moment," said the Mayor, as the policeman was about to replace the pall; then turning to Father Montmoulin who was still upon his knees beside the corpse, and fixing his eyes on him, he said sharply: "And what have you got to say about this terrible occurrence, Sir?"

"I can only pray for the victim and her murderer."

"That is all very well, but who is her murderer?"

"I cannot tell. You surely would not deem me capable—"

"I have expressed no opinion. But the suspicion which forces itself upon our minds is that you must in some way be an accomplice in this murder, as your own words prove. At any rate you will have to be examined before a magistrate. It is my duty to report the matter to the police authorities at Aix without delay. You will, if you please, accompany us to your room, Reverend Sir. Cover the body over carefully, so that all should be left just as it was. You bear me witness, gentlemen, that nothing has been disturbed? Very good. (Grasable, you can remain here and keep watch by the corpse. Carillon, you will have the goodness to take an official telegram, which I will give you directly, down to the post. It must be sent off to-night."

"The police-constable observed that the door of the chamber might be locked, so as to leave him free if he was wanted for any service, and the Mayor assented to the proposal. The door was accordingly locked, the Mayor putting the key into his pocket, and all the party ascending the winding stairs in silence, passing through the tribune and along the corridor to the priest's apartments. As Father Montmoulin crossed the tribune, he cast a sad, wistful look at the choir of the church. He felt a sorrowful foreboding that he should have to leave the spot, perhaps never to return; but the remembrance of our Lord's presence in the tabernacle afforded him support and solace in his affliction.

"He knows my innocence. He will intercede for me. He will stand by me, and not allow me to violate the sacred obligations of my calling. Whatever happens, I am in God's hands." Such were the good priest's thoughts as, feeling himself already a prisoner, he repaired to his room, accompanied by the other men of whose hostile dispositions towards him he was only too painfully aware. (To be Continued.)

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