

A VICTIM TO THE SEAL OF CONFESSION.

A TRUE STORY.

By REV. JOSEPH SPILLMAN, S.J.

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CHAPTER XVI.

A PILGRIMAGE TO THE SHRINE OF ST. MARY MAGDALEN.

Passion week was drawing to a close, and the day appointed for the trial was approaching. The Montmoulin case was the talk of all Aix, and the town was divided into two hostile camps, one party asserting loudly that the prisoner was guilty of murder, and of which the principal participants were to be found in the clubs and coffee-rooms, and among the writers of the press, whilst the other believed in the innocence of the accused, prayed that he might win the day, and expressed their opinion more or less openly.

In Mr. Lenoir's household Father Montmoulin had a staunch supporter in the person of the good wife, who defended him with a loyal heart and a glib tongue. Woe betide the neighbor, even the customer who ventured within the precincts of the baker's shop to cast a doubt on the priest's innocence! A broadside was immediately opened upon him. Mr. Lenoir himself was by no means as positive on the point at issue. Naturally in his wife's presence he was careful not to admit the possibility of a doubt, for the peace and comfort of his house was dear to him. Nor when the children whom he had taken in out of charity were by, did he allow a syllable to escape his lips to the effect that the result of the trial might not be what was expected; he would not vex Charles, for he was fond of the boy. But to himself he said: "I cannot understand how a priest could do such a deed; but the facts of the case which one reads and hears, seem all to be dead against him." The truth of the matter was, that since Lenoir had been summoned to appear as a witness, on account of his having driven Lenoir into Aix, on which occasion the wily scoundrel had fascinated him by a recital of his exploits, he considered himself to be on the side of the prosecution, and spoke up boldly on behalf of his "friend" Lenoir, whom the adherents of Father Montmoulin regarded as the probable criminal.

He had a little dispute with his wife on this subject, and made her very angry by venturing to say a word in favor of the rascal, as she dominated him, who had not been to his Easter duty for years. "Mind," she cried resolutely, "that you do not utter a syllable in Court on behalf of that wretch, who you may be sure, was the one who stabbed the poor lady."

"Perhaps by saying so you may do harm to the good clergyman, who is undoubtedly innocent. Would it not be better for you not to give evidence at all?"

"And be fined, or put in prison for refusing to appear? No, wife, you understand nothing at all about it. If I am called as a witness, it is my duty to appear in Court, and state the truth to the best of my knowledge."

"Dear me, how unfortunate! Must you really give evidence that will be damaging to the priest? I could never sleep in peace another night if I had to own to myself that I had said anything that contributed to the unjust condemnation of an innocent person. That comes of so much talking and boasting! You must needs to tell everyone how you drove that miserable scoundrel to the station, and how he had related to you all manner of wonderful achievements, every one his own invention, as sure as I stand here. And then people say, 'we women are the babblers!'"

At this juncture, when Mr. Lenoir was at a loss what answer to make, and consequently was in danger of losing his temper, for goodnatured as he was, he could at times be angry, master Charles entered the room with a downcast air. On his way back from school some one had called out after him that his uncle would be sentenced to death next Monday, and his mother and grandmother sent to the House of Correction. Both husband and wife sought to console the little fellow, and in doing so the conjugal differences were forgotten. "How could anyone be so cruel!" cried the good wife. "Never mind, Charles, all will go right. To-morrow we will make the pilgrimage we have talked about so long, to Holy Cross, and pray to the blessed Mother of Dolours, whose feast is kept to-morrow. Andrew, you will drive us to the foot of the hill, will you not?"

"You can have the pony and trap and John shall drive you," replied the worthy baker, rejoicing to find peace restored. "You know, my dear, I cannot possibly get away myself to-morrow."

"May Julia come too?" asked Charles, already more than consoled by the prospect of the pilgrimage, which in his childish faith he believed would have the happiest results for his uncle.

"To be sure, she may, you and she and I will entreat the holy patron of Provence to intercede for your relatives."

Early the next morning Mrs. Lenoir and the two children started on their way. It was a perfect day, almost like summer, such a day as we sometimes have in the end of May, although it was but the end of March, and the spring, that comes so early in the South, was nearly over. As yet the landscape was in all its fresh vernal beauty; on all sides the eye rested on daisy meadows, verdant foliage, well-cultivated gardens,

smiling farms and homesteads lighted up by golden sunshine on the grassy hillsides, whilst over all stretched the deep blue canopy of heaven. The birds trilled as merrily their spring-timed lay as they did centuries ago, when the wandering troubadour wended his way by these same mountain paths to the proud Castle of Aix, where the Counts of Provence held high festival, and minstrel and minnesinger found a hearty welcome and a liberal guerdon.

No thoughts of bygone times occupied the minds of our pilgrims, but the beauty of the day and the mirth-song of the birds had the effect of raising the spirits of the whole party. Only when a turn in the road brought into view the distant church and convent of Ste. Victoire did the children's faces cloud over, and their eyes filled with tears. But the passing sadness was quickly dispelled, and when the hamlet of Croy Rouge was reached, they alighted at the Golden Lily Inn whose sign board showed the ancient fleur-de-lis, in the choicest frame of mind. There they left pony-cart and driver, and after taking some refreshment, they began to climb the steep side of the mountain.

The old forest at its foot was first passed through, one of the few forests in Provence which the axe of the woodman had mercifully spared. Then came the mountain itself, with its rocky wall, resembling grey granite, which appeared to rise almost perpendicularly from the plain below. On the north side, looking towards Aix and the heights of Ste. Victoire, at a giddy height in the wall of rock is situated the whole cave, wherein tradition says, St. Mary Magdalen passed the last years of her life in contemplation and extraordinary penance. Thousands of pilgrims have in the course of centuries visited this sanctuary, and found solace and succour in times of sorrow and distress. Thither Mrs. Lenoir and the two children were bound, as they followed the narrow zig-zag path that wound round the side of the mountain. For the good baker's wife the ascent proved no easy task. From time to time she was forced to stand still, panting for breath, while the children scampered like chamois up the steep and stony path, and right glad she was when the narrow platform before the cave was reached, close to which stands the tiny house, built against the rock, where the two Dominican monks who are in charge of the sanctuary have their dwelling place.

Before entering the cave, Mrs. Lenoir sat down to rest awhile, and enjoy the view of the country, which lay stretched out before her like a vast panorama, shut in on the north-east by the peaks of the lesser Alps. At her feet far down below, was the forest, diminished by distance to the west was a wide expanse of plains and hill country, watered by the Arc and its tributaries, while more to the right, the rocky summits of Ste. Victoire were discernible, towering above the lesser hills. The eyes of our pilgrims naturally turned in that direction.

"I can see the point where the cross of Provence must be," said Charles, "but I cannot see the cross itself, nor can I perceive the church and convent of Ste. Victoire."

"Marius' camp hides the church and the village from our sight," replied Mrs. Lenoir, "and the distance is too great for you to see the cross. Pray do not go so close to the railing, you might slip and fall down this giddy height. Come, let us go into the grotto, and pray fervently for our uncle and grandmother."

They went accordingly into the sanctuary, and all three knelt down before the picture representing the great penitent held aloft by angel's hands whilst raised in an ecstasy above the tops of the mountains. "Look children, you see how the angels carried St. Mary Magdalen, our great patroness and protectress of Provence, high above the mountains, every day, that she might join in their prayers and praises," said Mrs. Lenoir. "Now you lay your petition before her, and commend it to her earnestly. For great is her power with our blessed Lord, beneath whose cross she stood, and who appeared to her after His Resurrection."

Charles and Julia looked with feelings of wonder and awe at the old painting, dimly lighted by the flickering flame of two silver lamps, and kneeling before it, they addressed to the Saint, whose figure was shrouded in this mysterious twilight, their childish petitions on behalf of their unfortunate relatives.

"Pray for us O kind Saint! Pray with the blessed Mother of God for mother and grandmother, that they may be let out of prison, and for poor uncle that he may be proved innocent!" Then they recited Ave after Ave, until they were tired, and their eyes grew heavy. The tapers which Mrs. Lenoir had lighted on the stand beside the picture were not half burnt down, when she saw that the boy's curly head had sunk on his clasped hands and he was fast asleep. Julia, noticing this, pulled her brother's sleeve, and whispered "For shame!" but very soon afterwards she too was overcome by drowsiness, and leaning her head against the back of a chair, slumbered as soundly as he. Mrs. Lenoir did not rouse the sleepers until she had finished saying her beads and was about to leave the chapel. "You have been asleep, instead of

saying your prayers," she said, to them with a smile when they regained the open air.

"Oh, I prayed for a long time and very hard first," Charles answered; "then I thought the Saint nodded at me, but I believe it was I who nodded, and I fell asleep just a little. It was so dark in the grotto and the gnats buzzed so loudly."

"Just a little," Julia said laughingly. "You slept like a top, I pulled your sleeve but you did not notice it."

"Do not you find fault with your brother," interposed Mrs. Lenoir. "You fairly snored in your corner. Well children, it was no sin, and I do not think your prayers will be heard any the less for it. Now let us drink some of the water from the spring which rose miraculously out of the solid rock on purpose for the Saint, and then we will climb up to the top of the mountain, where she sang the praises of God with the choir of the angels."

They took a draught of the clear cold water, and bathed their sleepy eyes with it, before regaining the narrow zig-zag path leading through the wood to the plateau at the summit of the mountain. On this spot was a small Chapel of the most ornamental description, erected in commemoration of the miraculous converse which the Saint, as the legend tells, was accustomed to hold with angelic visitants in that lonely place. After spending two or three minutes in prayer, Mrs. Lenoir led the children to the southern brow of the mountain, and directed their attention to the magnificent view to be obtained from that lofty eminence, on which they were standing.

"Look," she said to them, "there on the right, where the haze lies thickest, is Marseilles; Toulon is on the left, and over there, far away on the distant horizon, you can just see the lovely island of Hyeres."

"And the sea rolls between," the deep, blue sea, bearing the ships with their white sails! Julia, do you see that large steamer with the long trail of smoke behind it? It is on a ship like that that I mean go to savage countries, to convert the heathen."

When enough had been seen of the green shores and the blue waters of the Mediterranean, the little party descended the mountain, and repaired to the Golden Lily, where they had ordered dinner to be ready for them on their return. During their absence the man who drove them there had told the landlord and the waiter who the children were, and what was the object of their pilgrimage. Everyone in Croy Rouge had of course heard of Father Montmoulin's arrest, and everyone was looking forward eagerly to the on-coming trial. The barmaid who had lifted the children out of the cart on their arrival, and who had fallen in love with the good-looking little boy, afterwards said to the man: "So those are the nephew and niece of that poor priest, about whom the people say such unkind things! I could have a word to say about the matter, if only master would let me. But he always says: You hold your tongue, or they will summon you to appear in court, and you will have to go to Aix to give evidence. And heaven only knows what annoyances you will get into. Besides your evidence would do the priest no good. As he talks like that, I have said nothing, but still I cannot help thinking I ought to."

Then John questioned the woman about it, and she told him that one day in the first week of Lent, on Tuesday, she thought, when she opened the house-door in the early morning, she saw the scoundrel of Ste. Victoire coming along the road at a quick pace. He looked so strange that she did not recognize him at the first moment, but as he hurried past, she knew him by the scar on his cheek, though his hat was pulled down over his eyes, and he turned his face away. When the news came of the murder at Ste. Victoire, she told the landlord that she had seen the man, for there was something about his appearance that roused her suspicions. However her master took no heed of it, saying that there was every proof that the clergyman had committed the murder, so she held her tongue, for she did not want to have anything to do with the courts of law. But now that she had seen the poor children, she almost thought she was bound in conscience to tell what she had seen. And she concluded by asking the man what he thought about it?

The baker's employe was not the most sagacious of mankind. Yet it struck him that the information he gave of some importance, so after pushing aside his hat and scratching his head, he said it might be as well to ask his mistress her opinion, when she came back from the Grotto. "For," he added confidentially, "she is a shrewd woman, and master and mistress too, though she is but a little body."

To this the girl agreed, and the whole story was repeated to Mrs. Lenoir on her return to the inn. She listened attentively, and raising her eyes to Heaven, exclaimed: "I really believe the children's prayers have been heard! Put the pony to at once, John. As soon as we have had dinner we will drive home. I think what the barmaid has to tell may be of no slight consequence. It has been my opinion from the first that this worthless rascal of a scoundrel is the real culprit, though my husband thinks so much of him. Of course the girl will have to give evidence. What is her name?"

"I heard them call her Annie," the man replied.

"I will give her something, and ask her what her other name is. If I ask her to come and see us in Aix, then I can impress upon her the importance of giving her testimony on behalf of the good priest."

Mrs. Lenoir was as good as her word. A few minutes later she learnt the name of the girl, Anne Joly, and inscribed it duly in her note-book. She had no difficulty in persuading her to come to Aix at the time of the trial and appear in court. The only objection the girl urged was that she had not a good enough dress, and this obstacle Mrs. Lenoir at once removed by saying she had a very pretty shawl that she would give her.

With light hearts the little party entered upon their journey home, and before sunset the town was reached. Mrs. Lenoir gave orders to drive straight to the solicitor's house. She found him in his office, and on sending in word that she had an important communication to make concerning the Montmoulin case, she was forthwith admitted to his presence. She told her tale somewhat less concisely than the solicitor could have wished, but at the end he seemed very well satisfied, although he did not hold out too bright hopes to his visitor. "The incident interests me," he said, "and I thank you for informing me of it. I hope we may be able to turn it to account. I must request you, however, not to say much about it, or our opponents."

"Oh I understand what you mean. But I am not one of those people who must talk about everything. And you really hope that you will succeed in triumphantly proving his Reverence to be innocent?"

"Most assuredly I do. But now in the interest of my client I must deny myself the pleasure of further conversation with you. You will excuse me, Madam; after the trial I shall be at your service."

As soon as Mrs. Lenoir had left the room, the solicitor rang for one of his clerks, and told him to go at once to the law-court. "I want the name of this person, to be added to the witnesses for the defence. There is no time to be lost, for the Public Prosecutor might take exception to it later on. And order a carriage for me to-morrow morning at 6 o'clock, to go to Croy Rouge. If this new witness is what I venture to hope, she will be of great service to us. A ray of light at last! But whether it will be sufficient to dispel the darkness, I cannot venture to say."

The next day towards evening, our friend Charles might be seen pacing up and down in the square before the town hall. Several times he passed before the famous clock-tower, the lower part of which dates from the time of the Romans, and which is the admiration of every stranger. The child's demeanor was irresolute, and now and again he glanced timidly at the large house on the other side of the street, where the chief judge resided, who, he had been told, would have to pronounce sentence on his uncle. Finally, when the clock struck six, he summoned up all his courage, walked determinately across the square to the door of the great house, and with a beating heart pulled the brightly polished bell handle.

An old servant in livery opened the door, and looked wonderingly at the handsome boy, who lifting his cap from his curly head, modestly asked if he could see the worshipful the Judge.

"What is your business with his worship, my little man?" inquired the servant in no unkind manner.

"Please sir, I am the nephew of the good priest who has been accused falsely by wicked people, and I want to beg him to let my grandmother and mother out of prison; they have done nothing at all that is wrong."

"Poor little lad! I am afraid your representations will not do for much. Yet I will ask if master will see you, he seems in a very good humor to-day."

A few minutes later Charles was ushered into a grandly furnished drawing room, where an elderly gentleman, very nicely dressed, was sitting. He looked the boy up and down, as with some hesitation at first, then with tolerable fluency, he laid his petition before him. The little fellow's frank countenance and modest mien prepossessed the Judge in his favor, and when Charles naïvely stated his readiness to swear in Court to his uncle's innocence, the listener could not repress a smile. Then he said: "Tell me child, who put this strange idea into your head?" For he thought it was a piece of acting, which his relatives had put the boy up to, for the sake of producing an effect.

Charles related the story of the innocent miller who was falsely accused of murder just like his uncle, and who was acquitted because another man deposed to his guiltlessness on oath. He told the tale well, and the Judge heard him to the end. "It was this story," the boy concluded, "that made me think I might do the same for my uncle, who is really a good and holy man. And since I was told that you sir, were kind and just, I took the liberty of coming to ask you how I was to take the oath, and get my uncle released."

"Well, my man," the Judge answered, stroking the boy's head, "you have told your tale and stated your case admirably. You will make a lawyer some day. There is one difficulty though: children cannot take an oath in a court of law."

"What a pity! But I am not a child now."

"You have not reached the age prescribed by law."

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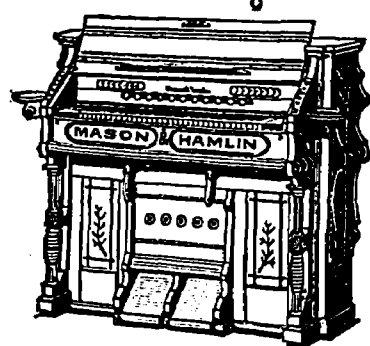
word, though I never told a lie?"

"I have no doubt that you are fully persuaded of your uncle's innocence, but unfortunately that is not enough for us. But you shall not have come to me for nothing: I promise to do all in my power in your uncle's behalf. And as for your grandmother and mother, you shall be allowed to visit them as soon as the trial is over."

The boy expressed his thanks, and departed with a light heart, and a nice cake in his pocket. The Judge sighed as he turned over the minutes of the case and said to himself: "Poor little fellow! I could not let him know what a had lookout there is for his uncle."

(To be Continued.)

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