

THE DARKEST HOUR.

By E. C. S.

[FROM THE MESSENGER OF THE SACRED HEART.]

THE great iron-bound prison gates clanged together behind Anthony Greyson, and he stood in the clear October sunshine a free man once more. Free to go whithersoever he would—"the world was all before him, where to choose"—and free to rid himself, if he could, of the odium that attaches to one who has spent six months in gaol for theft.

As quickly as he could do so, he got away from the neighborhood of the prison and walked into the heart of the city, trying vainly to rid himself of the impression that he still wore the parti-colored convict dress and that everybody was eyeing it curiously. When a man has been living in a sort of waking nightmare for six months it is not easy for him to return to realities all at once. Beyond the fact that he was a straight, well-set young fellow with a rather good looking face, there was no reason that any one should take particular notice of him; yet it seemed to his sensitive imagination that the public was leagued in a conspiracy to stare him out of countenance, and at last he bought a daily paper in self-defence and went into a restaurant to read it while he discussed the chop that his new found freedom had given him an appetite for.

Passing by the news, he turned to the advertising columns and began to look over the "wants."

He had to find work, that was imperative, for he had only five dollars in his pocket, the result, by the way, of a collection amongst the prison officials, who had thus testified their admiration of a prisoner who had never given them a moment's trouble. The question was, how was he to get the work? Times were hard and character he had none, except the one he had earned in gaol, which was not likely to avail him much. "I don't care," he said to himself doggedly, as the difficulties of his position grew more and more clear to him. "I am not a thief, I didn't steal that pocket-book, and I am not going to let six months undeserved imprisonment take the grit out of me. Let me see; here is an 'ad.' for a bookkeeper, I'll try that, and another for a checker in a railway concern; I'll try both."

Having paid for his meal he went out into the streets again and made his way in the direction of the establishment where a bookkeeper was desired. In spite of his assertion that he didn't care, he did care very much, indeed, and his spirits sank lower and lower as he neared his destination. It was a large dry goods store, and when he stated his errand he was ushered into an office at the back of the store, where a stout, elderly gentleman was laboriously adding up a formidable looking ledger.

"Humph! want a job at bookkeeping, eh?" said the stout gentleman, climbing puntingly down from his high stool and surveying Anthony from head to foot. "What is your name, young man; and where did you work last? Let me see your references."

Anthony turned scarlet, and his heart, low enough before, sank lower and lower. "I—I have no references, sir," he said slowly, a sickening sense of helplessness taking possession of him. "I worked last for C. H. Wayington & Sons, but I left their employ under—under extraordinary circumstances—and—and," he hesitated, stammered, and then broke out desperately: "The fact is, sir, I was accused of stealing a pocketbook that belonged to Mr. Wayington and—"

"I don't think you need say any more, man," said the stout gentleman, severely. "I remember the case very well. Mr. Wayington is a friend of mine, and I heard from his own lips the story of your base ingratitude to him. I wonder that you have the audacity to apply for any respectable position. You may go, sir."

His last words fell upon the empty air, for Anthony was already half-way through the store, his face white as ashes and his hands clenched hard. He had thought he was prepared for humiliation, but the reality was not what he had pictured it.

Sick at heart, indignant and trembling with anger he reached the street and walked deliberately to the railway office, where a checker was wanted.

"You advertised for a checker," he said to the straw-hatted, shirt-sleeved individual, who eyed him from the midst of a pile of freight.

"I did," answered the other, removing a pencil from between his teeth. "Had any experience?"

"Some—in a wholesale house."

"What's your name and references?"

just then the mid day angelus rang out. He mounted the steps, went in and passed down the side aisle toward the chapel of the Sacred Heart, as he had been wont to do in bygone days. The great picture behind the altar, with its life-like figures of the Redeemer and the humble Visandine whom He chose as the apostle of His divine Heart, had always possessed an attraction for him, and half unconsciously he found himself kneeling before it now. Everywhere he had been that day he had felt himself a stranger and an outcast; here he was not so. He was at home once more. The odour of incense, the soft light that fell through the painted windows, the crimson lamp that swung gently before the altar, and, above all, the tender face of the kneeling nun and the transfigured countenance of the Saviour, wrapt him round with an influence that drew him out of himself and his misery. Elsewhere he was an alien, a criminal, a prison-stained ingrate, unfit to associate with his fellows; but here he was the well beloved son, the dearly prized soul for whom that tender Heart was opening itself that he might take comfort and find therein renewed courage. A mist covered his eyes, and he hid his face in his folded arms. When he looked up again his cheeks were wet.

For many years he had been an Associate of the League, but it is doubtful if he ever knew the meaning of that wonderful devotion until that October morning.

Poor fellow, he needed all the faith and courage that came to him in that hour. His first experiences in seeking employment were only a sample of what was to come. Day after day he tramped the streets of Montreal, answering advertisements, asking for work; always with the same result. No one wanted a discharged convict. Some were civil, some were gruff, some laughed in his face; none would have anything to do with him.

Meanwhile his five dollars melted rapidly away, though he lived on one meal a day and slept in lumber yards and sheds and empty railway cars.

His clothes began to look shabby and his boots were almost worn out from constant walking. He grew gaunt and hollow-eyed from hunger—poor fellow, he had the voracious appetite of youth and nothing to satisfy it with—the commonest and humblest work was refused to him—but why go on with the heart-breaking recital?

The time came when he was without a cent and had been for two days without anything to eat save a piece of stale bread that he had begged from the niggard charity of a thrifty housekeeper. What it cost him to ask for that morsel only himself knew.

The month was drawing to a close and already the air savored more of November than October, when he made his way down one night to the wharf; weak, shivering and famished with hunger.

The navigation season would soon be over and the great coal company was getting in its stock as fast as possible. The coal shuttles were busy day and night unloading the steamers that replaced each other as fast as they could be emptied, and every available man was working as many hours out of the twenty-four as he had strength to do.

"For God's sake give me a couple of hours' work," begged Anthony of the foreman. "I am starving, man."

"Very sorry, but I can't employ non-union men," answered the foreman, wiping his grimy face on his sleeve. "The whole bilin' of 'em would go out on strike if I was to take you on. Here's a quarter out of my own pocket though; go and get something to eat, it's the best I can do for you."

He hustled away in answer to a call of: "Here you, Tim Flanagan, where are you?" and Anthony turned away and went nearer to the edge of the wharf where a pile of lumber made a shadowy corner. Here he sat down and looked dully out over the surface of the river, scarce conscious that he held the price of a meal in his hand. He had reached the deepest depth and there was nothing left for him but starvation or the gaol again. Nothing? He looked at the water dancing along, a silver pathway of ripples under the golden moon. Why starve when here was a way out of the difficulty? All he had to do was to slip down softly behind the pile of lumber and let himself gently into the water. A little splash—the men were too busy to notice it—a few choking breaths and all would be over—the hunger, the shame, the misery and degradation. A few days later a swollen, disfigured body would be washed up somewhere, there would be a hasty inquest, a hastier burial and then, and then—stay, was there not something more?

The lights in the French villages across the river swam and danced before his eyes; the red and green signals on a passing steamboat stared at him like fiery eyes, and the rattle of a coal train behind him filled his ears with thunder. Would the day of judgment be a scene of confusion like this? His hand went swiftly to his brow in the Sign of Him at whose name every knee shall bow, and staggering to his feet he turned away from the treacherous moonlit water and went feebly toward the town again, an unspoken, agonized prayer to the Heart of Jesus welling up from his soul.

As he toiled slowly up the road that led cityward he met a procession of people hurrying down to the ferry, and the sidewalk being narrow, stepped off into the roadway to make room for them. The street just at that part ran under a railway bridge and was in deep shadow, so that when his foot touched something soft he could not see what it was and was about to pass on, but a faint instinct of curiosity made him pause and pick up the article he had stepped on. The moment his fingers touched it he knew it was a pocketbook, and hurrying into

the light he examined it at the nearest lamppost. It was full of papers and keys, and in one pocket there was a roll of banknotes—a noble find for a starving man!

He turned the contents over and over eagerly, and at last came upon a visiting card bearing the legend: "Auguste N. Leduc," low down in one corner was written in pencil "No. — Sherbrooke Street."

He hesitated for the fraction of a moment, then closed the pocketbook, snapped the elastic band around it and hailed the first electric car that passed.

Twenty minutes later he was being shown into the library of a handsome residence on Sherbrooke Street. "You wished to see me?" asked the grave, thoughtful-faced man who turned from his desk to speak to him.

"Is this yours?" asked Anthony, producing the pocketbook abruptly.

Mr. Leduc's face lit up. "Indeed it is," he exclaimed in a tone of relief. "I dropped it somewhere down by the wharf this evening and was just preparing an advertisement for the morning paper." He took the pocketbook from Anthony, and began to turn over the contents and select a note from the bundle. "You work on the wharf, I suppose?" he queried, with a comprehensive glance at the young man's shabby apparel.

"I don't work anywhere just at present," was the reply. "I cannot get any work to do." As he spoke a faintness came over Anthony, and he involuntarily placed his hand on the back of a chair to steady himself.

"You are weak—ill!" exclaimed the other, rising in alarm and forcing him to sit down. "You are not well, eh?"

Anthony looked up with a smile that was meant to be cheerful, but was only piteous. "I have not eaten anything for two days," he said wearily; "I am afraid I am starving."

"Mon Dieu!" ejaculated Mr. Leduc, hastening to his desk and touching an electric bell. In a moment a servant appeared at the door. "A glass of port wine, Céclie, and quickly," ordered her master.

The maid tripped away and returned within a few moments with the wine. Mr. Leduc met her at the door and took it from her. "Prepare some supper in the dining-room at once," he said briefly, "something substantial, Céclie." Then he brought the wine to Anthony and made him drink it.

"You are better now?" he said, as the color came back slowly to the young man's face.

"You are very kind," murmured Anthony gratefully. "Eh bien! and why not, my friend?" demanded Mr. Leduc, smilingly. "I think the obligations are on my side; there were six hundred dollars in that pocketbook. Now we shall have some supper and you will stay here to-night, my housekeeper will find you a bed. To-morrow we shall see what can be done in the way of providing you with a situation."

"You had better hear my story first, Mr. Leduc," said Anthony quietly. "It may cause you to change your mind." Then he told it, slowly and deliberately. Mr. Leduc listened patiently, shading his face with his hand. When Anthony had finished, he looked up and said thoughtfully: "You have been most unfortunate, but I do not believe you were guilty. A man who is honest when he is starving is not likely to have been dishonest when he was prosperous. I know Mr. Wayington very well; he is a good hearted man, but very obstinate; and of course appearances were against you. I do not pretend to say how his missing pocketbook came into your trunk, but I am quite sure you did not put it there. God is good; perhaps the guilty person will yet confess. In the meantime, what can you do? Can you write shorthand? Yes? Very good! I am in need of a stenographer, you are in need of a situation; what could be more convenient?"

Anthony tried to stammer some words of thanks, but Mr. Leduc silenced him and led the way to the dining room, where such a supper was spread as the outcast had not seen for many days.

Dame Lecours, the merchant's housekeeper, looked somewhat taken aback when told to prepare a chamber for this very dilapidated looking guest of her master's, but she felt reassured when he addressed her in the very best French, and thanked her courteously as she was leaving him.

The next morning a difficulty arose. Anthony's clothes were scarcely in keeping with his improved fortunes. However his benefactor had not forgotten the fact, and before the young man had time to realize his embarrassing position, Mr. Leduc's valet appeared with an armful of clothes belonging to his master.

"Monsieur Leduc's compliments, and he hopes the garments will serve until monsieur has time to call upon his tailor."

Anthony was somewhat lighter than this new found friend, but the clothes fitted very well, nevertheless, and Mr. Leduc scarcely recognized him when he came downstairs, so much improved was he in appearance.

"One thing I must prepare you for," said the French gentleman kindly, as they walked down town together. "It will not be long before some one recognizes you, and you may be made to feel uncomfortable, but you must be brave and live down your trouble. Remember I hold you innocent; and remember also that le bon Dieu can dissipate the clouds when it shall seem good to Him to do so. Are you—pardon me—a Catholic?"

"I have that happiness," answered Anthony, simply.

"That is good—you have, consequently, many motives for faith and patience. Here now is the office; follow me."

For about a week all went well. Anthony's frank good nature soon put him on terms of good fellowship with his brother clerks, and he seemed on the high road to happiness once more, when all at once the clouds lowered over him again. One morning he went into the office, and not a voice returned his cheerful salutation. Everybody seemed too busy to notice him. "It has come," thought Anthony, hanging up his hat and walking into Mr. Leduc's private office, where a desk had been placed for him.

Mr. Leduc himself arrived about an hour afterward, and he was scarcely seated when the head clerk from the

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outside office brought in a paper and laid it before him. He glanced at it, and then looked up with a frown on his usually calm face.

"Send them all in here," he said, sternly.

A moment later half a dozen of his employes stood before him, most of them looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"I understand from this petition," he said in French, tapping the paper, "that you object to the presence of an employé of mine. Now, I want you all to understand that I am perfectly well aware of Mr. Greyson's history; that I knew what I was about when I employed him, and that I intend to keep him in his present position until he leaves it of his own accord. If any or all of you are not satisfied with my arrangements, you are at liberty to send in your resignations. You may go."

The little knot of clerks made their exit with an alacrity that would have amused Anthony had he not been overwhelmed at the moment with shame and mortification. Mr. Leduc looked at his crimson face and smiled. "Come, come, this will not do, mon ami," he said reprovingly, but there was genuine sympathy in his eyes, nevertheless. "It is only what I warned you of. You must have courage, courage. Oh, yes they will perhaps send you to—how do you say it? to Coventry, eh? But never mind, the lane that turns not is long, is it not? Now we will not speak of it again. Here is a batch of letters, let us get them out at once."

After that Anthony found his path a little thorny. None of the protestors sent in their resignation, but they all combined to cut him dead and he could not help feeling it acutely. "I don't think I'd be so hard on any of them if our positions were reversed," he thought more than once; and indeed it is probable he would not, for his was one of the rare natures that would rather raise a fallen brother than trample on him because he was down.

Once or twice in the days that followed he was tempted to give up his position and leave the city; but the knowledge that his story would certainly pursue him sooner or later deterred him. The stigma that clung to him was only to be removed by years of honest industry—unless indeed, which seemed unlikely, the one responsible for the original wrong should confess it and so clear his character.

Almost imperceptibly his nature broadened and deepened under the adverse circumstances that surrounded him.

From an easy-going, pleasure-loving youth he developed into a thoughtful, serious-minded man, to whom the world was worth exactly its real value and nothing more; he had seen beneath its surface, and the lesson just learned had, without embittering him, cured him of many illusions.

He had always been a practical Catholic—indeed uncommonly so for a young fellow who had been his own master from the age of eighteen—but his piety had been of a dutiful sort. It was the right and proper thing for a Catholic to go to church on Sundays, to observe days of abstinence, and to receive the sacraments several times during the year, and he had been careful to observe all these points—would have felt uncomfortable had he not done so—but his religion had entered into, and become the best and dearest part of his life as it was now doing. He had not dreamed that it could fill to overflowing the vacancy made in his existence by the withdrawal of a pharisaical world; but it was doing so daily and he rejoiced at the discovery.

Truly his tribulations had not been in vain. Happiness and prosperity, fair


fame and the respect of his fellows might all be his in the future, but he would never again be in danger of placing a fictitious value upon them.

Then one day his faith and patience were rewarded. Mr. Leduc came to him with a newspaper and pointed out a paragraph which ran thus: "If Anthony Greyson, late of Wayington & Sons, will call at the General Hospital he will hear of something to his advantage."

"Take your hat and go at once, my boy," said the merchant kindly; and Anthony hurried off, the prey of contending hopes and fears.

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