

Man and His Illusions

BY KONRAD KUEMMEL

(Continued)

Somewhat surprised and abashed the treasurer listened to these final instructions of the stranger: he had not reckoned that the intrigues planned against his own pastor would be of a kind so contemptible and criminal. Nevertheless he said nothing. The innkeeper, however, felt not the least scruple at what was said, and least of all Sparr, whose eyes glowed with a greenish light and an unhallowed joy. "The whole world's friend, the parson's enemy," he repeated to himself on his way home.

The substance of the stranger's soliloquy on his return to the city that night, might be readily surmised. "The simple expedient will again approve himself: Given two or three unscrupulous fellows who in season and out of season will continue for a few months to flatter the people, and who at the same time under the guise of religious zeal, with glib, fine-spun words will tell them the priest is no good—and the result will be, that with this or any other such telling phrase, they will put the best parish at outs with its 'parson' in a few weeks, and no power on earth will be able to heal the breach. It will be our concern, moreover, to have appear regularly in the papers especially on the so-called holy-days, short, spicy articles against the 'parson'; these items, which will be scattered broadcast through the place, will report that it is general talk the bishop must remove the priest, that otherwise the people of Ortingen will never have peace, nor the parish which is going to pieces, be saved.

The people will read these articles, believe them and imagine they were written by themselves. If the dupes succeed in drawing an episcopal commission, they will swear the 'parson' guilty of every thing and affirm that if he is not soon removed, bloodshed and murder will follow; finally the pastor is forced to leave amid the jeers and shouts of the people. It is not the first time we, who profit by it, have accomplished this. If a successor is appointed we instruct the villagers how to appraise him. They will praise or criticize or oppose him exactly as we direct. What was it my old grandfather repented time and again: 'The world is full of deceit and misery, and upon the very brink of despair, because people will not use their common sense.' So it is.

Thinking requires patience and some headstrain, whereas tale-bearing and gossip is so easy, and the scrutiny and judging of others so sweet. Three cheers and long life to Stupidity, to Credulity; these are the allies that help us to success! May our sowing in Ortingen thrive! ha ha,—ha, ha, ha, ha!" Dismally sounded the laughter of the finch fellow as he disappeared in the fog of the night.

5. The Bad Seed Spreads

The decree of the Chapter was put into execution. A delegation of two bought the house and garden in the district-city, and on the afternoon of Corpus Christi Day, a deputation headed by the Rev. Pastor, visited the place unannounced, and met one hundred fifty or more of the mission Catholics at an outing in a pleasure garden where they were innocently enjoying themselves. They were in a depressed mood, for they had just learned that the place they had in view for a church had been purchased by some stranger.

But when the pastor of Ortingen informed them of the resolution the Chapter had passed, and when the senior of the council handed them the deed of purchase and when, moreover, they had heard

the priest's words: "Now in remembrance of your neighboring Catholic parish, accept the place from its hands and work that you have a little church and school soon,"—their happiness was unbounded. They thanked the delegation with tears; old and young surrounded the visitors, wished them and the Ortingen parish the blessing of God a thousand, thousand times and promised never to forget their signal benefactors.

"Not even in heaven can one feel happier," remarked the delegates one to another on their homeward journey. "That was, indeed, a deed more meritorious than we supposed; God be praised to have granted us the pleasure to do it."

The old Ortingen forest warden, who went along, tapping the teacher on the shoulder, said: "Professor, I will remember you for the fine words you spoke at the council. You may always depend upon me and upon my married son in the city; my grandchildren will now be brought up Catholics without doubt!"

It would have been wholesome for all Ortingen to have witnessed the happy scene.

The day after the octave of Corpus Christi, the priest, though the Mass was over, remained an unusually long time in the church. He was very serious and lost in thought upon returning to his house. His sister inquired: "Are you ailing, perhaps?" To his no, she added, laughing: "Or is it with you as with Agnes? She, too, of late is much troubled with melancholia."

"The girl?" he asked surprised, "what's the matter with her?"

"If she only knew herself; she was generally happy and awake, she could eat and drink—now all of a sudden it seems as if a blight had struck her. Night before last a sound awoke me: I listened. Agnes in her room was speaking to herself and sobbing loudly. I knocked on the wall and called; she did not hear. I got up then to look after her. The girl was asleep in bed, loudly grieving about something, her face bathed in tears. I shook her and asked: 'What is the matter, my child?' She stared at me, then closed her eyes again and continued to whimper: 'Something is going to happen, they are going to kill the Reverend Uncle.' It took me half an hour to console and quiet the girl. Last night the same thing happened. Nor is it different in daytime; she glides through the house and says she feels oppressed, oppressed unto death—as she would feel, for example if you were found dead, or she were obliged to leave your house. Do you say a few words to her; it is getting on my nerves."

The pastor listened attentively; once his lips moved with a tremor of pity as if he would speak; but he remained silent and with a few words reassured his sister and dismissed her. He got up and before the large picture of the Crucifixion above his bed, he prayed: "Divine Master, if Thou wishest to impose upon me Thy cross, just so Thy grace accompany it. Thy will be done; but do not let me become a scandal to anyone." Then he sat down and wrote a letter, and for a while was busy figuring. The foolscap upon which the net results of explanation was forwarded to the notary of the city that he verify and stamp it. After his great work of charity for the scattered Catholics of the district, what could possibly grieve or overshadow the soul of the good priest? Did God wish to save his humility against yielding to self-praise in what he had accomplished? Or did the spirits of hell mean to revenge themselves on the pastor, the true victim of Christ, because he had provided one place more on earth

for Divine Service and where salvation might be found?

Of the machination in the village developing against him he had as yet no intimation. Sparr the sacristan was a changed man—humble and obliging. He was constantly in the rectory to ask—was there anything he might do in the garden or elsewhere, he consulted the priest about every trifling thing in the church,—he was wonderfully changed. The priest's sister and Agnes loathed his obsequiousness, but the priest begged them to make allowance for his good will. "Give him something to do now and then, and let him lunch with you. In this way he may rid himself of his inquisitiveness." Towards the people he was so accommodating and well-mannered that they were astonished. So much so that an opinion in his favor was begotten among the villagers: "He keeps a careful eye on the rectory and the schoolhouse; he could tell many a thing others do not even suspect," they said.

At the same time the question began to be agitated whether, after all, it was not gross stupidity to have given 5,000 marks to strangers who were no concern of the parish, when the money might have come so handy to the village. With reiteration the fact was emphasized that the taverner and the treasurer had manfully opposed the suggestion, but that the priest and the teacher who had not even a right in the Chapter, backed by the other subservient voters, had forcibly carried the resolution to give the money away. The gossip spread; in every house the subject was broached and the defenders of the pastor grew fewer and fewer. Even some of the councillors denied the assent they had given and put the blame wholly on the priest and the schoolmaster.

An evil intimation of another kind began to spread: "It is plain why the 'parson' and the pedagogue are so friendly, Agnes and the professor are as good as engaged. The girl, who by this time is spoiled for common life, was forced upon the latter—and with so many well-to-do girls of good families in the village who might have suited the teacher better,—all kinds of liberties are permitted him in the garden, all of which is so contrary to good manners and morals."

The reader knows the originator of this gossip: it was the mother of the sub-sacristan. Other scandalous things which she fabricated were told under the seal of secrecy the only, and where of a nature to rob the priest, his sister and the unsuspecting Agnes of their very honor and good name.

So it came to pass that by the diffusion of this secret, insinuating poison of lies, the whole parish became as if paralyzed. Not a man was found publicly to oppose with energy the disseminator of trouble, to halt him, to bring him to the priest and in his presence make him prove or disown his words. Even those who refused to believe the worst doubted and allowed the baiting to go on. Without a step toward self-protection, without reflection, without proof, forgetting all the good their priest had ever done, his faithfulness, his tempered sternness, his sacrifices—the parish suffered itself to be disrupted, suffered itself to be torn from its shepherd, by a couple of irresponsible, criminal fellows. Oh, the sad mystery of sin! that such a change in a whole congregation which, but shortly before boasted of its love for the church and its pastor, could be possible.

Had the mind of the priest been less unsuspecting, he would have noticed many a sinister word and act from those plotting against him. The very look and greeting and behavior of his people towards him had changed. Still, he observed nothing. A premonition,

however, weighed him down and this morning kept him in the church at the foot of the cross; it was this foreboding that urged him to make his Will.

6. His Testament

One afternoon, a few days later, the city notary, the mayor, Mr. Obermiller, Senior, and the head teacher met at the rectory. The Rev. Pastor had asked them to witness and sign the Will; he was reticent, however, as to its provisions. "You will learn the details," he said with a smile, "when I am dead." All having signed, he secured the document with a triple seal; then he said seriously: "When this is broken, I will be no longer among the living."

"God grant that may be far off," the mayor prayed, seconded by all. The pastor next took the sealed document and putting it in an envelope laid it on a table in his bedroom. "Now then," said he, "let me treat you to a sip of wine downstairs for your trouble in my behalf."

The invitation was hardly spoken, when a loud noise was heard outside. The priest hurried to the door. He found standing there the inquisitive sexton with an armful of wood, several sticks of which had fallen to the floor.

"I—I am carrying up wood," the fellow unmasked, with lowered eyes excused himself.

"No, no, you were eavesdropping; the way from the lower floor does not pass my door. Are you not ashamed of such vulgarity?"

Grinding his teeth, the convicted listener looked at the priest but immediately dropped his head and said: "I beg your pardon, I will never do it again!" Thereupon Sparr crossed the hall to its other side, going a story higher. The priest, however, let his guests precede him to the lower room, then with an "excuse me a minute, I will return soon", returned to his study. He took from his desk a Hundred-Mark bill and placed it in a second envelope unsealed, beside the first, after which he went down to the men.

To be continued.

CORRESPONDENCES.

St. Peter's Mission,
Reindeer Lake,
Sept. 7, 1918.

Rev. Dear Father Prior:—

In beginning this letter I must beg of you a little forbearance. The lines I write you today should, under ordinary circumstances, have been in your hands long ago. The reason for my begging your indulgence has been want of a suitable opportunity for writing. For two months I have been keeping most of my Red Children here at the mission, and only he who comes into constant contact with them knows what this means. A handful of our Indians give the missionary more to do than one has an idea of. Then there came the Government Commission, consisting of a Commissary and a Secretary, to arrange the compact between the government and the Indians. You know, Father, that the government allows each Indian the annual sum of \$5.00 besides a few other necessities. Now, it is the Commissary's duty to tend this business, and now and then he requires more time to it than suits me. Furthermore, one week I preached a mission to my Indians. Under such circumstances was the summer, short as it is, cut still shorter. It is now quieted down somewhat and I hasten to answer your several letters. I have received all the generous aims from the St. Peter's Colony and have read the masses according to the intention of the giver.

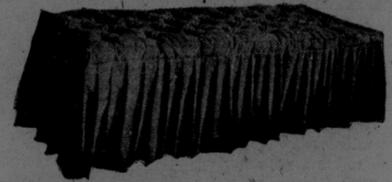
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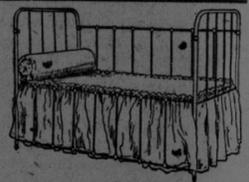
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