

A VICTIM TO THE SEAL OF CONFESSION.

A TRUE STORY BY THE REV. JOSEPH SPILLMAN, S. J. CHAPTER XVII. 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 partisans were to be found in the clubs and coffee-rooms, and among the writers for 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 denominated 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 sealed the poor lady."

"I shall speak the truth in Court," the baker replied. "When I am put on my oath, and asked whether I drove Mr. Lenoir that Sunday evening to the station, and heard him ask for a ticket to Marseilles, I must say that I did. You would not have me perjure myself!"

"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 which contributed to the unjust condemnation of an innocent person. There comes of so much talking and boasting! You must needs to tell everyone how you drove this 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 good natured 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. And, you will drive us to the foot of the hill, will you not?"

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

held high festival, and minstrel and minstrel 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 mirthful 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 St. Victoire did the children's faces cloud over, and their eyes fill with tears. But the passing sadness was quickly dispelled, and when the hamlet of Croix Rouge was reached, they alighted at the Golden Lily Inn, whose sign-board showed the ancient four-days, in the cheeriest 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 walls, resembling grey granite, which appeared to rise perpendicularly from the plain below. On the north side, looking towards Aix and the heights of St. Victoire, at a giddy height in the wall of rock, is situated the holy 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 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 proportions of a small copse; to the west was a wide expanse of plains and hills, country watered by the Arc and its tributaries, while more to the right, the rocky summits of St. 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 St. 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 your uncle and grandmother."

They went accordingly into the sanctuary, and all three knelt down before the picture representing the great penitent held aloft by angels' hands whilst raised in ecstasy above the tops of the mountains.

"Look children, you see how the angels encircle 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 and spoke lovingly to her after His Resurrection."

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 guiltiness 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, and is really a good and holy man, and since I was told that you, sir, were to be my uncle, 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, however: 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."

"And people will not believe my 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 me. 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 bad lookout there is for his uncle."

TO BE CONTINUED.

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 me to-morrow morning at 6 o'clock, to go to Croix Rouge. If this 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 little friend Charles might be seen peering 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, and he had been told, would have to pronounce sentence on his uncle. Finally, when the clock struck 6, he summoned up all his courage, walked determinedly 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 lifted 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 of a crime 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 go for much. Yet I will ask master if he will see you; he seems in a very good humour 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, with some hesitation at first, then with tolerable fluency, he laid his petition before him. The little fellow's frank countenance and good and holy man, possessed the Judge in his favour, 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.

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the building fund. At the dedication of the church, her father's gift was the high altar, and two memorial windows; and on her parents' death, Miss Tallon and her brothers and sisters, all married but herself, had given a beautiful marble altar, in keeping with her father's earlier gift, to the Lady Chapel.

In wealth and respectability, the Tallons had long been the foremost Catholics in Brucetown. Miss Tallon, as the eldest and most masterful held on. And order for the Public Prosecutor might take exception to me to-morrow morning at 6 o'clock, to go to Croix Rouge. If this 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."

She was nearing her fortieth year in single blessedness; and ably keeping up the family tradition of generosity to religion; adding thereto new forms of social service, not only among the familiar poor, but among the oftentimes needy foreigners drawn so numerous to Brucetown in recent years by the big wicker furniture manufactory. Yet, while every one respected Miss Tallon and acknowledged all her claims, there was hardly one who would not have braced himself for a private interview with her, just as Father O'Connor did.

"How are you, Julie?" asked the priest, pleasantly. He had baptised every one of the third generation of the Tallons, and had seen this one grow from infancy to her prime maturity he himself verged on his vigorous and young-hearted old age.

"Well, considering everything," sighed the lady, standing respectfully, as the priest settled himself as well as he could in the slippery horse hair arm chair opposite her.

"I trust there is no trouble in the family," said Father O'Connor, with kindly solicitude. "No, indeed, we never have trouble in the ordinary acceptance of the word," rejoined Miss Tallon, with a perceptible stiffening of her exceedingly erect person.

All the Tallons were as proper as Miss Tallon herself. The young people were the painful models of the various schools they attended. On their occasional visits to Brucetown, Father O'Connor would have given much to see one of these decorous nephews "hanging on behind" to a grocer's cart; or one of the nieces with a torn gown or hair disordered in beautiful play; just as he wished for an occasional lapse from grammatical accuracy or a hearty laugh from the model aunt herself.

"I thought of possible illness," said the priest, gently. "This is a sickly season."

"Our family rarely has illness. All the children have inherited sound constitutions and get the best of care. No, it is a little worry about our St. Martha's Society. To be frank with you, Father O'Connor, it was a mistake to admit Mrs. Thornton to membership."

What she seems to be a very constant and efficient visitor among the poor."

"That is not the question, Father. It is in her bad influence at the meetings. She is so very frivolous; all for dress and jokes and the notice of men, as if she were a badly brought-up girl of eighteen, instead of—There, look at her now!"

The lady in question was passing, evidently happy in the company of the tall man of middle age, who beaming with good fellowship, had to bend a bit to catch the words of the bright-faced, gaily dressed little widow.

"I suppose it's only a matter of taste," said the priest, keeping his mind on the spoken criticism, and ignoring Mrs. Thornton's escort. A young woman adorning herself always seems to be like a bird sitting on a bough and preening its feathers. It's nature, and so long as it's modest."

"But Mrs. Thornton is far from young. She is at least as old as I am."

"And you are still a young girl to me," he answered. "But Miss Tallon was not to be placated nor diverted from her grievance. Was it zeal undisciplined for righteousness, or was it John Hamilton's apparent admiration for the eyes of a woman who never blundered to the shortcomings of her frail sister? The human heart is a labyrinth in which the wanderer is as often surprised by unlooked for evils as by unlooked for good. Few knew its tortuous windings better than Father O'Connor."

Miss Tallon's "might have been" as to Holy Matrimony had better ground than most of those maiden laides verging on middle age. Was she not an heiress, and good to look at even yet, and though a little sharp of features and angular of figure? Who in Brucetown, or even in the city a hundred miles east of it, were most of her family dwelt, equalled her in delicate refinement of dress—the result, no doubt, of observant sojourns in Paris, with a well filled purse.

But the advances of all suitors were repelled with gentle but unmistakable coldness; and only one besides herself realized that John Hamilton, the playmate of her childhood, who having acquired a competence, could not be suspected of mercenary motives, might at any time have had the well controlled heart for the asking. True, he had sacrificed many of his best years to the claims of filial and brotherly duty, but at last he was free. And now, if he remembered to any woman attentions, it was to the little world of Brucetown, could read the slightest significance, it was to this gaily, flippant stranger.

For Miss Tallon was president of the society. She was "the head of everything among the Catholic women of Brucetown," as a member of St. Joseph's parish would have explained to a stranger. Indeed, if the Golden Rose or the Laetare Medal were to be given in Brucetown, the people would have deemed it Miss Tallon's inalienable right.

Truly, she had many claims, ancestral and personal, on local Catholic gratitude. Her grandfather had given the site of St. Joseph's, now one of the most valuable properties in the town, together with a generous offering to

the building fund. At the dedication of the church, her father's gift was the high altar, and two memorial windows; and on her parents' death, Miss Tallon and her brothers and sisters, all married but herself, had given a beautiful marble altar, in keeping with her father's earlier gift, to the Lady Chapel.

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