

Man and His Illusions

BY RONRAD KUEMEL

(Continued)

6. The Veil Is Lifted.

While the exhortation just reported was in progress, a startling scene was being enacted in the little house of the widow Sparr. Her room was but a lean-to of a larger house. It was entered from the rear, the door facing the village meadows. By this back way a man stealthily, unobserved and noiselessly entered the room of the old woman, instantly she had him in her arms, hugged and kissed him, overwhelmed him with flattery,—Jack her son, as if he were still a child and not a grown man.

Sure enough, it was Jack, just escaped from the lunatic asylum. While he was eating greedily and drinking and telling of his lucky flight, his eyes gleamed impishly to frighten anyone but his mother. She noticed nothing weird about her idolized boy, she was without suspicion of what was threatening and failed to notice his preoccupied air.

"You'll now remain with me," she said, "no one knows that you are here and no one shall find you."

Jack arose and with a strange voice tragically declaimed: "Mother—woman—the hour has come. I must prove to Ortingen it was not I, otherwise—they will burn me, too. Frances is the cause of it all, the doctor said the same, so did the director of the asylum. She wishes to destroy me. She said I was the firebrand, I must prove now it was not I. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, very well, dear Jack," the old woman replied with trepidation, she was beginning to fear the excited and uncanny behavior of her son.

"And you must help in washing me clean!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, Jack, rest assured, I'll surely help you," she spoke to quiet him.

"But I will cleanse myself with fire—by fire, like the Poor Souls." Thereupon he went out to the little kitchen, his mother heard him meddling with things. Then he pushed open the door and threw upon the floor, one, two, three fagots of twigs, which, with oil-can in hand, he began soaking with petroleum.

"In the name of God, Jack, what are you about?" screamed the frightened mother. "you don't intend setting the house on fire!"

She ran to the window. He drew her back, stopped her mouth: "Don't you know I must justify myself? When I told Frances that henceforth there would be no more fires, did she not retort, then you are the incendiary! Therefore a conflagration must again happen, otherwise Frances stands confirmed and people will say: 'Sure enough he was the one who set the houses afire!' I have shrewdly studied it out. Mother, woman, if there is a fire here today, they will be constrained to say: 'That can't be Jack Sparr in this case, he loves his mother to well to burn down her house.' In this way will I be brilliantly exculpated, cleansed by fire, and Frances will be forced to retract. Did I not plan it well in the asylum? That is why I am here."

In an instant he started the fire and threw a dozen lighted matches among the dry twigs. The old woman made an attempt to cry out but he throttled her, to halt her desperate struggles, he gagged her and tied her hands.

"Now remain where you are," he hissed, "till the place is all ablaze; in the very nick of time I will hasten and save you; thus will I attest my innocence and prove myself the hero of Ortingen."

The flames leaped lively among the dry branches, the room was

filling with smoke. "That's all right now," he sniggered, gliding like an eel through an opening he had made in the partition wall, he slipped into a room of the larger house adjoining and got upstairs.

It was already quite dark when the alarm of fire was shrieked through the village; when the council attendants rushed out they found the widows cottage a mass of seething flames. From out that oven horrible cries were heard. At great risk and with much effort the brave men succeeded in rescuing the half-burnt woman. No one noticed a head cautiously peering down upon the scene from the gable-window of the larger house.

The much-injured woman had regained consciousness. She gazed at the fire with a vacant stare, then suddenly she cried aloud: "O save my boy, he, too, is in there!"

"What Jack?" all asked at once, the crowd becoming terribly excited. "What is he doing in your house?"

"Oh, don't harm him! I beseech you, help him out, he didn't do it in his right mind—"

"Do it—what?" the crowd questioned. The chief deputy approached and personally inquired of the widow: "What do you mean to say? Did your unhappy son start the fire?" Upon her refusal to answer at once he reassured her: "Nothing can be done to him anyway, he is crazy; tell us then, so that no innocent person be suspected."

Thus urged the old woman lamented: "Yes, of course, he did it; he brought in dried branches, oil-soaked them, stopped my mouth—but oh! don't harm him; he is not right—his head—he was never quite right in all his life; I am sure of that."

From above, a demoniacal laugh interrupted. The crowd looking upward beheld a blood-endling scene. Upon the coping at the very gable end of the neighbor's house, in a momentary rift of the pall of smoke, Jack Sparr was descried as by a flashlight silhouetted against the dark sky.

"I—not right in my head?" he screamed and jeered;—"I am wiser than all of you together—not I—it is you who are crazy!"

"Drag him down from there!" the mayor commanded a couple of men; Sparr having heard the order and noticing a consequent movement in the crowd, screamed defiantly: "If one of you touches me, I'll leap into the fire, and drag the aggressor with me!"

"Jack, dearest Jack!" called to him the old maimed mother whom they were carrying away to safety, "come down, in God's name, you'll burn to death up there!"

"Never! here from this my pulpit, as the priest in church, I will now preach to you, ye people of Ortingen, in place of your late pastor. My theme is fire. This suits me as it suits you, but why, you'll not know till I tell you. Can you still recall the places afire? First the mayor's, then the carpenter's house by the brook, then at The Sign of the Red Gong; later, on the day of the storm, fire at the Eagle tavern and the treasurer's—but in this last place it didn't succeed,—then some of the cottages in the bottoms went, and finally Brook Inn. And do you know why? Because all these with few exceptions were declared enemies of the old priest!"

Silence fell upon the crowd; they saw the veil lifting which had shrouded the origin of the many burnings in the village. Sparr continued: "Ha! you're all ears now! And do you know why these places and no others were set afire? So I would be the last to be suspected! Ha! ha! Am I not a wise fool, ye people of Ortingen?"

"Then, you were the incendiary!" a dozen voices shouted. "Drag

him down, throw him into the fire alive, the scoundrel, the murderous firebrand!"

The Chief Deputy strove to keep order, while the maniac, pleased with the role he was playing, calmly resumed his disclosures: "Who of you would not have done the same if a devil stood by his pillow every night threatening: 'Either set fire to a house, or else I'll take you with me!' Surely I'd rather let a neighbor's house burn than my own skin! For this reason I was obliged to reason thus: If I put the torch to my friends, no one will suspect me. Isn't that so? Am I not a wise fellow, then, I, Jack Sparr of Ortingen? There was none in the whole asylum as clever as I, the director said. Who among you all thought it was Jack Sparr?"

"And see how I led you by the nose, to accuse this or that one—and you wise people believed me—He! he!"

Fierce curses were hurled at him, but the fool, enveloped every now and then by the clouds of smoke, was heard to laugh only the louder.

"You have no idea how smart I am. There is a story I might tell of the rectory, that Hundred-Mark bill and that newswriter whom I misled. He thought he had me under his thumb, but I had him under mine! I used him as a dog and sicked him at whom I pleased. I have turned the parish round, I have flattered and deceived you, I ruled the village, I drove as I pleased the learned councillors of the Chapter; it was I who forced the pastor to leave, I, Jack Sparr,—I planned it—and you, all of you followed my steps! I incited you to surround the house of the treasurer to mob the body of the dead Agnes—and heading you ran—ran into the arms of the police—ye gross-headed people of Ortingen—now, then, who's the fool, you or I? If 'tis I, then a fool it was who led you the whole year round, and you knew it not,—Ha! ha! a fool, ye wise ones of Ortingen, a fool!"

An uncontrollable tumult ensued, fed by the realization of having been so grievously deceived and obsessed. A long pole, claw-hooked, was pushed upward to tackle the insane man; from a dormer-window an attempt was made to size him from behind; Sparr snatched the hook madly, pushed it aside, and with a ringing yell, to the consternation of all, leaped into the surging flames.

A woman's voice was heard to call: "Oh, draw him forth! help, he has still one disclosure to make!"

It was Frances who had just arrived. They were lucky in pulling out the unfortunate men still alive. They laid him on the ground. As he opened his eyes and began to whine, Frances knelt by his side and began gently questioning: "You poor fool Jack, can you speak a little yet?—it isn't true, is it, that Agnes killed herself; come, tell me, you know it."

His face became changed at once. With a conscious look and mellowed voice he replied: "No, Frances, Agnes did not kill herself. I did that, too, but it seemed to me I could not help it; after lighting the Brook Inn and when it was already ablaze, she crossed my way and called: 'Why, Jack, the house is afire!' It was a struggle till I caught her and stopped her mouth; I then said to her: Yes, Agnes, and it simply remains for me to put it out, upon which I threw her into the brook. She offered no resistance, but made an effort to cross herself; I pushed her head under the water—it was soon over—"

Frances uttered a moan.

"It did not seem right that this should happen," Jack whimpered, "but it had to be. The time I had come into the garden to avow my love she was singing: 'For in this world I'm sad and lone, Come soon, sweet Death?'"

It was a premonition. I was destined to procure the rest. Then, too, why was her behavior such as to urge me to hate rather than to love her—she also is responsible!"

The eyes of the fool began to roll in a frightful way, his lips were flecked with blood and foam. He was carried to the local hospital. The priest called to see if anything could be done for his poor soul.

Mute, the crowd tarried by the ruins, dazed by the awful revelations of the maniac and its own aberrations more awful still.

As the embers were slowly dying, the first glimmerings of respect began to show, to revive and glow in the hearts of the people towards their late pastor, and towards the innocent maiden, the chief victim in this tragedy.

Many years have elapsed. The young Administrator has become pastor of Ortingen. The teacher is married; his helpmate is the erstwhile redoubtable Frances. The old game-warden, who is still living, teases the old father, the treasurer, occasionally: "Frances rules not only her three boys and two girls, but her husband also, and many others besides." To which the invariable answer is: "Indeed, I know it; she was never wanting a mouth-piece."

"And her youngest, the little Frances," observed the old huntsman taking his pipe out of his mouth, laughing, "will be her exact counterpart. The other day I said in her hearing: 'It will soon be time again to bring my annual hare!' up stood the little child with monitory finger threatening: 'But take care, uncle huntsman, not to kill the Easter rabbit, else we'll get no eggs!'"

The old men laughed heartily. Over yonder, within the shade of the cool forest, the cemetery lies, peaceful and trim. With feverish, the haunting zephyr out from its sylvan retreat comes sighing a lullaby o'er the wearied sleepers, who lie, bedded over with grass and flowers luxuriant. Two small wooden crosses mark the sunken graves of old Mrs. Sparr and her ill-starred son. Close to the highway, near the mortuary chapel, an imposing monument crowned with a cross, with a holy water stoup at its base, overlooks the whole village. Beneath the mighty stone rests the remains of the old pastor. Fresh wreaths and bouquets are never wanting. The parish made it a point of honor to have his body transferred to the present site, so as to give to their late pastor in death the rest they denied him in life. Not one was absent at the great funeral of removal; it was a triumphal procession such as Ortingen had never seen.

Close to her uncle deceased, beneath a little cross, rests Agnes. Upon her grave the chaste and beautiful lily grows, and none ever visits the cemetery without halting at her grave and uttering a prayer. But every now and then, when in the stormy nights of March the treetops sigh, and the wind howling and shivering, rushes impetuously and shrieking down from the heights through the village streets, the people say: "That is the spirit of Jack Sparr; it has not yet found rest." Then they say an Our Father for the peace of his soul.

THE END.

The colored guard called "Halt, who goes there?" "A Catholic priest," answered Father Vincent of the Passionists, who has been doing relief duty. "What's your cross?" replied the guard.

Father Vincent reached into his pocket and showed the guard a small crucifix he carries. "Dat ain't no good, sah; you have to have it on your shoulder." It was necessary to call the corporal of the guard before the guard would be satisfied, as he said "Orders is Orders," especially after dark.

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