

### Man and His Illusions

BY KONRAD KUEMMEL

(Continued)

Just as the tower clock was striking midnight, behold, the affrighted bells began calling clamorously for help. For the sixth time there was a fire in the village.

Maledictions and terrible curses and threats were loud in the streets against the incendiary. Men were hastening to the Chapter-house for the fire-engine.

"Where is the fire?" a woman called from a window.

"At the landlord's!" the answer echoed through the night. "House and barn are wrapt in flame!" So it was. When the bucket-brigade had arrived and the villagers were in their appointed places, it was seen at once that it was too late.

"Where is the innkeeper?" someone inquired.

"He's gone to get his two brows from the stable, they are very much excited and none but their owner dare approach them."

All at once terrible cries for help came from the stable; you could hear the horses madly stamping and neighing. A dense smoke was issuing thence and the appeals were becoming ever more pitiful. The taverner was lying on the floor back of the first horse, evidently he had been kicked. With a fire-hook he was carefully dragged out; his two arms, which he held shielding his head, were terribly fractured and crushed by the maddened animals.

"Can't you get up?" a neighbor inquired, ready to assist him.

"In God's name, no," he screamed—"my kneecap—the horse has shattered it."

With a gurgling sound he fainted. The crowd stood encircling him, speechless with terror at the sight. Through the guest room the flames were surging, just then an overheated pane burst and fell into the room. In falling it must have struck the button of the music-box, because from out the fire-lit area the gay melody was heard:

"Alas, must I leave thee,  
My village, my home!"

Coincidentally, too, the taverner on a stretcher was being borne out the yard to the house of a neighbor. He was put to bed, groaning in intense agony. The young horse he had gone to rescue, in its fright had broken both his kneecaps and had injured him terribly about the head and arms. The priest was soon at hand and administered to the unconscious, dying scuffer, Extreme Unction.

#### 4. A Mysterious Death

Amid the confusion a girl's voice was suddenly heard: "In the name of heaven, where is Agnes?" It was Frances who had just arrived. The people stared at one another, none had thought of the girl, gone had seen her.

"Agnes, Agnes!" Frances with a heart-rending voice screamed towards the upper window of the burning house.

"Where is her room?" some one inquired.

Without more ado, snatching a water-soaked bag from one of the men, she slipped it over her head and shoulder as a protection against the heat and rushing round the corner entered the house by a rear door where the fire had not yet penetrated. Some wished to follow her. But she dissuaded them: "Wait below, I will wake her." To herself she said: "The modest Agnes would die of fear and shame if strangers would come and wake her." Quickly she leaped into the smoke-filled room. The people below in the meantime were anxiously awaiting the result. They heard her rattling at a window which was tightly closed by a shutter, then, knocking at the door.

"She cannot force the shutter," the bystanders shouted to one another.

"Up, up, for the sake of God, help!" the cry came from above. Heat-bursting tile were thumping down the roof, the very roof-supports were threatening to give way. A man fixed a ladder and ascended to reach the closed shutter. With a powerful stroke of an ax he forced it open, tore one wing away and pushed the other aside. An immense mountain of smoke rolled out and in an instant the place was aflame. With one leap the daring man was within the room. He found Frances with wringing hands before an empty bed.

"She is not here," said the brave girl to the fire-man.

"Then there is nothing more to be done," he said, urging her forward, "hurry out of the window, I will remain here till you are down." Then only did Frances recognize her rescuer; it was the teacher.

"You—and on my account?" she expostulated.

"Yes, Frances, on your account, but hurry down the ladder that I may get out safely too." Hardly had they gotten down when the house gutter and a mass of shingles came down in a crash.

They sought her, they called her, Agnes was nowhere to be found. Of the inn there was nothing left to save, moreover, the neighboring house gave them work enough. By morning, inn, barn and stable were a total ruin. The taverner in the meantime had died. The news of the terrible judgment of God evident in his death had scarcely spread over the village when a second appalling rumor followed in its wake. Agnes had been found, indeed, but—dead.

At the treasurer's, on a neat couch, with the mellow light of a blessed candle caressing her, she, the poor orphan was laid out, her hands folded, her face lily-white in deep repose. In the brook which flows hard by the inn, she had been found hidden beneath the overhanging branches of a willow; her features were set and calm, her hands clasped. How she came to meet her death no one could tell. It was an awful mystery. There were no marks of violence on her body; she had evidently been drowned.

Frances declared: "Either she was drowned dipping water—or—or else because she gave the alarm, being the first undoubtedly to have noticed the fire—she was"—she paused, her face expressing intense horror—"or else she was—" she would say no more.

With the old hunter, Frances waked the body of her friend that night; her father was with them. She was leading the Litany, the two men responding: "Deliver her, O Lord!" and "We beseech Thee, hear us!"

They stopped suddenly. Voices were heard on the outside; there was a knocking at the door and on the shutters.

"Who is there?" Frances inquired.

"We, the citizens of Ortingen," was the answer.

Frances opened the window. A crowd of eighty or a hundred individuals stood in front of the house. "Deliver to us the self-murderess! Out with her, out with her!" they yelled.

"What! a suicide?" Frances challenged; she was dazed almost to fainting; "Agnes, a suicide?"

"What else?" inquired a dominant voice from amidst the crowd; "to revenge the priest she set fire to the houses, one after another, that is why she remained in the village; that is why only those were burnt out who were against the priest, and not the others!"

"In the name of God—what nonsense!" uttered Frances.

"No nonsense at all!" screeched Jack Sparr, "but a fact. It was

she, too, that lighted the inn. Many a time I heard her say that that house was a hell, and that it would not surprise her if it burnt down." Another person attested: "She set it on fire, and then her measure was full; fearing that this time she would be discovered, she threw herself into the brook."

With a great show of indignant pathos Sparr complimented: "And those within are praying for this murderous incendiary and self-destroyer! That is forbidden, it must not be allowed; take away the crucifix and the Holy Water from the suicide!"

"It is quite so; drag the woman out into the street—to the brook!" the others assented, trying to force the door.

The treasurer went to the window and told the crowd he would not let them in; if anyone use violence, he'll have him arrested for breach of peace.

A mocking laughter was the response: "No such thing as peace exists anymore in Ortingen"—open, let us in!"

"Holy God, Blessed Mother of God, inspire me what to say!" Frances prayed. At once a new light shone in her eye—a thought had come to her mind. Deliberately, calmly she spoke: "Who knows whether or not Agnes was the incendiary? At least wait and see if henceforth there'll be no more conflagrations."

"There'll be no more fires," a voice bawled from the crowd.

"If you are so certain of that, then you yourself are the firebrand!" With terrific force Frances hurled this imputation at the speaker—the crowd listening silent as death.

Foaming with fury, Sparr threw himself against the window at which Frances was standing, but fortunately there stood the warden. "Dare it, you devil!" and he raised his gun.

"People, citizens, they wish to shoot you!" screamed Sparr, inciting them: "Forward, crush in the door, force yourself in!"

An officer appeared, the mayor also and the priest. The mayor advised them to disperse; they would not, not until the suicide was dragged out and thrown into the street. A second, a third time he charged them to disperse and to go home or take the consequences. The crowd simply jeered him. Forcing his way through the mob up to the door, he gave another futile warning, telling them he must now read the Riot-Act. As his last expedient, he read the frightened decree.

"He is siding with them!" incited Sparr—"forward, men, will you permit him to intimidate you?"

The crowd pressed upon the mayor and the officer, pinning the latter's arm to his side; then there was a shot in the air and loud came the hunter's threat: "That was only a warning—this one will count!" He raised his gun.

"Fire, fire!" echoed and re-echoed from far and near; the bells were again ringing the ominous alarm. It was a cry of terror—the masses turned from the besieged house to the one now aburning. The gable of the house neighboring the ruined inn was on fire. In spite of all precautions, some flying cinders must have ignited and set it aflame. It was the work of several hours to put it out and save the building. The rest of the night the corpse of poor Agnes lay unlighted in the little room.

#### 5. A Thorough Reckoning.

Two days after, ten mounted officers arrived in the village to take the depositions of the principal rioters. So it happened, that while the largely attended funeral of the taverner and of his young ward, Agnes, was wending its way to the cemetery, two carts guarded by soldiers were rattling in an opposite direction through Ortingen, carry-

ing the suspected disturbers to the district Capital for trial. Jack Sparr, the leader, was among them. A couple of days after, the newspapers brought the information that the under-sacristan had been brought to an insane asylum for observation.

Upon the grave of the innkeeper lay many wreaths bound with red and white and varicolored ribbons. On the plain little cross which marked Agnes' grave hung a wreath of the last roses of summer, entwined with a white silken scarf, with which the sad autumn breeze of All-Souls' month coquetted. This was a remembrance from Frances; but the daily prayers she offered for her departed friend was a remembrance a thousand times better.

All this while the village had not regained its peace. Stubbornly, many continued to believe the awful accusations against poor Agnes deceased, and to declare that Sparr was well-intentioned towards the whole parish.

On a certain afternoon, immediately upon the arrival of a carriage there was a meeting of the Chapter and of the Citizen Committee. The District Deputy and the bishop's Vicar were present. After sternly alluding to the deplorable conditions in Ortingen and regretting the change which had come over the village parish, the deputy presented the bishop's representative, begging him to introduce the subject that had brought them hither to the committee.

The Vicar began by stating that the Last Will of their pastor, of blessed memory, had been read a few days ago. Upon opening the outer envelope which enclosed the sealed testament, a Hundred-Mark bill was found. No doubt, this was the vanished bill, the disappearance of which gave cause to so many rash judgments, and was exploited in so criminal a way by the papers. Probably by mistake the priest had put it in this, instead of in the envelope intended for it. Furthermore, it was found that he had willed the parish six thousand marks to be used for any parish purpose, or for the poor, or in any way the council might determine.

At first he had intended this money for the Diaspora of the Capital; upon second thought, however, it seemed to him better to devote to the 'Dispersed' the surplus of the foundation-gifts, which in accordance with the mind of the donors could be used for religious purposes only, and then by way of compensation give over to the Ortingen congregation his money, which they might employ for any good use without restriction.

The money has already been handed over to the village authorities, the speaker declared. It was the express will of the late pastor, he continued, that nothing in the Will to their favor should be changed in spite of what he had been made to suffer and to endure in their midst, and especially did the pastor affirm that he had forgiven them from his heart. He confessed that unworthy as he was of the high dignity of the Priesthood, he had never knowingly neglected the duties which it imposed. Commenting on these facts, the Vicar attested that as in this present affair so all his life their late pastor had approved himself an exemplary priest. That he must express to them the pain and anger of their bishop for having permitted themselves to be so grievously incited against their pastor; that there is no doubt, it will be a long time before another priest will care to become the resident of Ortingen. He strongly impressed upon them that it was their duty in some public way to make amends to the deceased for the injury they had done him, and he warned them that it was to their interest to do so as soon as possible.

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