

THE CATHOLIC RECORD.

A VICTIM TO THE SEAL OF CONFESSION.

A TRUE STORY BY THE REV. JOSEPH SPILLMAN, S. J. CHAPTER XII.

THE CROSS EXAMINATION.

At the close of the conversation reported in the preceding chapter, the two speakers had reached the door leading to the priest's apartments.

"True, I had only time for a cup of coffee before starting," the magistrate replied, "and when our inquiry is ended, I shall be happy to avail myself of your invitation."

"Not a single moment! I always act on the principle: first see to the living, because you may do them some good; it does not matter to the dead how long they wait."

The post-mortem examination then took place. Father Montmoulin's knife was found to be the instrument with which the wound was inflicted.

"Now we have the whole connected chain of evidence," he said with no small satisfaction. "We will let the accused feel all the force of it at once, and I shall be very much surprised if he does not confess forthwith."

So saying, Mr. Barthelot re-entered the priest's sitting room and taking his seat at the table with the clerk, he ordered the accused to be brought before him.

Father Montmoulin slept the sleep of the worn out until, soon after day-break, he was roused by the unusual commotion outside the convent-walls, caused by the concourse of villagers who had locked thither in ever increasing numbers.

The magistrate could scarcely repress a smile at this personal attack upon the mayor, and he made a sign to the latter to let it pass. He then reproved the police for having been discourteous in their treatment of so respectable a person.

"What did you answer the girl?" "I exclaimed, 'Good heavens, some misfortune must have happened to her!'"

"What made you say that?" "Because his Reverence had told me she was coming to fetch a large sum of money for the new hospital."

"Did anyone else know that Mrs. Blanchard was going at that time to fetch the money?" "No indeed, do you imagine that I am such a tattler? I did not say a word about it to any living soul."

"You say you met Mrs. Blanchard coming to the Convent. What time was it then?" "The clock had just struck 10. She said good morning to me, and asked if he should find Father Montmoulin alone. I said yes; his mother had just left, and no one was with him."

"Had his mother a basket or bag in her hand, when she left?" "Yes, she was carrying a little bag which his reverence had given her, I think it contained some linen that wanted mending."

"Was the bag heavy or light?" "I cannot tell. I wanted to carry it downstairs for her, but she would not let it out of her hand."

The magistrate and the mayor exchanged a knowing glance. "Do you know perhaps where the reverend gentleman's mother lives?" "Yes, in the Rue de la Colombe in Aix. I do not know the number. She has a little shop for woolen wares near the market."

The magistrate made a note of the address. "You are sure that your master was alone in the Convent when Mrs. Blanchard went to him, the sacristan was not there?" "No the sacristan took himself off on Sunday evening, and has not been back since."

"Well, Susan, what is your opinion; if Father Montmoulin was the only person in the house when the old lady met her fate, on whom does the suspicion fall?"

entered the room during Susan's peroration, and caught her last words. "Well done! Give it the old sinner hot and strong! I would not have given you credit for such eloquence!"

"This is our medical practitioner, Dr. Corbillard," said the mayor by surprise whilst he was counting the money on Sunday afternoon. Might he not at least mention this fact to the magistrate, since it was wholly unconnected with the confession, and it was certainly calculated to throw suspicion on the right person."

"You cannot satisfy justice with these evasive answers. Now look here; do you know where this candlestick comes from?"

Father Montmoulin turned pale. He felt that the weight of evidence against him was heavier than he had supposed. His eyes grew moist, and he could scarcely control his voice as he answered: "Appearances are indeed against me, but no one can deny. Nevertheless I am innocent of the crime; God is my witness."

"It would be far wiser on your part to make a full confession of this fatal act, as I told you before, instead of attempting to impose on me by maudlin and posturing," said the magistrate angrily. "I hate scents; once more I ask you, will you acknowledge your guilt or no?"

"I can only repeat that I am perfectly innocent. My God! Whatever do you imagine would have induced me to commit such crime?"

"That is a psychological problem, of which perhaps the solution is not so very far to seek. Why, you are poor, you are in want of books, as the poverty-stricken appearance of your bookshelves testifies, as does the order for the bookseller which was found lying on your desk. You wanted to buy books, and I hope to make both ends meet; here is an opportunity to help her, and perhaps others too, and the temptation was too much for you. You see the idea that you did it for your mother's sake, what is in itself a dreadful crime, and I promise you, that every extenuating circumstance shall be urged in your favor, and your mother's, and you shall not suffer the full rigor of the law, if you will frankly confess your guilt."

"My mother!" Father Montmoulin exclaimed. "How can my mother possibly be implicated in this affair?"

"I feel convinced that your mother carried the money with her, if we fail, let us find it concealed on these premises. At all events, your mother will be arrested as accessory to the deed."

"For Heaven's sake have pity on her! It will be her death," cried the priest. But the magistrate showed no sign of relenting. "Confess your guilt, and your mother shall be treated with more leniency. Otherwise I shall order her to be arrested. And you too shall be taken in a closed carriage to Aix; but if you persist in asserting your innocence, you will be dealt with as a common criminal. Do you imagine that your profession will entitle you to any indulgence; a clergyman who can perpetrate such a deed deserves to be put to public shame ten times more than a vulgar murderer."

"I can do nothing more than assert my innocence, and leave the rest to God," Father Montmoulin responded calmly. The magistrate shrugged his shoulders and passed the protocol, after it had been read over by the clerk, to the accused for signature. The unfortunate man felt as if he were signing his own death-warrant. Then Mr. Barthelot called in the police and gave him into custody. The prisoner held out his hands without a murmur, yet he could not restrain a shudder as the handcuffs closed on his wrists. He raised his eyes to the crucifix, and was enabled to maintain outward composure. The magistrate and the other Government officials then re-entered the room.

"Our task is ended for the present," said the magistrate. "The police officers, with the assistance of the mayor, who owe the speedy discovery of the murder, will complete the search of the house, and take possession of the prisoner's papers. He shall be removed at once to the prison at Aix, and we must see that his mother does not escape the hand of the law. It is not necessary to provide a closed conveyance for the prisoner; he certainly is not deserving of such an attention, and it is just as well to show that the law is impartial in its treatment of the clergy."

"I am quite of your opinion sir," replied the mayor, with a low bow. He then gave the required orders to his subordinates. In vain the good-hearted Dr. Corbillard endeavored to obtain some relaxation on behalf of the prisoner. "I am no friend of priests," he said, "but I must in common justice testify that our pastor here has always shown himself most kind and charitable in regard to the sick, and I find it very difficult to believe in his guilt, strongly as circumstances witness against him. Besides, his guilt is not yet proved, and until it is, he ought not to be treated as a convicted criminal."

"Perhaps you will have the goodness to leave it to me to decide what treatment is to be received, and whether his guilt is to be considered as proved or not," the magistrate replied haughtily. "That is what it is!" rejoined the doctor, in a tone of annoyance. "This is but a fresh manoeuvre in the plan of campaign against the Clerical party. Hear the people outside shouting: Down with the priests!"

The others retorted angrily that it was no such thing, and declined making any alteration in their arrangements. They walked up to the boarding

tion that he had heard of the crime from the lips of a penitent would be equivalent to an accusation against the man; the only penitent he saw in the convent was Loser, therefore he was the murderer. No, there was no doubt; nothing in the world should induce him to exculpate himself by saying that he was told of the fatal deed in the confessional. Thus no means of escape was left him.

Another idea occurred to him. The sacristan had come upon him by surprise whilst he was counting the money on Sunday afternoon. Might he not at least mention this fact to the magistrate, since it was wholly unconnected with the confession, and it was certainly calculated to throw suspicion on the right person."

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ment. The doctor turned to leave the room, muttering under his breath. Just as he got to the door, he paused, and addressing the prisoner, said: "I have not attended your sermons, Father, nor have I troubled you in the confessional; yet I have always respected you as a kind and good man, and I do not believe you to be capable of any wickedness. Keep up your courage! If that is a God in heaven He will interfere in your behalf."

"Thank you, doctor," Father Montmoulin replied. "He will make my own judgment clear as the day before His own judgment seat, if He does not do so before an earthly tribunal."

The woman took her traps and moved back of the other.

"I'll give you my seat, too," she said, in the kindly Western fashion. "The view's on both sides." It was easy afterward to fall into conversation.

"Going far?" asked the Colorado woman. "Oh, into the mining district."

"Yes, to visit my son."

"No, I sometimes wish he were."

"I don't know," said the woman thoughtfully. "It will be an awful trial to you when you have to give him up. I know. My eldest son was married last year. It nearly killed me. And I've got my husband and two children left, too."

"And I should have nothing," said Mrs. Etheridge softly. "My husband is dead."

The woman shook her head. "I hope he won't marry. He'll never be the same to you." Her eyes were full. "I feel as if I've lost mine."

It is strange how we sometimes drop into heart talks with strangers. Possibly the very fact that they are strangers makes us freer to lay bare our inner life. They know nothing about us, not even our names, perhaps; our paths will not cross again; for once we may say just what we think.

"You ought not to feel that way," said Mrs. Etheridge. "Try to feel instead that you have gained a daughter. It was one of those sweet plaudits with which people who have never had a scar try to mollify gaping wounds."

"I haven't gained a daughter. I've lost a son. The emolument had proved an irritant. 'You'll feel just as I do some day.'"

"I hope not," Mrs. Etheridge spoke earnestly. "I've been schooling myself all these years to meet this right woman comes."

"The right woman, yes! But suppose your son should marry a woman that you didn't like, and couldn't—"

"My son would never love anybody that I would not take to my heart as a daughter," said Mrs. Etheridge. And she confidently believed it.

Her companion looked at her with kindling eyes. "You're a good woman," she said. "You deserve a good daughter-in-law. But I hope he won't marry, just the same."

The club through the mountains was a glorious one. Mrs. Etheridge felt lifted up spiritually. "With Robert and these mountains," she thought, "I can give up the rest."

place. It was but a step, and she wanted to see the town. Such a queer looking place! It lay in a canyon, the walls of which were the sloping sides of the mountains. The canyon stream ran through the town and the main street was beside it. Other streets were dug out from the mountain side and the houses ranged in tiers one above the other.

"How I shall enjoy all this!" Mrs. Etheridge exclaimed, stopping to survey the town.

"How did you happen to give up your place, mother?" her son asked as they started on.

"I couldn't stay away from you any longer, laddie! But I did not give it up permanently—I could go back next year if I wanted to. Do you disapprove of it?"

"Oh, no. Only the times are so hard out here that we feel when one has a good place he'd better stick to it. But you can go back next year, you say?"

"Yes. I can go back—next year." She did not herself notice the change of tense. They walked on a little distance and then Mrs. Etheridge stopped.

"How different the effect upon one of being right in the mountains," she said. "At a distance they are so inspiring. But here—they seem to shut one in. Do you notice it, Robert?"

"It's the altitude. You are a little short of breath."

"I think that must be it," she said slowly. "Yes—I'm sure that it is."

At the door of his boarding house Robert Etheridge stopped to find things here as they are back home, mother."

"You mustn't expect to find things here as they are back home, mother," he said uneasily. "Mrs. Skidmore is a plain woman, but they have been kind to me."

"If they have been kind to you, laddie, that is enough!" And Robert hopefully ushered her in.

Mrs. Skidmore was sitting in a red and gold plush rocker in agitated consideration of a blue album of the same material. She ran to push. Her red hands were just from the dish water, and her conscious manner belied the studied leisure of her attitude.

Robert Etheridge presented his mother.

"Pleased to know you," observed Mrs. Skidmore with some stiffness. Mrs. Etheridge shook hands cordially. "My son has told me of your kindness to him, Mrs. Skidmore, and I feel that I know you already."

She could not help seeing in one comprehensive glance the tawdry furnishings, the staring family photographs (enlarged) in cheap white frames, and the inappropriateness of Mrs. Skidmore's dress. But gratitude is like charity, it covers a multitude of inharmonious colors and kindness to one's self in a strange land is more to be desired than immaculate taste.

Mrs. Skidmore looked more at ease. "Thanks," she said. "We've tried to make him feel at home, and I guess we've succeeded pretty middlin' well; ain't we, Rob?"

Mrs. Etheridge drew within herself as swiftly and silently as a turtle whose outstretched head discovers within uncomfortable distance an alien to his kind. She felt convicted of over-efficiency. He had probably paid his board! "Rob," indeed!

In her room she took herself to task. What did she expect? Robert had told her they were plain. In her heart she was protesting. "She is just plain. Plainness can be forgiven. She is vulgar and—familiar."

A supper she met the daughter, who came in after they were seated. She wore a sweeping tea gown trimmed with cheap lace. Mrs. Etheridge had seldom seen a more radiantly beautiful face.

"Miss Skidmore, Miss Etheridge," pronounced the mother, and Miss Skidmore responded in the family formula.

"Pleased to know you," adding succinctly in an aside to Robert, who greeted the smart gown with a low whistle. "Oh, shut up!"

Mrs. Etheridge's spirits dropped to zero during that meal. Was this the atmosphere that Robert had been in for four years?

"What do you think of the girl?" he asked when they were upstairs.

"She is beautiful!" his mother exclaimed enthusiastically. "The most perfect features and coloring I ever saw!"

His face glowed.

"But, Robert, her manners are atrocious! Why, she talked in an undecorous to you half the time."

Of course she hasn't had many advantages," he said, apologetically. "I should think not!" Then she proceeded to unpack.

"I've brought some of the new books with me, Rob. I'm looking forward to our reading together this winter."

"It will be nice," he said. But he did not ask what the books were.

"And here are some as much as ever?" "Haven't had a game since I've been here."

"You haven't? Well, we'll have one to-night."

He looked uneasy. "I'm afraid I can't to-night. I promised to go to a party before I knew you were coming. I'm awfully sorry. I really couldn't get out of it."

"Why, that's all right," she said. "I shan't be lonesome. Do you take a young lady?"—with interest. His friends were always hers.

"Yes," he tried to look indifferent, but he was watching her closely.

"Miss Skidmore."

"Oh-h!"

She was hanging up a dress skirt. She pinned the bands together, carefully matching the loops, then undid it and pinned it again, smoothing out the folds after it was on the book.

"Do you take her out often?"

"Her tone was very even and quiet."

"No, not very. I don't go to parties much."

"Is she received in the best society here?" Her voice seemed to cut the air.

"I don't know. Yes—I guess so—there is any best. This party is at the hall."

"Oh-h!"

When they went off Mrs. Etheridge