

### Man and His Illusions

BY KONRAD KUEMMEL

(Continued)

#### 2. The Brook-Inn Kitchen

Three days later incendiary fires were discovered in two more places; but having been found as soon as started, they were fortunately extinguished. As before, the parties injured were friends of the late pastor. The next morning a message announced that the Reverend Pastor, after a short sickness, had died. One paper stated, that the terrible visitations which had come upon Ortingen had broken his heart, and that he died praying for himself and for his enemies.

Few of his former parishioners attended the funeral; among these few Agnes was the first. Nothing could keep her from paying the last honors to her instructor and benefactor. After the funeral she stayed a few days with her aunt, whence she wrote that she would return by Saturday and that she would walk the way to the inn from the village station.

To oblige her, Frances gladly took her place for the time in the innkitchen. It meant much work, for Kermess was near. At the moment she was busy baking little cakes, and she was an expert at it. Enveloped in steam and smoke, the dipping- spoon went up and down, taking up the dough and lifting it into the bubbling hissing lard, the while she kept turning the shallow pan, and puncturing the doughnuts against over swelling; then with a quick, sure aim she flung the finished ringlets upon a mountain of similar pastry rising upward from a tin receptacle. No one dared to interfere with her.

The old hunter kept her company in the kitchen; he was enjoying one of her brown, fragrant cakes and gossiping with her in half-voice. Through the door ajar, she at the same time oversaw the bar. They were speaking about Agnes. "I pity her, she does not fit in here, she belongs to the cloister," Frances remarked, "although she can work and can do things better than I. But she is afraid of the people and easily loses her head just when presence of mind is most necessary. This very summer she went well-nigh crazy from fear; do you know about it, that affair in the teacher's garden?"

"No," replied the huntsman, finishing the doughnut; "but I presume you were present."

"You are continually teasing me about the teacher," pouted Frances blushing, "instead, I wish you'd eat another cake, here, this one is fine."

She handed him the cake hot from the pan and then continued: "Well, those fellows within, had planned that at night they would steal into the garden of the teacher and do all sorts of mischief there. You know how he and his mother all spring and summer cultivated the beds and borders, the flowers and vegetables, watering and nursing them. Jack Sparr worked up his gang to the trick by treating them to wine,—for I believe that sober none would have joined. Now, Agnes overheard all this, and not knowing what to do, in her very despair she sent for me to hurry over, naturally, I did not hesitate—"

"Of course, of course!" chuckled the hunter with his mouth filled.

"And do you know what I did? I sent a note, advising the schoolmaster to be on his guard against a visit to his garden set for twelve o'clock that night. This I signed: 'From a well-meaning friend,' and dispatched it to the schoolhouse immediately. And then—"

"Why, the teacher was prepared to receive the fellows," the hunter finished.

"Not by a long ways," corrected Frances. "Next I said to Agnes:

Now you go to the bar-room, and I will soon follow; it will be our business to detain the scamps until the rise of the moon—say eleven o'clock—twill be lightsome then to enable the teacher to recognize them in turn as they seal the wall."

Astonished the hunter regarded his protégée: "Frances, you are even more clever than I imagined, you are as wide awake as a real huntsman. Hand me another doughnut."

She handed him one and laughed. "How I talked—I invoked all the saints in heaven to help along my gossip, so as to detain the fellows. Even Agnes talked—but transparent beads upon her brow bespoke her terror. So it got to be eleven, then twelve o'clock, and at last the plotters arose, stumbling to their work; the moon shone in the heavens—so brightly—it were possible to read! When they had come to the garden, the teacher hiding in the hedge was ready to welcome them with his gun. They detected him, however, and upon inquiring what he was doing in the garden at so late an hour, he answered: 'Lying in wait for weasels!' They left for their homes then without daring to disturb the garden."

The old man listened admiringly and then asked: "Does the schoolmaster know who sent the note?"

Frances blushed still deeper: "I don't want him to know. The other day, after telling Agnes the whole story, he said he would like to know who wrote that note—every second word in it was misspelled, but—"

The huntsman shook with laughter.

By way of excuse she added: "The note had to be hurriedly written; still I am ashamed of it with all my soul."

"As a matter of course, the future Mrs. Pedagogue ought not to be guilty of mistakes in spelling," the hunter dryly observed.

Before she could reply, the teacher stepped in from the inn, and greeting them both, he took off and hung his mackintosh (rain-coat) on the door.

"Is it true, Agnes will come home late to-night, alone?" he inquired.

"No, professor, I'll tell you, but keep it secret, she returns to-morrow noon," Frances replied—"those in there better not know it, however."

The hunter got up to go; "Good night, I must leave, or I'll eat up all your baking."

In a minute or two he came back and said to the girl: "That sub-sacristan is in truth a real devil. Just as I was leaving, I heard him plotting something in the stable adjoining. The teacher is going to meet Agnes to-night, that will be a fine chance to smash his windows. For every pane a bottle of wine!" he stipulated, after which he went back to the inn. His confederates, however, discarded the first and agreed upon another plan. They would post themselves along the route and attack the schoolmaster on his way to meet Agnes; this would be less hazardous. I will wait to see what they are going to do; had they ventured into the village, I would have spoiled their window-smashing a second time. Sure enough, they're off to the station; well, let them run. Since Agnes does not return to-night, the teacher need not go to meet her."

Frances bubbled over with joy at the idea of the ruffians waiting and waiting in vain.

After an interval Jack Sparr stuck his head into the kitchen, remarking sarcastically: "Poor Martha must slave and worry, to enable lazy Mary, I meant to say Agnes, to idle away five days at the funeral of a priest."

"That's nobody's business but Agnes' and the landlord's, and he gave his permission," Frances snapped him off.

"It is a cheap permission, for it makes no difference whether she is here or away; she can do nothing as it is, except to dream and pray."

"There are others whose work is more illusory still," came the biting rejoinder.

"Whom do you refer to?" Sparr asked, his weird eyes glaring.

"To whomever it concerns," she retorted, while pitching a doughnut deftly into the pan, just grazing his nose. She added: "I think it contemptible to defame a girl one likes, and in this way to secure her against others."

"Does that apply to me?" he hissed.

"Do you dare to deny it?" she asked composedly, putting more dough into the frying-pan.

"And you,—you—" he exploded with rage, "can you deny that you are infatuated with the teacher? Only for his sake, not for Agnes' are you here, you—"

The resolute Frances motioned as if she meant to throw the pan and his contents into his face. He dodged. She controlled herself, however, and her eyes of a sudden danced with joy. Continuing as before she took no notice of the fury at the door.

All at once she said kindly: "Jack; stay here, it's hard telling how the weather'll turn!"

"What do you mean to say?" he questioned.

"I mean to say, Agnes will be delighted this moonlit night, to see you, all spindleshanks and elbows, coming to meet her. Ha! ha! that will be a race! She will run back here like a hare, to the depot-matrop."

Sparr sulked in spite of his fury. Looking up suddenly, he noticed that Frances was eyeing the teacher's mackintosh. "A fine piece of apparel that," she commented innocently.

His eyes taking in the coat on the door, sparkled mischief.

He returned to the bar to finish his drink and waited until the teacher had moved across the room, facing away from the entrance. Quick as lightning then he absconded with the mackintosh through the kitchen door.

"Jack!" Frances called, but in a manner neither loud nor excited, "if you don't return it, I'll murder you."

"I'll be back in an hour; the teacher will not have missed it," he replied.

"Take the consequences, then," doled out Frances tragically.

"So I will," he replied, throwing the teacher's mantle loftily around him and slyly remarking: "I am the teacher now, Agnes will not avoid me," and away he went parading.

Frances sat down by the hearth and with hands to her face laughed till the tears trickled down her sun-browned cheeks.

"Good luck to you," she said, "if mistaken for the teacher by your own chums, they beat you to a rag, you will have deserved it, first on account of Agnes, secondly, on my account, and thirdly," she halted, "thirdly—most of all! Pity, the warden is not here, how he would enjoy it; I must tell him first thing in the morning."

Sure enough, Jack Sparr got his deserts. Disguised in the only mackintosh in the village, he played the teacher better than he knew. The lads suffered him to come on and then piled upon him.

Frances was back in her home quite awhile, when there came hobbling along village-ward, a groaning, scolding, dilapidated wretch. The mackintosh hung loosely about him torn, tattered and soiled. But when his mother saw the condition of her only darling, there was no end to, "O murder! O pity!" and maledictions upon the perpetrators. Next day he was obliged to buy the teacher a new mackintosh.

#### 3. Tried in the Crucible

The Requiem celebrated for the deceased pastor a few days later was over. More parishioners attended than the Administrator expected. The absolution had been given, and clouds of incense were still rising slowly to the arched ceiling, upward to the large central painting, the Resurrection of the Dead; deserted stood the catafalque, upon its bosom the chalice and biretta facing the cross; the church was sombre and still.

One lone figure in deep mourning, tarried kneeling, lost in prayer, the rosary gliding through her slender fingers. It was Agnes. In her dark dress, her face looked delicate and refined as never before; but it bore traces, too, that she had suffered much, a fact which her swollen eyelids, reddened by countless tears, confirmed. Stopping a moment, she looked towards the tabernacle. "Dear Saviour, how gladly I would have died in my uncle's stead," she lippled, "if it had been possible! I have enough of the world already to do me for life." Then she turned to the Virgin's altar; unconsciously her hands lifted higher and higher imploringly, and her face became almost transfigured. The world heard it not nor suspected, but from that virginal soul arose a great and holy vow which upon the wings of a thousand petitions, sought the heart of the Mother of God, the Mother of the Afflicted. The daughter addressed the Mother; the virgin the Queen of Virgins. The secret of this sacred communing, wafted over the chasm dividing time from eternity, between the poor orphan and the ever Virgin, remained hidden in the hearts of Mother and child.

Finally, Agnes arose. A long, tear-stained look at the catafalque, a last, "Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord!" and she left the church. At the door on the outside, stood Jack Sparr; he wished to speak to her. His face was disfigured, his eyes glowing with an uncanny fire; his head was tied up, covering the contusions he had received a while ago. An ill-concealed passion distorted his face to an ugliness exceeding that of its natural deformity. He got no chance to address her. She looked up at him a minute and then rapidly passed him to the village street, which led to the Brook Inn.

Pale and trembling with indignation he followed her; she had disappeared from sight.

On the night of this day the "notorious company" met in the tavern; the most active among them as usual, were Jack Sparr and the landlord.

"You were also at the church this morning for the priest?" Sparr laughingly asked the latter. With a contortion of the face the taverner replied: "No, Jack, for you know, pews and genuflections don't suit my knees. Since the day I became enlightened, they have got erysipelas. Moreover," he continued mocking, when the laughter which greeted the joke had subsided, "I had a Requiem at home." Upon saying which he pushed the button of the music-box to the tune:

"Alas, must I leave thee,

My village, my home!"

The innkeeper, pulling out his handkerchief, sang the stanzas with an affected sob. Some of the guests looked at one another with horror, but Sparr and his boon fellows nearly burst laughter at the conceit. The music-box went slower, then it stopped.

Startled, the taverner looked up. What was it that made the dying notes seem to him like a judgment?

"It's run down," some one said, winding it up.

"When Agnes comes in again, we'll set it off to console her." A maiden appeared at the door that very moment; Jack without look-

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