

# A VICTIM TO THE SEAL OF CONFESSION.

A TRUE STORY. By REV. JOSEPH SPILLMAN, S.J.

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## CHAPTER II.

The Pastor of Ste. Victoire had ended a good day's work, for Sunday was with him a laborious day, as indeed it is for most hard-working Parish priests.

On the Sunday of which we are speaking he had risen betimes and made his meditation in the Church, until it was time to ring the Angelus. This he did with his own hands, his negligent Sacristan was not yet up. Since it was the first Sunday in Lent, a considerable number of his parishioners were desirous of approaching the Sacraments, and the good clergyman was detained for a long time in the Confessional, in fact until the time for Mass. He felt almost faint when he went into the sacristy to vest; the sacristan was there ready to help him, but not in the best of humor, for he knew he had failed in his duty and expected a well-merited reprimand. Instead of this to his surprise Father Montmoulin merely observed that he had taken a long rest that morning. The sermon that day was on the Sacrament of Penance; the preacher reminded his hearers more particularly that our Lord had rendered confession much easier than it would otherwise have been, by imposing strict secrecy as a solemn obligation on the minister who was His representative; so that on no account, not even to avert the loss of all his temporal goods, of his reputation, even of life itself, can the priest venture to violate the seal of the confession. In illustration of what he said, he mentioned the well-known example of St. John Nepomucene; and in more recent times, the case of the Polish priest who, rather than break the seal of confession, suffered shame and reproach and ended his days as an exile in Siberia. Finally he appealed earnestly to the men of his flock—of whom unhappily few were present—entreats them no longer to defer the duty, perhaps already too long neglected, of making their peace with God, and participating in the treasures of grace the Redeemer purchased for us by His bitter passion and death.

It was rather later than usual when Father Montmoulin, having finished the Mass, after a short but fervent thanksgiving, repaired to his own room, where a cup of coffee stood upon the table ready for him. Then the breviary—always longer in Lent—had to be recited; and almost before this was ended, half a dozen of his parishioners came in one after the other, each one needing counsel or help or consolation, according to their several circumstances. This lasted until Susan, the old house-keeper who attended to his wants, brought his frugal dinner in from the "Olive-tree" inn close by. This woman was not regularly engaged as his servant, she contemplated making a fresh arrangement, as soon as he could furnish a couple of rooms for his mother, and offer her a home under his roof.

Susan was dressed in all her Sunday finery, which consisted of a frock of pale blue material with a somewhat striking pattern of yellow and red flowers. Over this she wore a small shawl of green striped with white, the gaudy colors being ill in keeping with her wrinkled countenance and the grey locks that were rather untidily twisted up under her cap. The good woman was, in fact not far off seventy, and could never have been a beauty in her younger days; but that mattered little, for she was an honest old soul, and had no greater wish than to make all straight and comfortable for his Reverence.

As soon as she had put the soup upon the table, she smoothed her apron with her wrinkled old hands, and standing at a little distance she began, with the familiarity of an old domestic:

"What a splendid sermon you gave us to-day, Father! All about the seal of confession. And the beautiful story about the Saint, and the Polish priest! I looked around me once or twice in church—I hope I did not do wrong, it was for my edification—and you should just have seen how the people were crying. The persons who ought to have heard it, like the Mayor and the Notary, and the Liberals as they call themselves, were not there, more's the pity. They have got something better to do now than to come to church; they are so busy with the election! And as for one who was there, that lot of a sacristan, I saw him smiling to himself as he sat in the shade of the sacristy-door, instead of taking the sermon to heart as he should have done,

and resolving at last to go to confession."

"Well, Susan, we know that the most eloquent discourses do not change the heart. You ought to pray fervently, that will do more good than lamenting over the obduracy of sinners. We have a long-suffering and compassionate God who knows how to recall the wanderers to Himself."

"Mercy on us! I only meant first to tell your reverence what a fine sermon you preached and now seemingly I have been proud and uncharitable! But will you not take another slice of the roast beef, Father? No? Well, I expect it is rather tough, the butcher serves us very badly now. I have scarcely got a tooth left in my head, but you are young and with your excellent set of teeth you might manage it. Am I to clear away? I do not think however you will keep up your strength, eating as little as you do."

"I shall get on well enough, Susan. Now you must leave me time to get ready for Confession. It is really more important than the morning's sermon," answered the priest, watching the old woman with a smile as she carried away the dishes amid many an anxious shake of the head. When the door had closed behind her, he took up a catechism and began to think over the instruction which he had already prepared some days previously. For some time he sat at the table meditating, his head resting on his hand. He was quite a young man; his pale, rather handsome features were a pleasing expression, for although somewhat grave, he was naturally of a blithe and cheerful disposition. The careful and pious training of his boyhood, and the course of study he had subsequently gone through, imparted a certain refinement to his countenance.

The whitewashed walls and simple furniture of the room were in keeping with its occupants. The old fashioned carving of the dark wooden ceiling and door-posts bespoke considerable antiquity; and the Crucifix hanging on the wall, as well as the picture of the Last Supper facing it, were far superior to the ordinary productions of modern religious art. The common gilt earthenware vases on each side of an image of our Lady of Belours looked, it is true, somewhat out of harmony with the quaintly-carved wood-work, and the writing-table of unpolished deal, the book-shelves only half-filled with books, the plain chairs and table, testified to the poverty of the priest. In this case, however, poverty did not banish cheerfulness and content. What, in fact, did he want with grandeur and show? To his mind the fragrant hyacinths at the open window, the bright sunshine that lit up the room, the mild spring air laden with the scent of the orchards in flower, did more to make the humble apartment homelike and pleasant than rich carpets, costly paintings and luxurious furniture would have done. A Sabbath stillness, an atmosphere of peace rested on the whole scene; nothing in his surroundings led the good pastor to suspect how near the storm was approaching which would wreck the happiness of his tranquil life.

The church bell rang out its summons only too soon. The priest rose, and went into the church to give the instruction; to this he had to devote his whole energy. Then followed Vespers and Benediction, and to wind up all, an infant was brought to be baptized.

No marvel that when Father Montmoulin at length threw himself back in his easy chair with a sigh of relief, his eyelids closed from sheer weariness, and drowsiness crept over him. But a moment later he started up and rubbed his eyes. "Come, come," he said to himself, "this will never do, I am too young yet to go to sleep in broad daylight. I have just time left to look over the accounts of St. Joseph's Guild, and count the money that Mrs. Blanchard deposited with my predecessor and myself. She is coming to-morrow to fetch the whole sum; thank God, they will soon set about building the hospital. It is astonishing what an amount these good ladies have contrived to collect. France is as ready as ever to help the needy; God grant she may thereby win the divine favor, and the old child-like faith may revive in our land." Thus musing, he cast a glance out of the window at the quiet village that lay below, half-hidden by the trees which were now in full blossom. Then he turned to his writing-table, and opened the drawer where he kept the cash-box

containing the funds of the Guild. He spent some time reckoning up his figures, and then slowly and doubtfully, in it must be confessed no very business like manner, he began to count the monies spread out on the table.

"80 hundred-franc notes is 8,000 francs; 50 twenty-franc notes is 1,000 francs; that makes 9,000 francs in notes. 75 gold Napoleons added to it makes 10,500 francs; 215 five-franc pieces 1,075 francs more, and 425 francs in smaller coins. Altogether the 12,000 francs (2480) which are to be given over to Mrs. Blanchard. Upon my word 'tis a goodly sum! I never had so much in my keeping before." Thereupon the good priest began to count some of the rolls of silver over again; and so absorbed was he in this occupation, that he failed to hear a knock at the door. On its being repeated rather loudly, he started and called out "Come in!" in rather a frightened tone. In came the sacristan, and when he saw all the money on the table he made an attempt to conceal his astonishment. "Bless my soul!" he exclaimed, as he ran his eyes greedily over the little heap of bank notes, the glittering gold coins, and the various piles of silver money. "I beg your pardon, Father, but I really had no idea your reverence was so rich."

"Not a penny of all this belongs to me," answered the priest, by no means well-pleased that the sacristan, of all people, should find him engaged in counting a large sum of money. He mistrusted the man, and certainly his antecedents were not such as to inspire confidence. He was an unprepossessing-looking fellow, of average height and powerful build, not more than forty years of age, although he might have been taken for ten years older. There was a bold, bad look in his dark eyes, and his moustache, twisted upwards at the ends gave him a somewhat rakish appearance. A broad scar passing over the upper part of his nose and left cheek, did not add to the attractiveness of his countenance. In fact, it would not have been easy to find anyone more unsuitable in appearance for the office he held. Albert Loser—such was his name—was a native of Lorraine, and had served in a company of Franc-tireurs during the Franco-German war on the French side, and as he was wont to boast, had shot down not a few Prussians in cold blood. After the war was over, in reward for his exploits in the field, he received a medal, with a right to have a situation provided for him in the civil service. Several posts had been given him in succession, but his irregular conduct and neglect of duty generally led to his dismissal within a short space of time. His only recommendation, or rather claim on his country, was the sabre-cut across his face, which he alleged to be the work of a Prussian Hussar during a skirmish. In the course of his wandering he had come about a year ago to Provence, and by his glib tongue had ingratiated himself with the Mayor, who happened to be looking out for a sacristan, and offered the vacant post to the hero of many battles. Loser accepted it on trial; "I never could tolerate priests," he said to the Mayor, "but beggars must not be choosers." Nothing better having presented itself since, he had kept the situation, thanks to the favor he had found with the Mayor, although he had given the priest grave cause for dissatisfaction.

It will be readily imagined that the appearance upon the scene of such a man as this was rather disconcerting for Father Montmoulin, who remarked the covetous look in his eyes as they rested upon the gold. It flashed through his mind in an instant that he was all alone in the rambling, old-fashioned building with this man whom he knew to be unscrupulous, not a soul being within call. Involuntarily he started to his feet and stood between Loser and the table whereon the money lay, placing his hand on a chair, as the only weapon of defence within reach, and repeating in a determined manner: "This money does not belong to me, it has been collected by St. Joseph's Guild, and is intended for the building of a new hospital. Mrs. Blanchard is coming to fetch it to-morrow or the next day."

"You need not be alarmed, your reverence," rejoined Loser with a mocking smile, for he guessed the good priest's thoughts. "I shall not take you for one of the accursed Prussians, whose game I stopped—all is fair in war, and for the sake of one's country. There is not a more harmless man in creation in time of peace,

I cannot say so to a goose upon my honor. And as this money is for the sick and needy, I will not ask so much as a penny of it. And do you think I would demean myself to fill one of those pretty banknotes—all of a hundred francs, I do believe—either by fair means or foul? Fie, fie, Father, I would not have credited you with such a rash judgment! But it all comes of your mistaken idea that only your pious folk have any idea of honor. It is quite true that I have not been to the Sacraments for twenty years or more, and don't mean to neither, in spite of your reverence's fine sermon about confession, yet none shall say that Albert Loser is not an honest man!" And as he uttered these words in tones of righteous indignation, striking his breast in a theatrical manner, he was busy plotting a scheme which was diametrically opposed to the virtues he claimed for himself.

The simple-minded priest only thought at the moment how he could best get the man to his duties. "I am very sorry, my good fellow," he said. "If I judged you somewhat harshly; but just tell me, how can one expect a man to be very conscientious who has neglected to fulfil his bounden duty towards God and his own immortal soul for twenty or five and twenty years." Qui sibi nequam, cui bonas? Will a man who is his own enemy be a friend to others?"

"Well, well, Father, one would think you had preached enough for to-day! Who knows if there really is a God, and if there is, whether he troubles Himself about such insignificant creatures as you and me. And as for immortal soul, science has long since shown that we have nothing of the sort. But I did not come here to discuss these matters with you, Father. Of course God exists for you and you must have an immortal soul, it belongs to your profession."

"You forget yourself strangely, Loser!" interrupted the clergyman, repressing with difficulty the just anger he felt at this godless way of talking. "What did you come to ask me?"

"Ah true. The sight of all this wealth for the Church and the poor put my own business out of my mind," Loser replied. "I wanted to ask for a holiday till next Saturday. You can get along quite well without me in the week. I should like to go to Marseilles, where a friend of mine has heard of a situation which I think will suit me better than being a sacristan. Where have I put his letter to—" he concluded, feeling in his pockets.

"Never mind about showing me the letter," answered the Priest, while the man was still fumbling in his pockets. "Go to Marseilles by all means, and I hope you will meet with something desirable. I will ring the Angelus myself, I am generally up before you are. Old Susan can open and shut the church; leave the key on the kitchen table when you are going."

"I shall start to-night. I can easily catch the last train from Aix. I am much obliged to you for giving me leave of absence. And may I venture, seeing your Reverence is flush of cash just now, to ask for a little loan—a mere trifle—one of the hundred-franc notes I see there."

"I have already told you that this money is not mine to dispose of. And if it were, it is quite against my rule to lend you money."

"Well, if you consider me a thief—" "It is quite against my rule, and that is enough. But if a small gratuity out of my own pocket will be of service to you—" and the priest held out a five-franc piece to the man, for the sake of getting rid of him.

"I will accept it as my well-earned due," answered Loser, as he slipped the coin into his waistcoat pocket. "I will not take it as an alms. I am not a beggar. Besides I shall soon be out of my financial difficulties. I expect a legacy, an aunt in Lorraine, quite a rich woman, is said to be dying. I wish your Reverence good day!" And with a low bow, and another greedy glance at the money on the table, he took his departure.

"Thank Heaven the hateful man is gone," exclaimed Father Montmoulin with a sigh of relief. "I must confess I am right glad that he is going away to-night. I should hardly feel it safe to pass the night alone with him in this desolate old house, now that he has discovered how large a sum I have in my keeping. Heaven forgive me, if I do him wrong, but the man seems to me most untrustworthy. He is quite capable of making a feint of going away and coming back secretly to-night. My best plan will be to take the money to the Mayor. Besides it might give an opportunity of getting on more friendly terms with that good gentleman; hitherto he has always sided against me."

While thus soliloquizing, Father Montmoulin wrapped up the money, after counting it again hastily, in one of his large red and white cotton handkerchiefs, and deposited it for the time being in the drawer of his desk. Just as he was taking the key out of the lock, the clear merry tones of a boyish voice were heard through the

open window. Looking out, the worthy priest saw his mother with his sister's two children in the act of crossing the courtyard.

"Is that really you, Mother," he exclaimed, his eyes sparkling with pleasure.

"Here I am, as you see Francis, and I hope I find you well and happy," was the answer that came up from below; the children adding their greetings.

But their Uncle, leaving the door of his room open behind him, was already hastening along the dimly-lighted corridor to the stairs, which led down into what was formerly the cloisters. He met his mother just as she reached the archway which connected the outer building with what in by-gone days was the enclosure. He welcomed her and embraced her affectionately; then, drawing her out of the dark passage into the day-light, he scanned her features anxiously, for it was some months since he saw her, and he had heard from his sister that she had several times been unwell.

"Last winter has not improved my appearance, has it?" she said cheerily. "I have not grown younger; look what ugly wrinkles have made their appearance, and my hair has turned quite white."

"I think your white hair is very becoming to you, mother; and as for the wrinkles we will see if we cannot smooth them out, and give you round rosy cheeks again," rejoined the young priest. "I have good news for you," he continued. "In a few weeks time we will have your room fitted up for you beautifully. At present my funds are rather low. But come upstairs now, we must have an extra strong cup of coffee in your honor. Look here, Charles, run down to the baker's, will you, the third shop in the village street, and fetch two or three rolls and a dozen sweet cakes. Here is some money. Now Julia, you must see if you can help make the coffee."

"Oh, I can make coffee all alone, and good coffee, too," answered the girl, while her brother scampered off to the baker's in high glee. "If only Susan has left enough coffee ready ground," she added.

She ran lightly upstairs, for having been at Ste. Victoire before, she knew her way about the old convent, only pausing for a moment to listen to her grandmother's injunction to put on an apron, and be sure not to soil her Sunday frock. Father Montmoulin, meanwhile conducted his mother with a somewhat more sober step to his room.

Little did he suspect that, while the scene we have described was being enacted below, Loser was still spying about his room, lurking in the dark angles of the corridor. It is necessary to explain that the old convent, built on a ledge of rock, formed three sides of a quadrangle; the church on the left, and a corresponding wing on the right, being connected by a wide facade. The front of the building, two stories high, looked down into the valley where the village lay. The priest occupied a good-sized room in the angle where the two corridors leading respectively to the church on the one side and the right wing on the other, met. In former times this had probably been the Abbess's room, as it commanded a view of both corridors, and the double row of cells opening into them. Communicating with this sitting room was a small bedroom, the only one to which access could not be had from the corridor. On the other side there was no adjoining room, as a corridor had been left to allow of the chapel being lighted by a window in the outside wall, without which it would have been almost completely in darkness. Opposite the Priest's rooms, in the inner angle of the building, was a small apartment separating the row of cells; it was very dark, as the window was small, but there was a door on either side leading to the two wings. In this room, probably once the kitchen of the infirmary, was a cooking-stove which served for the preparation of the good pastor's simple meals; the kitchen of the convent being a spacious apartment with a vaulted roof on the ground floor.

To this little kitchen Loser had betaken himself on quitting the Priest's presence. He made a critical survey of the narrow, ill-lighted chamber, with its two fold doors of exit. When, in obedience to the priest's directions, he laid his bunch of keys on the table he pulled open the drawer, and began to examine its contents. Amongst these was a sharp carving-knife, with the initials F. M. engraved on a silver plate let into the handle; this he took up, and felt the edge with his finger. "That is by no means blunt," he said to himself; then holding it like a dagger, he made a swift lunge with it in the air, before replacing it in the drawer, which he closed. "We shall not want that," he muttered. "Though it might be the shortest way. No, no; I hate bloody work."

At that moment he heard Father Montmoulin calling from the window to his friends below, and immediately afterwards saw him hasten down stairs. Taking for granted that the exchange of greetings would occupy some time, Loser ventured to go back to the priest's room. "Confound it!" he exclaimed, "he has put all the chink away! Hullo there, the key is left in the desk, let us have a look inside. 'Pon my word there is the whole blessed lot, wrapped up neatly in a handkerchief quite handy to take away. Shall I do this office for him." The man's hand was already on the parcel but prudence prevailed. "He would find it out to-night, and the police would arrest me. Do not be a fool old fellow, you shall have the pelf, but one must not be precipitate." He withdrew his hand reluctantly, and locked the desk. "I will take the key," he added, "it may come in handy. If he misses it, he will only think he mislaid it in his hurry."

Loser had only time to slip the key into his waistcoat pocket, to give a glance at the bed-room beyond, and dart back into the kitchen, before Julia's footsteps were heard approaching, as she ran singing up the stairs. To avoid being seen he went out by one of the side doors into the adjoining corridor, where a winding staircase enabled him to reach his own quarters, the porter's lodge at the principal entrance. He locked himself in, to avoid being disturbed while he was concocting his plans, and getting an hour later he emerged from his room, dressed for a journey, with hat and stick, and a small travelling bag slung round his shoulders. He fastened the door behind him, taking with him the ponderous, old-fashioned key. We will follow him for a short distance before returning to Father Montmoulin and his unexpected visitors.

He first turned his steps in the direction of the "Golden Rose," one of the village inns, which at this time of the year was generally pretty full of a Sunday afternoon. To-day there was not an empty seat, and the worthy landlord, Daddy Carillon, as he was familiarly called, with his black velvet skull cap and white apron, had enough to do edging in and out among his guests, ministering to their anxious wants. The room was full of smoke, and pipes were being eagerly discussed, as glass after glass of absinthe, or of the red wine of the country was being consumed.

"Who comes now? Why our Sacristan to be sure!" exclaimed the host, as Loser made his appearance in the door-way. "Not converted yet by our good Pastor's sermon this morning. But I see you have a travelling bag, where are you off to now?" "I am off to Marseilles by the last train," Loser answered, raising his voice so as to be heard by all present. "I have come in for a small legacy in Lorraine, an old aunt of mine has just died, a wily rich old woman. Of course the priests have grabbed the principal part of her property, for the poor old soul was one of your pious sort. However she has had the sense to leave a trifle to her godless nephew, somewhere about a couple of thousand pounds. Now those devils of Prussians, who have not forgotten the brave Franc-tireurs who carried their outpost at Bar-le-Duc, and blew up a bridge at Fontenoy under their very noses, will not give up the money to me. I must get legal advice, and perhaps I shall not be back until next Sunday, if they are slow about it."

This intelligence made quite a stir in the inn parlour. Some of the guests congratulated Loser on his good fortune; some advised him to apply to the governor of Marseilles, others would have him lay his grievances before the President of the Republic, or appeal to Parliament. War ought to be declared with Prussia if every penny of the sum was not paid within twenty-four hours.

Loser began to fear he had gone a little too far. He begged the good people who espoused his cause, so earnestly to wait for further information; he would make the Germans look small he said, when they got a lawyer's letter from this side of the frontier. Then taking the key of his lodge and that of the Convent gate out of his pocket, he handed them to the landlord, requesting him to take care of them during his absence. He was about to take his departure, but Daddy Carillon would not let him go so unceremoniously.

"Plenty of time yet to catch the night train," he cried. "You must do me the honor, Mr. Loser, to take a glass with me and my friends here, to drink your health, and good success to your business. I have always regarded you as a patriot, Mr. Loser, as a hero, I may say, and the scar that marks your cheeks is a decoration to be prouder of than the ribbon of the Legion of Honor, which the Prefect of our Department wears on his breast, though he has never been in a single engagement. And I have always regarded you, Mr. Loser, as an honorable man, to whom fate has not given his deserts, since you, a man of advanced thought, are compelled to pander to the clericals, and serve an effete superstition. But at length fortune has been kind to you, and if, now that you are a gentleman of property, a man of wealth, we cannot expect to see you again in our humble village—for doubtless you will find elsewhere an appointment more commensurate with your talents—if you find a more fitting sphere in which to serve your country, may we beg, Mr. Loser, that when basking in the sunshine of your happiness, you will not altogether forget your old friends at Ste. Victoire. I drink to your health, Sir!"

Although up to this time Loser had borne by no means the best of characters in the village, yet all persons applauded this speech, and joined in a hearty cheer, congratulating him on his good fortune and coming greatness. The inn-keeper was quite elated by his oratorical performance, and shook hands all around, before taking the head of the table, and looking at his side. "Twilight had long fallen on the scene before the sacristan left the Golden Rose, and took the road to Aix, being escorted for a part of the way by some of his boon companions.

(To be Continued).