

CARROLL O'DONOGHUE

CHRISTINE FABER
Author of "A Mother's Sacrifice," etc.
CHAPTER XLVIII.—CONTINUED

Rick returned with good-natured Mrs. Murphy. Her motherly skill immediately devised means of comfort for Nora which were grateful and refreshing to the still weak girl. She reclined on the well-worn lounge, and looked at the kind-hearted matron bustling about in services for Rick, as well as for the invalid she had come to tend, with, as Mrs. Murphy expressed it, "the smile of an angel."

"Tired of you, your reverence!" the boy's two hands closed with an affectionate pressure upon the priest's hand, and his eyes met those of the clergyman with an eloquent expression of gratitude, while he continued: "I place you in my heart with Cathleen."

No more was said, and the boy walked confidently by the side of his benefactor to the little dwelling, where the self-sacrificing priest found that, comparatively short as had been his absence, there had been numerous calls for him. So perfect, however, was his discipline of himself that, though tortured by distressing thoughts of the doomed Carroll and the unhappy Nora and Clare, each the fond playmate of his youth, no trace of his inward agitation was suffered to appear—his exterior had all that calmness which is ever the sign of a truly mortified will.

The next day was the vigil of the assumption, and in the afternoon many waited in the little chapel to be admitted to shrift. Hour after hour the poor, patient priest sat, hearing the doleful story of sin and voluntary imperfection, and reproving, admonishing, exhorting and counseling. He never seemed to weary; even when the tale was but the outpouring of a morbid self-love craving for the sympathy which should minister to its vanity.

The last penitent had disappeared within the confessional, and the whispered sound of voices from the curtained recess could be heard throughout the little chapel, when an ill-dressed man with shuffling gait entered, and knelt for an instant near the door. Then rising, he looked about him with a wild stare. There was no one within sight, and guided by that sound of whispering voices, he walked slowly to the confessional. Kneeling almost in front of the sacred tribunal, he bowed his head and beat his breast, while burning tears gushed from his eyes. The penitent came forth, and Father O'Connor, observing the kneeling form, waited. It rose, walked a few steps forward, then, as if deterred by some sudden fear, paused, and knelt again to bow his head and beat its breast. Still the priest waited.

At length, with a motion so sudden and hurried that he seemed to be impelled by an unseen power, Rick of the Hills arose and darted within the penitent's side of the confessional. "What was there in the tale he so gaspingly told to make the priest start and tremble—to make him lift the curtain which screened him from view, and lean forward as if he was stifling for air?"

"You do not speak, father," gasped the penitent, when the last of that thrilling confession was told—"is there pardon for me?" "But even though I should recognize her," resumed Rick, mournfully, "she will not know me, and she may refuse to acknowledge me."

"I think not," answered the priest. "Providence, who has dealt so mercifully with you, will not now impute your cup of happiness just as it is at your lips. Besides, you will carry to her a letter from me, and you can get the record of her baptism."

Wild hope once more flooded the heart of the excited man; in his joy he dropped on his knees at the feet of Father O'Connor. "Father, have you forgiven me?" For an instant the priest's eyes were turned upward; then they fell with their wonted kindly look on the kneeling suppliant, as he answered: "When God forgives, of what have I, the creature, to complain?"

Rick bent over the hand he grasped, and bedewed it with his tears. "Nora," he said, when his emotion calmed sufficiently to let him speak—"how shall I quiet her anxiety?" "I shall attend to that," answered Father O'Connor; "give yourself no concern, Rick, save to thank God for His wonderful goodness to you. Tomorrow I think you and Bartley can begin the journey."

But Cathleen knows why you remain from her," answered the priest; "have I not twice written to her about you—how you were hurt in Tralee by the overturning of a vehicle, how strangers kindly cared for you, and how you persevered in journeying to me only to become ill as soon as you found me? She knows these particulars, and she knows, also, that I will send you back to her as soon as you have sufficiently recovered—are you tired of me, Bartley, that you want to leave me so soon?"

Father O'Connor did not reply for a moment; his eyes sought the floor, and his lips moved as if in prayer; at last he looked up. "Yes, Rick, since you so desire; and now tell me the story as clearly as you can."

He tightly closed the little parlor door, took from the pocket of his soutane a small tablet and pencil, and as Rick proceeded with his tale, marked down sufficient to enable him to repeat the account. On its conclusion Rick sat with flushed face and folded arms.

The priest arose. "Rick," he said, and his voice had a startling clearness, "thank God from your heart for this night's work! He has already pardoned you, and He would even now give you an earthly reward for your act of justice, late though you have performed that act. Cathleen—your Cathleen—is within your reach!"

"Great God! what do you mean?" The poor startled creature was up from his seat, his wild eyes turned appealingly on the clergyman's face, and he was gasping for breath. "The priest said softly: 'You shall know in a moment,' and then he left the room, returning shortly, and leading by the hand the beautiful boy whom he had called Bartley. 'Tell,' he said to the wondering lad, 'all that you know about Cathleen Kelly—this person here thinks he too knows her, and he would like to hear you speak of her.'"

An exquisite smile broke over the boy's face; he needed no pressing to accede to the request, for instantly and artlessly he poured forth all that his own ardent affection for Cathleen prompted—her sisterly kindness to himself—to her was owing his own unusual intelligence—her charity to others, her constant gentleness; all was told with a candor and earnestness which must have carried conviction to the most unbelieving mind. Rick could not restrain his emotion; he held his clasped hands before his face, but the tears trickled through his fingers.

"Perhaps, after all," he said brokenly, "it is not she—not my Cathleen." "It is, Rick," the priest had said upon Rick's shoulder—"I have other reasons than Bartley's story for knowing that the Cathleen he speaks of is your Cathleen; and you shall be speedily convinced, for in company with this lad you shall go to her,—now that he will have some one with him, I think perhaps he will be strong enough to make the journey."

"I will, father; indeed I will!" said the boy joyfully. "But even though I should recognize her," resumed Rick, mournfully, "she will not know me, and she may refuse to acknowledge me."

"I think not," answered the priest. "Providence, who has dealt so mercifully with you, will not now impute your cup of happiness just as it is at your lips. Besides, you will carry to her a letter from me, and you can get the record of her baptism."

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Rick was waiting in the little parlor; if he had feared to meet the priest because of his recent wretched tale, the first glance of the clergyman's soft, pitying eyes, the first touch of the friendly hand so cordially extended to him, at once restored his confidence.

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ADA ROACH'S PUZZLE

Busy feet pattered softly along the padded corridors. Sweet-faced women in bright nurse's costume or somber Slater's garb passed in and out of the spotless halls and chambers in the refuge which Mercy had made for Pain. In one of these rooms, her drawn face as white as the enameled bed on which she lay, a woman was dying. Though science clearly saw and read the decree of imminent death written in her vital organs, her mind was clear, her senses alert. She would not have guessed that the end was so near had she not been told. But Father Casey watched at her bedside, and far from him was the cruel pity which hides approaching death from its victim, and thus prevent the poor human soul, trembling on the brink of eternity, from preparing for the supreme effort to prepare for the meeting with its All-Just Judge. With tact born of long experience and boundless charity he had helped Ada Roach to realize that her hours were numbered and to put the few remaining to the best possible use.

Acts of Faith, Hope, Love, Contrition, Resignation, petitions for forgiveness and grace, protestations of desire for heaven, of unreserved abandonment to the mercy of God—he repeated them again and again, while she followed in word or in thought. In his heart he thanked Jesus and Mary for the calm Christian sentiments in which this brave, humble soul faced death. Soon, however, he began to be disturbed. Who can tell what the temptations the enemy may marshal for a last desperate attack on the departing soul? He saw clearly that ever and anon a troubled look passed over her wasted features.

"My child," he said at length in his solicitude, "you are going to meet the best of fathers. Banish every doubt and fear. Throw yourself with unbounded confidence upon His mercy. The contrite and humble heart He will never despise."

"Father," the voice was full of courage, "I am not afraid. I have confessed all the sins I could remember. I am sorry for everything I have ever done to offend God. I believe He will pardon me and be merciful to me."

"But my child, something is troubling you. I can see it on your face. Tell me—what is it?" "Oh, Father, Father, must you ask me that! Can men never understand a woman's heart! Don't you know I must see Richard again before I die—that I must tell him how I have always loved him—hear him promise that he will return to God?"

"God will hear your dying prayer for the husband you have loved and lost, and wherever he may be, send holy thoughts into his mind and grace into his heart."

"God will do more—He will send Richard to me before I die—I have appealed to His Sacred Heart. But they tell me death is so near. How will Jesus do it, I wonder. I am not troubled by the puzzle, The Sacred Heart will find a way."

"What could the poor priest do but tell her to pray, that no true prayer goes unheard, that God will give us the very thing we ask for, or something else which He knows to be better for us. For Richard Roach had never been seen since that day ten years before when he left his young wife, his heart embittered against God and man."

"You remember, Father," she said to the priest, "that picture of the Sacred Heart you gave to Richard and me on our wedding day?" "I remember well, because I gave it for a purpose. Beneath the picture was inscribed that consoling promise: 'I will bless every home set up and honored.' I knew you and Richard could be happy together—happy in the unshakeable happiness of the true Christian home—if only you would learn to look upon life as a serious matter—learn that no worthy character is formed, no true good attained, without self-denial and self-sacrifice. I named your devotion to the Sacred Heart would bring you this blessing, for He is very true to His promise: 'I will bless every home in which the image of My Sacred Heart is set up and honored.'"

"Father," she replied humbly, "our home was not blessed, but we cannot blame the Sacred Heart. We set up His picture, but we did not honor it. We were too much taken up with our selfish pleasures to honor anything that stood for suffering and sacrifice as the Sacred Heart of Jesus does. He did not bless our home—why should He? We were never in it. Selfish indulgence brings selfish vanity, selfish suspicions and selfish jealousy. When Richard accused me I resented it. I had been foolish, but not bad. A word would have explained; I would not speak it. After the divorce, he learned the truth, and came repentant to repair the wrong he had done me by his false suspicions. I turned him away with a show of haughty disdain which I did not feel—and I never saw him since. But the Sacred Heart will not let me die without seeing him. I remained in the home which our foolish levity had wrecked. I kept the picture of Jesus showing His Sacred Heart, and I honored it—after I had learned in the school of sorrow to prize the lessons of the Sacred Heart—I honored it. And He will hear me. He will bless even a broken home and unite its

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