

Man and His Illusions

BY KONRAD KUEMMEL.

(Continued)

The priest had hardly left his study when the door to his bedroom opened quietly and the sacristan entered. He examined the large envelope. Within it he saw the sealed Will. "I can do nothing with that," he grumbled. Then he took up the other envelope. "Ah! a Hundred-Mark bill!" he chuckled, examining it for a while. Suddenly, with gleaming eyes and altered face, quick as lightning, he took the bill and shoved it into the envelope with the testament, which he then sealed. The now empty second envelope he placed beside the other, just as he found it, then noiselessly leaving, he footed into the room the dog, which was lying by the threshold, closed the door, and with a mocking leer went down and out into the yard. The dog immediately began to bark and howl.

"Jack, go up and let the growler out," Agnes bade the sexton, just as she was serving wine to the men. "No, Agnes, you better go yourself," quickly enjoined the priest.

"All right, uncle," and the girl tripped up the stairs and released the yelping dog.

After a little while the priest said to the notary: "You can save me the sending of a bill; as treasurer of the Catholic Diaspora you can credit me with a hundred marks, which I have received in trust for them and which I will hand over to you. The money is already laid by."

"With pleasure," the notary assented. But when he came to look for it, the envelope was empty. Nowhere was there a trace of the bill. The longer he sought, the more excited the priest became.

"Did you perhaps put the bill in with the Will?" the notary inquired.

"No—impossible," the priest replied; "I sealed the testament and placed it in the envelope in view of all of you: whereas I took out the Hundred-Mark bill only after you had gone below." Amid this excitement and confusion, it is readily seen how it happened that he forgot to open the first envelope.

"Has no one been in the room?" the notary ventured to ask. "None but Agnes," although unwittingly he thought of Jack Sparr. Agnes was called; she saw nothing, in fact, she had not been in the room at all. Finally, the sexton-assistant was questioned. Not satisfied with proving that he had been all the while in the yard, he demanded that he be searched; he emptied his pockets, took off his shoes, and swore by all that's holy he had stolen nothing. The money had disappeared and could not be found.

"Under the circumstances, dear notary," said the priest in his great dilemma, "I can give you nothing. I have not another hundred just now at hand. Of course, I am responsible for the money; that must satisfy you."

With malignant pleasure Sparr overheard the last words.

Eight days after, one of the most vicious leaflets of the Capital spoke about questionable things happening in the parsonage of Ortingen. A hundred marks which the priest had received for charitable purposes had been stolen, but instead of examining the inmates of the parsonage, he accused of theft and subjected to a humiliating personal examination before a crowd of approved boon companions, a young man wholly innocent, who enjoys the best of reputation and is universally liked, as a matter of course the innocence of the youth was fully established. The parish is in revolt at the occurrence and in view of what has happened is asking and would like to know the

value of the guarantee which the rectory affords for the moneys entrusted to it for charitable purposes.

The leaflet was secretly slipped in every village house. And it was read by the folk with an avidity and assent, as if it were a page from the Gospel or from a prayer-book, and not rather as the calumniating drivell from the pen of a degraded and unscrupulous scoundrel. In proportion as the pastor came to be mistrusted, sympathy for the poor "assistant" grew among the people, whom he obliged in every way.

A week later, a second news item of the kind above appeared in the same leaflet. It said: "Our last article created a sensation in Ortingen; the people are glad that the 'happenings' at the rectory are at last being publicly ventilated. There are many things still to uncover. Up to date the Hundred-Mark bill has not been found. His Reverence in consequence is grieving himself almost to death; his sister also. The little coquette, Miss A., however, seems not specially concerned about it at all; on the contrary, she is as pert as ever and amuses herself exchanging amorous rose-tinted billets-doux with the handsome teacher and in arranging meetings, for which occasions she knows admirably to adorn her diminutive person with fascinating attraction. But let no one dare to remonstrate with her, and woe to him who criticizes her singular behavior even remotely before the priest! For be it known, that trim little Agnes is practically undisputed mistress of the house and the declared favorite of the pastor. All this is not to the edification of the parish and the people are asking how long this is to continue."

This leaflet was likewise distributed by the dozens in the houses, in the church and in the park on Sunday; a stack was left upon the hedge of the priest's garden. The unholy machinery of hell was working feverishly.

7. A Pair of Enraged Vipers

It was forenoon. The Rev. Pastor, as was his monthly custom, had departed early for his mission to say Mass. Agnes, who had been working hard in the garden, was resting a moment close by the wall, in the shade of an over-branching tree. She was leisurely sipping cold milk from a bowl; this was her lunch. A rustling was heard behind her, and she observed a vigorous viper coming out slowly from a cleft in the tufa; near-by a second flat head appeared, winding sluggishly toward the place where the girl sat. Agnes looked and laughed at the reptiles but did not move a step.

"You have smelt the milk, no doubt, you epicures!" She poured a little of the fluid into cup-sherds and fearlessly set them before the vipers as you would serve milk to a cat. Not long and the reptiles were lapping their ambrosia. Then coiling themselves up for sleep, the head in the middle, they sunbathed on the coping, from which in color they could hardly be distinguished. At times, one and then the other would raise its head and peer fixedly at the girl.

"You surely have it nice," Agnes babbled with the creatures; "you sleep till the sun is high up, then enjoy a breakfast of milk, pay nothing for rent, heat and light, and work at nothing all day, for you allow the mice to run into your very mouth. Yes, yes, just look at me; it is true. Maybe you are a fairy prince and princess, I beg pardon then for having spoken to you; in that case you must invite me to your palace and show me all its glory."

Then with a mock-bow she continued: "And don't forget it was I who saved your life and good name more than once. How often have I explained to people that you are

not poisonous but useful creatures. You can be quick to anger, though, especially you, the big long one. How you frightened my little pussy the time it was after your tail. Like a tiger, you flew in its face, so that from very fright it tumbled over the wall; this is hardly becoming a princess."

To the gestures of her threatening finger one of the creatures darted its head upward, but it settled back as quickly under the soothing pressure of her hand.

Agnes was taking her last swallow of milk, when the garden gate creaked and the voices of women were heard. The sister of the priest, the teacher's mother and Mrs. Sparr entered. Greatly excited they hurried up to the girl and nearly frightened her out of her wits. They stood facing her. "Agnes," said the housekeeper, "we must speak to you."

The girl wished to reply, but the looks of the women unnerved her. As yet she knew nothing of the news items against her Reverend Uncle and against herself, nor was she aware that Mrs. Sparr had ingeniously worked up her companions to the highest pitch of excitement by showing them the articles in question.

Mrs. Sparr frightened the one woman with the threat that her son, the teacher, would be dismissed; in the heart of the other, the priest's sister, she kindled suspicion, jealousy, and an insane fear, all centering round her brother.

"Now tell us all," the aunt began, "before uncle returns; who would have believed possible such an affair in a priest's house! An intimacy! you have disgraced me and the Rev. pastor; is this your gratitude?"

With dilated eyes Agnes listened, then she laughed out loudly. "But, aunt, for whom do you take me," she interrupted, "do I look it? An intimacy—no, no, no, never!" she cried trembling all over.

The priest's sister looked at her for a moment with astonishment, then the teacher's mother blurted out: "Agnes, did my son ever hand you a rose-tinted letter?"

Purpling over, the maiden stood for a moment dismayed—the poem came to her mind; it would be impossible to explain it to the women. A minute after she replied: "Dear friend, for God's sake, don't you believe what I said a moment ago?"

"I ask you," probed the aunt, what truth is there about the letter." Agnes was about to speak, but noticing the gleaming, feline eyes of the woman Sparr, she hesitated: "I will tell it all to Reverend Uncle; he will exculpate me." The old woman now came up approaching Agnes, who instinctively retreated to the very wall, and bawled: "Of course, it is necessary to lie to His Reverence again, for he is quite in your power, you beggarly witch! However, it ends today; you must get out!"

Whooping and shouting, she furiously struck out her arm against the girl; but suddenly with a ringing, soul-piercing cry the hag fell back, for at that very moment, the larger of the vipers enraged, shot forth with lightning speed and coiling about her arm, bit her viciously in the hand. With hateful screams she rolled on the ground until the reptile had loosed its hold and disappeared among the stones.

In the meantime, while Agnes was relating to her aunt the innocent affair of the rose-tinted letter, the other woman ran to call the village surgeon. He was out, so the blacksmith was summoned. Notwithstanding Agnes' assertion that the viper's bite is non-poisonous, he, perhaps to add to his prestige, ordered that the wounds be cauterized with a red-hot iron to prevent the poison from spreading. A little later doleful yells long and continued came from the smithy up the street; the smith having

done his business thoroughly, the old woman with a seared, bandaged arm, hobbled home. The poison of her soul, however, was not burnt out. "For the present say nothing to uncle," the aunt enjoined strictly; "leave it to me." Pale as death Agnes returned to the house.

8. The Powers of Darkness Triumph

That same night, a company unanimous in its fell purpose met in a small backroom at the landlord's. As a matter of course the innkeeper and Jack Sparr were present; the urbane stranger, who had been much in the village recently, also. Malignant joy prevailed. "Those news items were veritable bombs; you'll hardly find a man in the village to-day who is for the priest. The people are one in demanding that he leave." It was decided that henceforth the anti-religious paper in which the articles against the priest had appeared should be introduced into the village.

Jack Sparr volunteered to secure subscribers. Late at night, the urbane left accompanied by Sparr, to whom further instructions were to be given what next to do. "Be sure to flatter the people, always give them right; never contradict them no matter how nonsensical what they affirm, and all the while exploit all the doings of the priest to the last detail. You are a genius," he flattered the vain fellow, "an agitator of first class. Keep on in this way and some day you may openly defy the priest with the whole parish to back you."

They parted. Onward, alone through the night, the stranger muttered: "Things have progressed, and we have now a footing in Ortingen. Our paper will have fifty subscribers more and in a short time our party will rule the roost." Jack Sparr, towards the village bent, soliloquized in his own way: "The priest must leave soon and he cannot take Agnes with him, that is settled. Left behind, she will be friendless and alone; then I will come, and will be good to her, and she will be mine. After that the stranger and his paper may go to the deuce."

It happened that a few weeks later, going to the sacristy ahead of his accustomed time, the priest saw a stack of papers in a corner, which proved to be hundreds of samples of the anti-religious leaflet. They were filled with a new installment of lies and vituperations. The gist of this third attack on the priest was a statement openly made that he must leave. "The parish attends church no longer, it has lost confidence, and will be Protestantized unless a change is made soon." No reason for all this was given. The servers told the priest that Sparr had brought the papers. When confronted with the fact and with the implication that it was he also who had scattered them the other times, his answer was only a scornful laugh.

Next day was Chapter meeting. The Reverend Pastor brought to the council's notice his charges against Sparr and asserted that for the reasons assigned he should be dismissed as assistant-sacristan. The priest's motion, however, was voted down by a considerable majority. "The sexton-help has triumphed over the priest," Sparr jubilated from house to house. "I am now more firmly fixed than ever in my position and I hope the priest will soon go."

Naturally, the victory over the priest, "of a free people who will no longer be ridden," appeared with glaring misrepresentations in the next issue of the little rabid sheet. Once again allusion was made to the vanished Hundred-Mark bill, for the loss of which the poor, honest, quiet, popular assistant was suspected, whereas the damsel continues as before the sole mistress of the parsonage.

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