

CHRISTMAS AT ST. DUNSTAN'S

MARION AMES TAGGART IN THE CATHOLIC WORLD.

Times were hard in the parish of St. Dunstan's. Perhaps the statement is superfluous, for times were never easier there, and the very mention of the parish was enough to call forth a groan of sympathy for its pastor from his brothers in the diocese. Hence it was not a place much sought for by candidates for vacant parishes, and when the Bishop sent young Father Francis there, just after his ordination, he had plenty of pity but none to envy him.

St. Dunstan's lay at the poorest end of a small town made up of manufactories and their workmen's houses, except the few better places west end of the town where the superintendents' and owners' families lived. There was never quite enough to eat in these little houses huddled together, for there was an average of at least five children in each of them, and money was scarce, and saloons plenty were the poor, tired, dull men found the only pleasure they knew in forgetting the hard day by the help of fiery adulterations of bad whisky.

There were a malarial, brawny, hopeless lot, begrimed by the iron and the smoke of the furnaces, made up of various nationalities, with a preponderance of the Irish, whose native fun was nearly eliminated by the conditions of their lives. And it was into such a parish that Father Francis came, a slender, pale youth of twenty three, with deep set, fervent eyes, and such an experience of men and life as a guarded boyhood and study in the seminary would be likely to give him.

The woman listened to his sermons, clasping pale babies to their breasts, and looking up at him with patient eyes, whose sadness had been drawn from the gaunt breasts of their mothers before them, and they accepted his words, although not especially applicable to the needs of their life, as good in themselves, and felt a vague, far-off desire to help him, born of the maternal instinct of their womanhood, and his youth, and a dim perception that he had much to learn.

But the men gave scant attention to the boyish priest, and when he exhorted them to keep away from the saloons, discussed his advice around the bar afterwards, smiling grimly at the impracticability of offering men the distant hope of heaven in exchange for the present bliss of the fiery stuff in their gnawing stomachs.

But as time went on the young priest took on a dignity in their eyes apart from, and far more effectual than, the mere fact of his ordination. He was quick to learn, and quick to feel the tragic needs of their life, and he ceased to exhort them for very shame of the difference between his past and theirs, stung with the bitterness of the lot that had made them what they were from their cradle, and farther back still. He worked for them and with them, spending every penny of the little salary they gave him for them, reserving for himself barely enough to feed himself poorly, and going about among them with coat and shoes already, at the end of the first year, getting very glossy and white about the seams and rusty and cracked in the vamps.

And with such garments thus worn he needed less to exhort, for the shabby coat preached for him; and when he went in shoes yawning at the side to beg the men to help him establish a coffee house, where they could meet and substitute honest hot coffee for the foe to which they were delivering them, many responded, and the coffee house was a success where every one predicted failure.

Tender sympathy, love, and a thirst for their souls that made his people realize dimly for the first time what God might be—this Father Francis showed to his flock, and his youth and delicate frame made him dearer to them, calling out a tenderness in the rough men and coarse-fibred women that supplemented their reverence, and perfected the relation between them.

"Father Francis" became a name to conjure by, even with the big Englishmen and Welshmen who were not Catholics and the castaways of St. Dunstan's who never entered the church; and since his family name was also a familiar Christian name, nearly every child he baptized after he had been in the parish a year was called Francis, with only the variation in the last syllable required by differences of sex.

And Father Francis a real gentleman born, "the people would say proudly, till the oldest woman in the parish gave a more spiritual turn to their pride in him by saying: "Ay, that he is, of the noble nobility, for he's one of the saints of God."

The chief mill of Pylesville was owned by a man named Denhard, whose splendid house on the outskirts of the town was built of the sinews of men, and cemented by their blood. There were many hard, close employers in the district; there was none other with such a black record as Denhard's whose name suffered appropriate and obvious profane corruptions on the lips of his men.

by against a rainy day out of the wages of a man who had not less than seven mouths to fill and backs to clothe.

In September came the fulfilment of the prophecies of the thoughtful. Wages were not reduced because the union stood between Denhard and that possibility, but the announcement was made that the mill would run but four days in the week, because it could not afford to do more owing to an overstocked market. "Overstocked Denhard!" said the knowing ones. "We told you. He worked us hard for five months at regular rates, and now he shuts down because he's got the stuff ahead to fill orders." But what was the use of talking? There was no redress for the misfortune; the union could not interfere to make a man run his mill when he said that he could not afford it, and on the four days of the week which they worked the men were paid at schedule rates. But how could they live with two days' earnings cut off from their already scant means? That was the priestly duty to be met, the solving of which fell heaviest on the patient women, whom the saloons did not help but rather fatally hindered.

There was sullen endurance through the glorious days of October, deftly rolling up while the mountains clothed themselves in gold and crimson, and the leaves fell, making a Persian carpet under the heavy feet of the ironworkers.

Matters had been going from bad to worse in the parish since late autumn had come, and the winds were blowing cold from the mountains, bringing scurries of snow with them. Thanks giving brought very little gratitude to the hearts of the people of St. Dunstan's, looking in the face a long winter in a severe region, with no hope of better days till spring, and then such a load of debt incurred as would prevent the improvement affecting their condition. And Mr. Denhard's family went to Europe just before the end of November; all but his crippled son, whom people said was the one thing he loved, and who stayed with his father in the big house.

Father Francis went about with a heavy heart and anxious brow that took from him the youthfulness as mere years could not take it. He had had no experience with the troubles among which he had been placed, but any one capable of reflection could see that desperate men, to whom the present was bitterly hard and the future more menacing still, could not be held in check, and he dared not speculate on the possible events of the winter. He redoubled his prayers and labor, and he could not help knowing that his people loved him as they had never loved him before, for he passionately resented their wrongs; but he realized how impotent was human pity, and felt like a straw on the great ocean of human suffering and passion, struggling with the agony of youth in its first encounter with the injustice it feels most keenly and cannot stay.

The men began gathering in knots around the saloons and corners, and the air was full of muttered threats. Father Francis went from one to another of these groups warning, imploring. "Don't strike, men; for the love of your poor wives and babies, don't strike!" he begged. "You are helpless; Denhard has the whole thing in his own hand. He has worked up enough stock to last till spring, and he would rather shut down than not. And where would you be? Half a loaf is better than none. As it is, you can keep along; badly it is true, but somehow. But with no work you would have no credit, and you'd starve. Don't strike—I pray you trust me, and don't strike!"

The men listened respectfully, sullenly, tolerantly, according to their dispositions; but they hated Denhard and they longed to get at him, and the only means they knew for this was to refuse to work for him. Their leader was a man who had a grudge of long standing against Denhard, and he was a fellow whose leadership was not won by fitness for the office, nor real sympathy with his comrades. He was a labor leader for what there was in it; and just now there was before his eyes but his power to call out the men, and force Denhard to close or make terms. That these men were to be the sufferers in the plan was not a matter that he considered in the least. And so the strike was ordered, and three weeks before Christmas the poor fellows, wronged by their employer and by their own leader, went out, and the mill was declared closed.

Denhard issued a sort of manifesto, in which he set forth the fact that he had fulfilled his contracts with the union and paid full wages, but that a man had an inalienable right to take care of his own interests. So, since he could not run his mill more than four days in the week without loss to himself, and was so well stocked that his suspension was welcome to him, the mill would shut down until the men should see the folly of their position and beg for work on the old terms.

Angry mutterings, swelling to open threats, hailed this declaration. Father Francis did his best to meet the cruel situation which he had been powerless to avert. Even one week of idleness brought sharp suffering to the families who had made no preparation for it, and, to make it harder, the winter set in early with old-fashioned vigor and severity.

It was known that there was no hope of Denhard's yielding, but that rather he had foreseen and desired this enforced idleness, and in many of the shops the men were refused a credit which would probably be too long to ever be discharged.

In ten days' time the suffering became severe, though it was accom-

panied with the acts of beautiful sacrifice of the poor for one another, and the selfish cruelty which such times always bring forth.

Father Francis spent every cent he possessed for food for his people, and when this was done, which did not take long, he pledged himself to discharge the debt if the grocer and butcher would give him the credit which they refused to the laborers. He got it, but his credit was limited, as was his salary, and all that he could do was to lighten a very little the awful gloom in the parish of St. Dunstan.

Sickness came, and the babies died—not many, for the children of the poor have a strong hold on life, but the weaker—and, looking down on the little pinched, waxen faces, Father Francis thought the wiser—died. Worse than this, pretty, flighty Nellie Byrnes, whom he had been trying to save from a flashy, prosperous adonis, and her own love of ribbons, went away deliberately to the city, saying that she could not stand her father's barren home any longer.

And Denhard drove in his big, furred coat down to the station and through the town, stout, red-faced from over-dining, absolutely impervious to the agony around him.

Father Francis' pale face grew grimmer at the sight, and he could hardly wonder at the muttered curses that followed Denhard from the gaunt men on the corners.

Thus the days dragged on, one like another, the situation unchanged except as every day heightened and accumulated the misery, and the men grew more restless under a burden too heavy to bear.

Father Francis feared all sorts of nameless horrors, for he knew the people were getting desperate, and he knew that though justice was on their side, the power was all on the other.

He seemed never to sleep; all his moments and hours were spent among his people, and in the midst of their bitterness and torture they loved him with a love that knew no bounds.

Two days before Christmas Father Francis commissioned some of the larger boys and girls to gather evergreens to trim the church, hoping in his aching heart that something of the sweetness of the feast might fall on the poor souls for whom heaven and its peace toward earth were sorely hidden by the bad will of man. He saw the deepening gloom on the faces around him, caught the echo of menaces that frightened him, but he hoped against hope, never dreaming that the end was so near.

It was Christmas Eve, and the church was trimmed for the feast, and Father Francis rose from the fragments of cedar heaped on the altar steps, and gave a parting look around the plain and pastoral little church before he looked the door for the night. He stood a few moments under the quiet stars, looking upward and wondering at their silent watchfulness of a world so full of wrong. He was too young not to feel that nature should show some pity for the life of man.

The night was still, the air clear and cold. Every sound could be heard for long distances, and the young priest distinctly heard the tramp of many feet going in the opposite direction. As he listened, in fear of he knew not what, one of his boys came toward him, running at top speed.

"O! Father, come; mother sent me!" he gasped. "Father and the men have gone to burn old Denhard's house. He's away and the cripple's there. She said you'd stop 'em!"

Father Francis did not pause for that; he wore his great coat over his cassock, and gathering up the skirts, he ran with all his best speed, by a shorter and more direct way than the mob had taken, to the big house which they were to attack.

He had been living on two meals a day during the trouble, and he feared his own weakness, but nerves did more than muscles could have done, and the boy at his side had hard work to keep pace with him.

He reached Denhard's house before the men, but only a few houses off the hill, and when the crowd came up the hill they halted an instant in amazement for there on the steps, his pale face standing out in the moonlight, bare headed and erect, stood their young priest facing them. While they hesitated at the sight of him, he hastened to use the advantage their surprise gave him.

"My men," he said, and his voice was strong and clear, "thank God I'm here to save you! Go back! 'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord. Your cause is just; you shall not spoil it by wrong. Trust me—I would gladly die for you! No one could hurt you as you would have hurt yourselves had you done this thing."

"We're going to make that devil sizzle for what he's done massing for a burly fellow at the front." "You get away," Father Francis. "You're a good man, and you're our friend, and we know it; but you're a priest, and we don't want any forgiveness in ours. We'll get a little square on our account. We couldn't pay him back, not if we was to cut him into inch pieces."

A murmur of applause followed. Father Francis was quick to catch a clue, and he answered at once: "I'm not preaching forgiveness like a priest. I couldn't blame you if you weren't ready to see that side. But I'm talking to you as your best friend, a man who loves you, and I say don't make bad worse. Go back! for you're bringing awful suffering on your children by this night's work."

"We'll go back by the light of Denhard's house!" cried a voice in the crowd, and instantly a shout arose in answer: "Burn it! Burn it! Kill the cripple in there! Take the priest away!"

Father Francis stood firmly against the door, his white, boyish face outlined on the background on the dark wood. The torches, which had been lighted from hand to hand in the last few moments, blazed up illumining the brawny chests, the grim faces, the muscular arms of the men who held them, in sharp contrast to the frail, slender figure facing them alone.

Father Francis raised his hand, and even then his voice had power to make itself heard. "I forbid you this sin," he said. "Command you to go back! I beg you to spare yourselves this new trouble. I love you, oh! my people; remember what night this is, and go back!"

For a moment the men looked at one another as if they might yield, but a voice called out: "We're not all your people. Some of us beez no Catholics."

"There's no Catholic or Protestant to me if a man's hungry—you know that," retorted Father Francis quickly. "You're all mine."

"Don't stand talking," said big Jim, the Welshman. "Take the priest off. What's a boy like that know of starving men? Take him off, or he'll get hurt. Now: Curse Denhard! Altogether, three times—Damn him!"

There times the curse arose like a cheer, and in the shout Father Francis knew his influence was lost.

"Good by," said Father Francis. The men were waiting silent, grief-stricken, outside the gates, and women and children were with them sobbing in suppressed anguish, for the news of the tragedy had been carried to the town.

"The doctor says I'm going to keep Christmas in heaven," said Father Francis as they pressed around his litter. "But the mill is to open at full hours and pay, and Denhard has sworn to be good to you forever. Give three cheers for Denhard, especially you who cursed him!"

There was profound silence. "For my sake, dear friends," added Father Francis; and the cheers arose, broken by sobs. "And now we will go home," said Father Francis. And with the people following, weeping, the procession went down the hill it had ascended so diffidently.

It was past midnight when they paused at the church door, and creeping up to look in the face so boyish and peaceful under the wintry sky, they saw that Father Francis had gently gone on his long journey beneath the Christmas stars.

The Pain of Parting. Life is made up of meetings and partings. No matter in what guise parting comes it is always painful, whether the mandate of the grim destroyer goes forth and we know that one of us must leave for the long journey to the land from whence no traveller ever returns, or whence of our own volition or by force or mundane circumstances a separation becomes necessary for weeks, months or years.

In parting there is always the hope of a reunion, but the wrench is no less severe on that account. The man or woman we have walked side by side with until their heart throbs were our very own, are taken away, perhaps only for a short space of time, but the terrible blank is left. The heart-hunger and the loneliness dwell with us until once more the dear one comes again into our lives and we feel that the sun shines and the birds sing. To some natures parting is not the pain it is to others. They do not feel deeply at any time, and what is a stab wound to one proves but a pin prick to another.

It is the man or woman who loves but few that feels the separation keenest. Chance acquaintances could come and go, drop out of their lives forever, and there would be but a passing regret at their absence; but when a loved one is forced to go away and they know they must live their lives without the dear presence, if for only a short time, the tears are not far from the eyes or the sobs from the voice.

Parting can never be sweet sorrow to such as these. There is no ameliorating quality about it, only a deep, lasting pain until reunion wipes out the memory of the long days of waiting.—Catholic Columbian.

The Stage of Convalescence is at once interesting and critical. The patient carefully guarded at this period and provided with the means essential for health, may be enabled once more to enjoy the inestimable blessing of health. On the other hand, neglect of even minor needs, at this period, is likely to impose upon him the life-long penalty of ill health, resulting in a wasted life. The assimilative processes are, at this time, sure to be impaired, and nerve tone overtaken in its resistance to the assaults of disease; will both sadly need the impetus which Maltine with Coca Wine alone can give.

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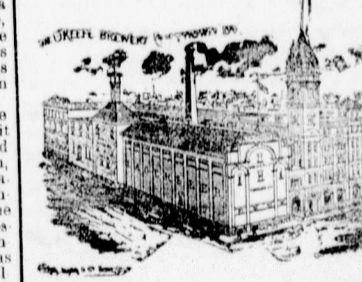
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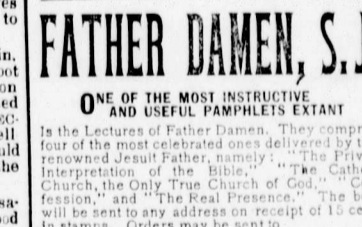
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