

# A VICTIM TO THE SEAL OF CONFESSION.

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

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## CHAPTER XIV. IN THE RUE DE LA COLOMBE.

When Mrs. Montmoulin, who had been carried out of the market-place into a neighboring house, recovered consciousness, she was almost beside herself with grief. Some compassionate persons tried to comfort her, others contented themselves with staring at her; to all attempts at consolation she could only reply: "My son handcuffed! in custody of the police! and he a priest!" And she covered her face with her wrinkled hands in shame and sorrow, while her grand-daughter stood by sobbing piteously.

"Poor woman!" said one neighbor. "They are honest folk too; never a word has been said against them hitherto."

"She must have brought up her son rather strangely, if he could commit such a foul crime," said another.

"You are right there," a third replied. "Like father, like child."

"Now do be a little more charitable in your judgment," replied the first speaker; "remember nothing is proved against the man yet."

"It is, take my word for it, otherwise they would not have put the handcuffs on his wrists."

"She doesn't seem to feel it so very much, after all," said another.

"She does not even cry, the child has far more feeling."

"Well, if my boy did a thing like that, I think I should throw myself into the river!"

"Come grandmother, let us go home," said the girl, trying to rouse the old lady, who seemed quite prostrated by the blow she had received. In fact, when she made an attempt to stand up, she fell back on her chair helplessly and hopelessly.

A cab now stopped at the door, and a policeman who had been standing outside all the time, entered the house, saying: "She does not seem well able to walk, so I have got a conveyance for her."

"It really is not necessary. She lives only a few steps off, in the next street," was the answer.

"We know that. But she is not going home just yet. The Superintendent of police has a few questions to put to her first," the man replied.

"Oh, she is to be arrested! She is an accomplice in her son's crime!" the bystanders ejaculated, as they fell back in consternation.

When Mrs. Montmoulin understood what was going on, fresh energy seemed to come to her. "If my son is said to be guilty, no wonder that people should have a poor opinion of me," she said. "Are you going to handcuff me too?"

"That will not be necessary at present," the constable replied, as he assisted the old lady to get into the cab. "Turning to Julia, who lagged on to her dress, she said: 'Go home, child, and tell your mother where I shall soon be back, or she will have to come to me in prison. Who knows but they will end by taking you and poor little Charles up too.' So saying Mrs. Montmoulin entered the cab, the policeman took his seat opposite to her, closed the door, and they drove off. The child stood crying and looking after the vehicle, until one of the neighbors took her by the hand and led her home.

Round the door of the house, a goodly number of people had assembled, curious to see what would happen next. For to the surprise of the whole street, the Commissioner of Police had gone into the house, leaving two of his men outside. Tidings of the whole affair soon got abroad, and almost all were inclined to believe the worst, only a few said it could not be true.

"There is a nice story for you! The Priests can take that as a text for their sermons!" exclaimed one of the lowest of the people. "And the old woman there who goes every morning to Mass and prays to the saints, is said to have hidden away the money, four thousand pounds."

"Four thousand pounds! Nay, that would tempt many a poor man. But how badly they managed it, to be caught red-handed," said an old soldier.

"No doubt they thought no one would dream of accusing a priest of such an act, and traded upon that," observed another. "And you see, they will do nothing to him, whereas one of our poor devils would have had to put our necks under the knife for it!"

"So he will have to, as sure as I stand here!" the other rejoined. "This is a free country and justice will be done, were he ten times a priest."

"Look, here comes the old lady's grand-daughter," exclaimed a kind-hearted neighbor. "What is to become of those children if first their grandmother and then their mother is put in prison?"

"They must go to the almshouse, or they will be placed in an orphanage like my children," said another of the bystanders. "They are better off there than here."

"Let the child pass," the former speaker rejoined. "Don't fret, Julia, if they take your mother away, you and Charles shall come to my place. One or two more do not make much difference." The child, passing through the little shop, where children's underclothing, besides knitted jerseys, vests and stockings were exposed for sale, was about to enter the small parlor behind, where her mother was usually at work at a sewing or a knitting-machine, a pane of glass in the door enabling her to see when she was wanted in the shop. But instead of her mother, Julia found to her terror, an agent of

police seated in the shop, who stopped her and asked her if she were Mrs. Montmoulin's grand-daughter?

"Yes, sir, but my mother's name is Jardiniere. Please let me pass, I have something to tell my mother."

"Wait a moment. So you are Miss Jardiniere, and the clergyman at Ste. Victoire is your uncle?"

"Yes, sir, and the bad people say he has done something very dreadful, and they have taken him to prison, and poor grandmother too. And it is all a lie; my uncle is a priest and a very holy man!"

"No doubt it is all a lie, I think so too. I dare say he often gave you nice presents!"

"Yes, he gave me a prayer-book and a number of beautiful pictures with gold and lace edges."

"There now, see what a kind uncle you have. Did he not give your grandmother any money yesterday?"

"Yes, grandmother brought a lot of money home yesterday that she had got from uncle. A good pious lady gave it to him; we all said our beads for her last night."

"Look there now, what dious people you all are! Cannot you tell me how much money your grandmother brought home yesterday?"

"I do not know how much, but it was a great deal. Grandmother said she had not had so much money in the house for twenty years."

"Bless me! And what did she do with it all?"

"She went in the afternoon to old Mr. Levy and paid him what she owed him. I do not know what else she did with it."

The constable had learned enough from the unthinking child to confirm the suspicions of the magistrate. Taking out a pencil he wrote on a slip of paper the words: "I have got everything out of the child!" Then he said: "Well you are a very intelligent little girl. There is something in them with your mother, but as you are so good, if you can go to her, he then looked at the door of the parlor. His superior officer opened it, and he handed him the slip of paper. The detective glanced at it, and said: "One moment, I shall have done shortly."

So saying he made a sign to the constable to come in, closed the door and addressing the mother of the children, who sat opposite to him, pale but composed, he said: "It is no use denying facts, my lady, my good woman. Your little girl has told everything."

"What has she told you?" inquired Mrs. Jardiniere.

The police-agent then repeated all that the child had said. His superior instantly ordered him to go to Levy, to see if the statement could be substantiated. At the same time he told the woman she must come with him.

"Indeed, it is a misadventure ending," she cried. "For God's sake do not put me to the disgrace of being arrested! The sum in question was nothing like as large as you imagine. Mother brought at most about twenty pounds with her, and it is quite true that for years we had not had so much in the house."

"Why did you not mention this to me, while I was questioning you about it?"

"You asked me if my mother did not bring a large sum of money back with her when she came home yesterday, and I answered what was quite true, that in the handbag you spoke of there was nothing but my brother's linen, which waited repairing. In fact I do not know why I should be called to account in this manner at all," she added indignantly. "We are honest people and have never defrauded any one of a penny."

"I say do not excite yourself," rejoined her interrogator. "I never accused you of theft. But Mrs. Blanchard's money must have been disposed of somehow, and your mother is under suspicion of having brought it here from Ste. Victoire."

"Mrs. Blanchard's money!" cried the woman aghast. "True, it was from a Mrs. Blanchard that my brother received the twenty-pound note; it was a present from her, mother said."

"Hear that! a present of twenty pounds! Only yesterday, the very day Mrs. Blanchard was murdered in the Presbytery at Ste. Victoire!"

"Murdered in the Presbytery!" cried Mrs. Jardiniere, springing to her feet. "By whom? My God, what a calamity!"

"By whom? Do you mean to say you do not know by whom?"

"Merciful Heavens! It cannot be that my brother is suspected!"

"You have soon hit upon the right person," answered the detective coldly regarding the unhappy woman, who wrung her hands in grief and horror. As soon as the first outburst of sorrow was over, and she resumed her seat, her tears still flowing, he continued: "Now my good lady, I quite believe there was no complicity on your part in this deed, and that you did not even know how your mother had come by the money she brought from Ste. Victoire yesterday. But I require you to inform me at once what has become of the remainder of the sum. If you do this, I will not be hard on you; if you do not, I shall be obliged to have you taken to the police station. I give you two minutes for reflection."

"I want no time for reflection," sobbed the poor woman. "It is all a terrible mistake! The mere idea that my brother could be guilty of such a crime, and that my mother would lend herself to such deceit is outrageous! No one who knows them would ever believe it of them."

"I shall only be too glad, if you

and your relatives succeed in clearing yourselves. Meanwhile I regret to say that I am compelled to take you into custody."

"Whatever will become of my poor children?"

"Have you no relatives who would take them in for a time? No? Then the parish must provide for them, to not be anxious on that score, the children will do well enough for a few days. I will look after them. And now I am sure you will come with me quietly, without making any resistance." He then opened the door and called the little girl in. "Now," he said, "kiss your mother, and stop quietly at home like a good child, till I come back. Your mother is coming a little way with me. She will not be gone very long."

Mrs. Jardiniere made an effort to command herself. "Yes Julia, mind you are a good girl till I come back. Where have you left your grandmother, and where is the market basket?"

"It was not my fault, mother," she said. Then she told in a few sentences what had occurred on the market-place, how the police had driven off her grandmother in a cab, and how in consequence her basket was lost.

"Never mind dear, we shall find it again. Now do not cry. This gentleman is going to take me to grandmother and I hope we shall soon be back. No, you must not come too, when Charles comes home, get the dinner ready for him, and do not forget to say grace as you always do."

Then she kissed the child, and turned quickly to the door, to hide the tears that started to her eyes. "I am ready now," she said to the police agent, on whom what she had said and her whole manner had not failed to make a good impression. Before the child realized what was happening, her mother was gone. She wanted to run after her, but the man who was still pacing up and down before the door, would not let her, and looking through the open shop-window, she could just see her mother and the police agent disappear round the corner of the street.

At that moment a sound from the kitchen warned her that the soup was beginning to boil over, so she wiped away her tears, she hastened upstairs, just in time to prevent the catastrophe. A few minutes later Charles came back from school. The house door, from which the crowd of curious onlookers had gradually dispersed, stood open, and when the boy entered the shop, to his astonishment he found there two police agents who were opening drawers, ransacking cupboards and empty shelves, and reducing every place to a dire state of confusion.

"Hello!" exclaimed the boy, "what are you up to now? Mother will be angry when she sees what you are doing. She is awfully strict about keeping her place in order; she rows Julia and me if we do not put a blank of wood out of its place."

"Are you Mrs. Jardiniere's son?" inquired one of the agents. "I dare say you can help us. Do you know where the travelling bag is that grandmother brought home with her yesterday?"

"Uncle's bag do you mean? It is hanging up in the passage. Grandmother mended it last night."

"Were you by when she unpacked it?"

"No, she unpacked it in her own room, I carried it upstairs for her."

"It was heavy, was it not?"

"Pretty well, I could carry it easily."

"Was there not a good deal of money in it?"

"In the bag? I do not know. Grandmother said it was Uncle's linen. But she did bring home a lot of money that Uncle gave her; he had it from a kind old lady. We were to pray for her."

"Where did she put the money? If you can tell me that, I will give you sixpence."

Before the lad could reply, the door of the parlor opened and Julia called to her brother: "Don't stand talking Charles! They want to question everything out of us. They asked me ever so many questions, then they took mother away. But what a mess you are in! Your sleeve is all over mud and there is a button torn off your jacket. Come here and let me brush you; you have been home fighting with your schoolfellows."

So saying, Julia drew her brother into the inner room, and shut the door. Then she went on, lowering her voice: "Oh Charles, whatever is

to become of us! They have taken uncle away to prison, and they say he has committed some dreadful crime and they have carried off grandmother and mother too. I think they have put them into prison as well, though mother said she was only going a little way, and would be back soon. I believe she only said that that I might not be vexed, else she would not have given me the key of the cupboard."

Charles looked very much disconcerted, and while his sister was brushing the mud off his jacket, he said: "As I was coming home, two of the boys called after me that uncle Francis had stabbed a lady, and said I was the murderer's nephew, and everybody looked at me. But it is all a lie, is it not? Uncle would never do such a wicked thing."

"Of course it is all untrue," his sister replied.

"Of course; so I said, and I told the boys they were liars. Then one of them boxed my ears, but I got hold of him, and punched him hard, only the other came up, and it was he who tore the button off my coat. Please sew another on for me, there are two in mother's workbasket. I wish I could pay that fellow out, some time!"

"Poor uncle!" said Julia beginning to cry afresh. "I saw him; look, they had fastened his hands together like this, and his cassock was all muddy, and he was sitting in a cart beside a policeman. The people said he would be executed."

"No, Julia, I do not think so; don't cry. I remember reading a story about a miller, it was called 'Martin the innocent.' He was put in prison because he was accused of murder, and was going to be hanged although he was quite innocent, but his children went on a pilgrimage and prayed for him, and his innocence was made clear. And he was let out of prison and had all sorts of honors paid him and the judge who had condemned him wrongly gave him a present. Do you see, it will be just the same with uncle, he will be proved innocent and go back to Ste. Victoire with great honor. Nobody shall dare to call me a murderer's nephew again."

"How was the miller's innocence proved?" asked Julia.

"I only could remember! Stop, now I know. Somebody went to the judge and swore a great oath that the miller was not guilty. That is what I will do; for I am perfectly certain that uncle is innocent."

This set the children's minds at rest. Julia laid the table and served the soup, and she and her brother ate their meal with a good appetite. Only Charles complained that Julia cut the meat too thin, and this gave rise to one of the slight skirmishes, which were almost of daily occurrence between the brother and sister. But Julia deftly changed the conversation, and turned the boy's attention in another direction, by telling him how she had heard the police agent, and the people in the street say that she and Charles would probably have to go to the workhouse. At this unexpected intelligence the little fellow hid his knife and fork fall, and exclaimed: "What? we go to the workhouse? Never, never!"

"But if they take us there by force, what can we do?" objected his sister.

"I will run away. I know what I will do. I will go to Marselles and be a cabin boy on a great ship that is going out to sea. And when we get to the island where there are savages and missionaries, I will leave the vessel and be a missionary."

"You know you are a great deal too young for that. Besides even you could get employment on board a ship, what is to become of me?"

"You go to a convent," answered the boy in a very decided manner. A pause ensued, during which he again applied himself to the contents of his plate. When he had finished, he communicated the result of his reflections to his sister. "Look here, Julia," he said, "had we not better run away at once, before anyone proposes that we should go to the workhouse?"

Julia negatived this proposal, saying they must wait to see whether their mother came home. Then Charles thought of another alternative; he would go to his friend the baker, tell him what trouble they were in, and ask him for some money for their journey.

This was no sooner said than done. As soon as they had returned thanks the boy took his cap and ran off to the kind-hearted baker, whom he found ensconced in a comfortable armchair, smoking his pipe with a cup of coffee by his side. His wife, a good-natured little woman, sat opposite to him; of course the event of the day had been duly discussed between them, and both husband and wife were equally of opinion that the priest was innocent of the crime laid to his charge. The only point on which they were not agreed, was whether the police authorities acted in good faith in arresting the clergyman and treating him as a criminal, or whether the whole affair was not a move on the part of the anti-clerical party, as the woman, who could think no good of her political adversaries, firmly maintained. They were eager to hear all that the boy, who was a favorite with both of them, had to tell, and listened to his story with most interest.

Mr. Lenoir had not heard of the children's grandmother and mother being arrested, and he inquired all particulars. He shook his head gravely when the boy spoke of the lot of money, his grandmother had brought home with her, and a shade of suspicion as to the priest's innocence for the first time crossed his mind. However the worthy man took care to conceal his misgivings, for his wife would certainly have scolded him soundly, had she known of them. As it was, on hearing that the two women, whom she considered to be god-fearing and upright persons, were taken into custody, she burst out into loud invectives against the police. And when Charles confided her misapprehension in regard to the workhouse, she exclaimed: "No, indeed, they shall not take you there and perhaps make you lose your religion. Nothing of the

sort. Andrew, let us take the children to be with us, and I will be a mother to them, as long as the authorities—(worse luck to them!)—who let rogues go free and put honest folks into prison—keep the mother in detention. Put on your hat at once, and give notice that we will take charge of the poor children. God has not blessed us with a family of our own, and we want for nothing, let us at least prevent them from being corrupted in the workhouse. You will consent, will you not?"

The same idea struck Mr. Lenoir, at least in regard to his little friend Charles, so when his good wife made the suggestion, and at the close went through the formality of asking whether he was of the same mind as herself, he goodnaturedly intimated his assent, adding, "That is if the children like to come."

Now Charles, young as he was, had the sense to see how much more desirable the proposal of the kind baker's wife was than the adventurous project he had formed for himself; he therefore hastened to accept it; and after partaking of a cup of coffee and sponge cake, he set off with high glee to fetch his sister.

Mr. Lenoir also got up from his armchair and repaired, attired in his best coat and hat, to the police station. The superintendent was very willing to give the children into his charge; but he considered it his duty to inform Mr. Lenoir that not only did the priest lay under the heaviest suspicion, on account of the strong circumstantial evidence against him, but his mother and sisters were proved to have been receivers of the stolen property. "I tell you this," he concluded, "in case you may not wish to be mixed up with people of this class."

The worthy baker did in fact feel more inclined to revoke his decision; but he said to himself, the children had done no wrong, and nobody could blame him for an act of charity. So he kept to his determination and that same evening both the children were received under his hospitable roof.

(To be Continued.)

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