

Man and His Illusions

BY KONRAD KUEMML

(Continued)

The good priest could only surmise the reason for Agnes' resolve to go to the taverner.

With the permission of her aunt and because she considered herself in a way responsible for what had happened to old Mrs. Sparr in the garden, she visited her, bringing her a gift of cake and wine. In this way she met the under-sacristan, to whom with uplifted hands she prayed to forestall in future the publication of articles such as had already appeared in the vicious leaflet against her Reverend Uncle.

"That is possible only upon one condition," the underling replied, flattered, full of conceit and self-esteem.

"Tell me, Jack, what is your condition?" inquired Agnes.

With gloating eyes and in an insolent manner he answered slowly: "That you marry me."

Agnes shuddered. Pausing a long while, she said: "Jack, had you made it a condition that I die for my uncle—I would not have hesitated. But this!"—and she shuddered again. Then finally and slowly—"No—perhaps—perhaps"—she clasped her hands appealingly.

Like a greedy tiger, Jack Sparr devoured this touching apparition with his big weird lustrous eyes. In a subdued voice he added: "Well then, leave the rectory and go to your guardian—and nothing more will appear in the paper against the pastor." With hardly a moment's hesitation she gave her "Yes." It was a heroic sacrifice of which no one knew. The secret remained hers. If she grieved, it was because she could not follow up her purpose immediately; for Jack Sparr had affirmed that only when this was done would the priest be let alone, and also that if she dared to inform him of the compromise, the baiting would grow worse than ever.

Weeks of agony intervened. The assistant worked day and night in prejudicing the people against the pastor. He told most awful stories about the priest which he was ready in a most detailed way and with solemn oaths to confirm if questioned; his earnest avowal that every word he spoke was true, else let him be cursed and damned to the lowest hell—if it shocked, it likewise convinced people, "that no one could invent such stories, they were too palpably true, and that their pastor must be a second Judas."

Even the best and most pious were gradually affected by this dementia; they argued that there must be some truth in what is talked all over the village. At the tavern in a rear room, the witnesses were already being chosen to serve when the trial of the priest should come on. The whole parish was in a feverish delirium. The priest was the pivotal point in their aberration with the one question uppermost: "How can we get him out the quickest?" But the intermediary of the plotters everywhere and at all times, the one chief aggressive spirit, evil, reprobate, satanic, was Jack Sparr.

No just appreciation prevailed within the rectory precincts of the violence of the passions, of the terrible fanaticism defying all restraints, which swayed the whole parish and which each day bred new sins and excesses among its members. The people having yielded abjectly to the plotters, having refused obedience and allegiance to their pastor and shepherd and constituted themselves his judges, having trodden the Fourth Commandment under foot,—the grace of God was taken from them, and they were left to themselves. Like a cloudburst, the devastat-

ing waves of which involve in a general ruin street and dwelling alike, did their disloyalty to the God-appointed priest, and their revolt against his authority, flood the parish, undermine its foundation, and carry it onward to destruction. No one, moreover, had dared to interfere with the couple of conspirators who, in order to give free sweep to the raging floods, had tampered with the dams.

Four weeks had passed when a rumor swept the town that the pastor had been given a new charge. Fanatical rejoicings were heard everywhere; shooting and fireworks continued until midnight.

The day of parting had come. The aged priest, who for so many years had faithfully served the parish, was kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament in the quiet church alone and for the last time.

Not for himself so much as for his parishioners was he praying: "I will not be a weakling," he said to the Lord his God; "if it is Thy will, I will gladly be adjudged wrong, though my conscience does not witness against me; at best, my remaining earthly years are few. Yet for all that, Thou knowest, O Lord, that the Fourth Commandment holds a blessing for the obedient, a curse for those who disregard it; it is the curse I fear for my poor flock. It has been mis-

led, punish it not for permitting itself to be separated from the shepherd Thou hast appointed. Spare my people the punishment of the revolt, the punishment for the loss of that faith and that good life which until now has been its heritage. Most of all do I fear, O Lord, that these people may forsake Thee entirely—let it not come to that, quiet their minds, give them the clear light of an unbiased understanding and introspection—then do with me as Thou wilt."

He arose, looked round the beautiful sanctuary once more, then genuflected before the Holy Sacrament, and slowly left the church. In front of the rectory the conveyance was waiting to carry him and his sister to the depot. On the lower floor within stood Agnes pale as death, in mourning attire. She had bidden the aunt good-by; in turn she now knelt before the uncle and sobbing thanked him a thousand times for his kindness to her and begged his blessing.

"May God protect you, Agnes; trust in Him; now is the time to prove your faithfulness to Him; be patient, humble and on your guard; I will assist you daily by my prayers." Thereupon he blessed the bitterly weeping child.

At this very moment the old game warden and the treasurer with his daughter Frances came in. The treasurer admitted that he had opposed the priest at first because the latter had spoken against his new altar plan, but that he was now out of sympathy with the intriguers. He begged the priest would harbor no hard feelings against him. The pastor was touched and gave him his hand. "Moreover, to please you," he said, "I will watch over Agnes as over my own child, while she stays at the Brook Inn. My daughter Frances visits there daily, for we and the proprietor are acquaintances; she will—"

Frances did not permit her father to finish, putting an arm around the neck of Agnes she said: "Your Reverence, truly and certainly, nothing shall happen to Agnes in your place; we will be close as two sisters; I am not afraid of the innkeeper, and Agnes can come to visit me when she pleases or whenever she has anything to complain about."

"And I, too, will be on hand," spoke out the old huntsman; "late-ly, on account of the depraved company here, I have not been at the taverner's, but now I will again resume my visits and if anyone

presume anything against Agnes, he'll deal with me."

"See, child, the friends God sends you," the priest said, deeply moved. To Agnes; then shaking the hands of all once more, he stepped out and entered the carriage for the train, whither the pawing horses were eager to bring him.

Another look at the rectory, the garden, the church, one audible heart-sob from poor, deserted Agnes, and all was over; the old priest had left the village never to return. There was no sign of life on the streets; but peeping cautiously from behind the window curtains many a head might be seen bobbing back and forth watching the departing vehicle.

As the carriage was crossing the bridge, there was a crowd at the tavern window drinking a farewell to the priest in mockery. "Now listen!" said the innkeeper, the while he put a music-box on the bar. He pressed a button, it sang: "Alas, must I leave thee, My village, my home!" The song was received with rousing acclaim.

"This record I bought specially for the occasion, as a remembrance of this day!"

A few minutes later the taverner was called back to the kitchen where he remained a short time. Returning, he opened the door wide and quite elated, introduced to the guests the new waitress,—there like a marble statue, stood Agnes. Someone quickly slammed shut the kitchen-door. It was the treasurer's daughter, Frances. She had come with the girl. Agnes was weeping—she could not control herself; but Frances with her hand clenched, said: "Agnes, don't stand anything from those in there and if my uncle, the innkeeper, is rough to you, tell me. My mother was his sister; he was afraid of her and he is also somewhat afraid of me. We'll hold our own with him."

Back in that rear room, however, drinking and jubilation was growing more and more boisterous. "We've had music, we've had shooting, we've had drinking, now we ought to have fireworks for today's feast!" suggested someone.

"Sparr, it was up to you, to have looked out for that," reminded the landlord.

With eyes green-shimmering like those of a beast at bay, he launched forward somewhat as if intending to reply, but immediately fell back and with a sleepy look said: "I've had too many other things to do. Give me one of your cigars on the celebration." The tapster handed him one; Sparr lighted a match, watched with his uncanny eyes the blue and yellow flame, then feverishly cast it to the floor and stamped it out.

For to-day Agnes had nothing to do. She retired early to the little room provided for her and fell asleep weeping. Gradually the tumult below subsided; it was long past midnight when the last guest left and the lights were put out. Agnes awoke of a sudden, frightened; she heard the cry "Fire! Fire!"

Throwing open the blinds of her window, she was dazzled by the flames near-by. The mayor's house just across the way was ablaze from top to bottom. This was the promised illumination to celebrate the Reverend Pastor's farewell.

Part Second AN UNHALLOWED CROP

1. The Treasurer and His Daughter Frances

Many weeks had gone by since the departure of the pastor. There was loud quarreling between the treasurer and his daughter, which at night could be heard many houses away. Frances, who took charge of the house of her widowed father, was proving but rather loudly that she knew what was

what,—if this was a fault, it was her only one.

"I speak as I think," was her invariable answer, to which he as invariably replied: "If you spoke only when you thought, you would observe a silence stricter than the Trappists, who speak only once a year." When these disputatious colloquies took place, and that was six times a week not counting Sunday, their neighbor, the old game warden across the brook was amused. From her childhood up the redoubtable Frances had been his favorite and during her mother's lifetime she was oftener in the warden's house than in her own. A person could frolic there, race with the hounds, wrestle with the warden's boys, or recline on the soft grass. Within this hut were guns and cutlasses and powder flasks; a picture, also, of the old huntsman with sword and scabbard, proudly mounted on a prancing steed, hung on the wall. For a half-florin he had it taken years ago, when as infantry captain he was drilling his recruits on the race-course of Gmunden, between the State Prison and the portrait painter's house; even yet the recollection of those days filled him with honest pride.

If it happened that at times Frances was specially plucky, it delighted the old hunter royally—this all the more for the reason that he had three boys but no girl. Frances, on her part, thought much of her old friend, almost as much as of her father. And that she loved her father was certain, for she attended to the house and barn and with but one maid looked after field, garden and kitchen, to save him the hire and keep of a man.

Withal she was good and neat.—Excepting Agnes, Frances, with her brilliant eyes, clear-cut features and prominent aquiline nose, was the prettiest girl in the place; in appraising her reasoning power the warden differed radically with the treasurer. "The resourcefulness of six foxes and four gypsies can not match the sagacity of Frances," he asserted, and with him that was going the limit. Therefore was he so hugely pleased when from the distance he heard the maid disputing with her father quite in the manner of the gentlemen in the Reichstag, as she read and quoted from the Sunday Leaflet. Then would he raise his window and listen and laugh himself to tears, until not being able to stand it longer, he would go over and join in the debate. Moreover, he was lonesome: two of his sons were in the army, the other, a warden like himself, was married. The end of their argumentation was always the same and of a creditable character. When the father had exhausted his knowledge and had tired opposing the tried mouth-apparatus of his Frances, he took from the shelves an old Lives of the Saints or P. Cochem's Passion of Christ, out of which she would read and pray, and he would respond. Even then a little clash about who was right might spring up, but it was effectually hushed in their common night-prayer.

This particular night the devout consummation was not as yet in sight.

For the twenty-fifth time the treasurer had told his daughter about the teacher who at the Chapter-meeting without any right to do so, had spoken against him and the innkeeper; that he was the cause of his motion being lost; he can forgive the pastor, who is an honest man, but the schoolmaster—To which Frances reverted: "Would it have been right for the professor to have spoken against the priest?"

"He had no business to speak at all."

"But did you not invite him to the Chapter to have the benefit of his opinion?"

"How do you happen to dote so on the schoolteacher?" he asked

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