

The Town Crier's Son

There can be no doubt at all that to have a father who is Town Crier is a great distinction. And this is all the more apparent if you are a French boy and live in the delightful town of Laumant.

The uniform itself is not all that it might be in point of color. It is inferior to that of a gendarme, and is not to be mentioned in the same breath with the costume of the patriarchal Suisse; but in the hands of a self-respecting man like Jules Trillot, to say nothing of Madame, his wife—a laundress of quite exceptional talent—there are possibilities about this official costume that render it capable of being raised to a very respectable level.

It is not the uniform, however, that makes the public crier. It is the drum. The hand bell of the English crier is a sufficiently far-reaching thing, but it has not the ear-compelling force of the Frenchman's drum. Nervous old ladies in Laumant have sometimes thought the German army was in the town when Jules Trillot, at eight in the morning, started his tattoo as a prelude to the exciting notice of an evening promenade concert in the Rue S. Eustache. Such is the power of the drum.

Jules' eldest son, Henri, who went to the school of the Brothers of the Christian Doctrine, felt his young bosom swell with filial pride when he heard the familiar rat-a-tat-tat in the distance, and knew that his father was about to convey some item of municipal information to an interested crowd. Henri had only just turned twelve, but he was tall for his age, and many of his younger school-fellows regarded him with a certain awe as the being privileged to call the town crier papa, and more wonderful still, actually to live and sleep under the same roof as that soul-moving drum.

We must really try to be fair to Henri, for he was a very good lad. He served two Masses every morning of his life—not infrequently three. Other "children of the choir" might be late even for the Mass of M. le Cure; Henri never. He was to be depended upon, and it is this virtue of a solid kind, well-what is virtue? He knew his responses, too, and this is much more than can be said of some who enjoy the huge privilege of serving at the Holy Sacrifice. A little too fond of the bell he certainly was, at any rate for his taste; but then M. le Cure liked plenty of bell, and in his view this falling of Henri's leaned altogether to virtue's side. Nor is it to be denied that Henri wiggled as he knelt on the altar step, but then all young things wiggle, and it almost seems as if they were made to do so—so very natural is the habit in kittens and puppies and lambs and children.

You could not live very long in Laumant without knowing that Henri was a personage, and almost as much in evidence as his drum-beating father. For it was Henri who carried the holy water at the Asperges; it was Henri who bore the blessed bread from chair to chair; it was Henri who was on duty at baptisms, at weddings and at funerals. M. le Cure said the boy was a born ceremoniarious, and certainly in spite of the tendency to wiggle, Henri's bow was as perfect as that of a Spanish courtier. Perhaps it might be described as bearing about the same relation to that little duck of the head with which we are familiar, as the movements of a marionette bear to those of a finished actor.

That Henri would be educated for the priesthood was a thing as well understood in Laumant as the coming of a holy day of obligation. He had been dedicated to our Blessed Lady as an infant, and from the age of eight had never swerved from his determination to become an apostle of the cross.

If you asked the superior of the Brothers of the Christian Doctrine if Henri was quick at his lessons, the good man always remained speechless for a space, expressing his wondering admiration of the boy in mute gestures. When the good Father found words they contained more superlatives than I care to set down here, but he always ended by declaring that "if a Cardinal's hat was not waiting for Henri, well—the gesture with which he concluded expressed deep pity for the Sacred College.

It was thoughtless of me, perhaps, to repeat this speech to M. le Cure's Vicar. His reply startled me. "A hat supposes a head," he said, grimly. "Which is just what Henri possesses, apparently," I urged. "He will lose it before he is one and twenty."

"How!" I ejaculated. "He will be guillotined."

I learned afterward that M. le Vicaire was a humorist. In French humor there is something a little sardonic.

From his sitting-room M. le Cure commanded a view of the little square that lay before the church. The steps before the great door were also well within his ken, and the zealous parish priest saw much that no one gave him credit for seeing—much that was good, and a little that was less good. The weather was warm, and both M. le Cure's windows were wide open, when I called upon him one Sunday afternoon immediately after vespers. He himself, looking a little weary, sat half in the room and half in the iron balcony upon which the tall windows opened.

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"They are loath to disperse," he said, with a smile, pointing to the crowd below. "I like to see them thus. Sunday is a good day for the exchange of felicitation."

I agreed with him. The crowd looked like a big happy family bound together by the common tie of the faith. For in Laumant, as in so many French provincial towns, the Church was everything.

Little by little the crowd dispersed, and the hum of speech outside grew less. The Cure and I chatted of many things, and soon a group of children of the choir was all that was left in front of the cathedral-like church.

"Pig! Big-headed pig! Dirty pig! Two-legged pig in sabots!" The scornful words, uttered in a high, shrill treble, floated through the open windows with startling distinctness. In another moment they were followed by the sound of one, two, three blows, as of an open palm falling upon a fleshy cheek. A wall of pain filled the market-place.

I rose instinctively and stepped into the balcony. A small boy, very poorly dressed, was leaning against one of the buttresses of the church, weeping loudly. Near him stood Henri, with clenched fists, his face white with passion. Several little boys looked scared, and a bigger one was remonstrating with Henri.

"But the son of a pig should keep his dirty feet off my shoes!" shouted the enraged Henri in reply. "It was an accident," the bigger boy retorted, "a mere accident! Is it likely little Jules would do it on purpose?"

I came back into the room. The Cure was walking up and down with an expression of deep pain and anxiety upon his usually placid face. "I am glad you are here," he said. "You may be good enough to advise me. In a few minutes Henri is coming to me. It is a question of his going to the Little Seminary in a fortnight's time. "Such a course is, I fear, impossible."

"It is only a passing fit of bad temper," I suggested. "Alas! no. He hates that poor child, Jules. Many times lately I have witnessed similar scenes. And always when Henri had reason to think I was not in the neighborhood. As a rule, I go to the Young Men's Club immediately after vespers. Today I was too weary."

"But I hear such great things of Henri," I ventured again. "Doubtless they are all true. He is very clever, and Brother Francois has a high opinion of him. The other Brothers, particularly those who are responsible for the discipline of the school, do not share the superior's view. My colleague refuses to discuss Henri."

I thought of the Vicar's prophecy and was silent. When, a few minutes later, Henri appeared in the Cure's sitting-room, the gentle old priest received him very kindly and, to my surprise at first, began to enumerate the lad's good qualities. When the good man had finished the catalogue, he summed up thus:

"And in a priest of God we expect these qualities: Learning—oh, yes, as much as possible; activity—punctuality—reverence at the altar—neatness of person—regularity—an intelligent appreciation of the Church's ceremonies—yes, yes, all these, all these, my child. They are good, they are excellent, they are indispensable. But they are not exhaustive."

The Cure was silent for a moment. Henri stood in the middle of the room like a boy-soldier on parade, but with eyes cast down. "In a priest of God," the Cure began, and his voice was, if anything, more gentle than before; "in a priest of God we look for humanity, charity, pity for the poor and weak, self-control, self-mastery, an absence of those violent passions that go so far to make our beautiful earth a hell."

The Cure paused again and looked steadily at Henri. The boy was very pale, and his head dropped a little lower. "Do not lose hope, my child," the quiet voice went on. "There is no spiritual disease the grace of God cannot cure, no matter what our temperament may be, no matter how violent our passions. It is now August. At the Noel you may come to me again. I am sure you will improve in the meantime; but send you to the seminary now, after what I witnessed to-day, and what I have seen so many times before—I cannot and will not."

The boy made no reply as he left the room, but as he began to descend the stairs the sound of his sobbing came back to us, and the Cure himself was moved. "It is a keen disappointment to him," the Cure began after a while, "and a sharp lesson. I must see his mother forthwith. She is much to blame, poor soul. Her folly has been great. Henri has several young-

er brothers and sisters, and she has allowed him to act the tyrant over them all. Everything, everybody, must give way to Henri. Anything in food and dress is good enough for the other children; nothing is too good for Henri. His brothers and sisters are shod with wood; not Henri. They are clad in simple blouses; Henri must have the latest fantastic costume sold in the shops. The hard bread is for the children; the cake for Henri. And so on, and so on."

I took my leave and M. le Cure set out to see Henri's parents. The father, he said, was, if anything, more foolish than the mother.

Snow fell in Laumant long before the Noel—fell and remained. The intense cold produced disease, and many poor suffered cruelly; the very young and the very old found it hard to live. In the home of the Trillots there was sorrow and mourning. The Public Crier lay dead.

"He was never strong, Henri's father, and the winter always tried him. Cold succeeded cold, and pneumonia set in. He lay ill scarcely a fortnight."

"And Henri?" I inquired. "Poor child! Poor child! He must leave school, I fear. He must work; there is no help for it."

It was weeks before I saw the boy again. He no longer served my Mass and it seemed as though he had disappeared forever from the environment of church and school. I learned afterward that on Sundays and holidays he served a very early Mass.

We met on the snow-covered hills early in January. He lifted his cap without raising his eyes and would have passed on without a word if I had not called to him. I had heard that he was working on a farm close to the Bois de Laumant.

He was really greatly changed, Henri—changed in every possible way. A rough, coarse cloak was about his shoulders, and his sabots were of the heaviest. He blushed painfully as I began to talk to him, and it was some time before he raised his eyes. He looked very thin and pale, very pinched and cold. Not to keep him standing, I turned and walked with him, trying hard to comfort him with encouraging words. Tears and sobs were his only reply. I put a two-franc piece in his cold little hand when I left him, and when he raised his face I saw that it was full of gratitude.

"You will also give me your blessing, my Father," he said, in a trembling voice, as he knelt in the snow, "and pray for me."

Three months passed by before I met him again. I saw at a glance that he was happier. His master had been very kind to him, he said, and the short winter days had meant fewer hours of labor and longer rest.

"And then—and then—" such a happy smile overspread his face, I wondered what was coming and why he hesitated. "But, of course, my Father, you know! Doubtless M. le Cure has told you! Oh, the kindness of M. le Vicaire!"

I was puzzled, but Henri soon explained everything. All through that bitter winter the Cure's old colleague (the priest who had made this prophecy concerning Henri and the guillotine) had visited three times a week the farm where Henri was employed, in order that these long, precious nights might be utilized for the furtherance of the boy's studies.

"Was it not heavenly of him!" Henri exclaimed, enthusiastically; "the more so," he went on, as the smile died upon his face, "the more so because he knew me better than M. le Cure. Ah, yes, it was M. le Vicaire who really knew what a wicked child I was, because he saw me oftener at home and at school and at play. And then, I had been rude to him more than once, and he knew so well what a proud, passionate boy I was. I said to myself always, 'It is M. le Cure I must try to please. For M. le Vicaire, it does not matter.' My Father, I was so bad, so deceitful! God knew it and sent me a heavy penance."

Henri's penance was not yet over. All through the hot summer that succeeded the bitter winter the boy toiled, and mottled in the Shadeless fields. When September came his face was as brown as the changing beech leaves.

"Henri is a year older in point of age," M. le Vicaire said to me, "but in disposition he has become a little child again—a good and intelligent child. His master has sent constant reports of him to the Cure, and always Henri has been humble, obedient and hard-working, anxious only to help his mother."

"It is impossible that he should become a priest?" "He goes to the Little Seminary next week. He does not know this yet. Kind people have volunteered to help both Henri and his mother."

"And what about the guillotine?" I asked, mischievously. "Oh!" exclaimed M. le Vicaire, with an expressive gesture, "in our country there is always the chance of martyrdom. In yours, well—"

Another gesture, and M. le Vicaire was mounting the hill that led to the cottage of Henri's mother. "From 'The Organist of Laumant,'" by the Rev. David Bearne, S.

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