

A VICTIM TO THE SEAL OF CONFESSION.

A TRUE STORY.

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CHAPTER XXI.
A FRESH AND HEAVIER CROSS.

The Easter festival was over, and the rest of Easter week had run its course. The prisoner in the condemned cell was prepared for death and daily, hourly, he expected the announcement that his sentence was to be carried out on the morrow.

He was perfectly calm and resigned to his fate. The warders declared that they had never known a man under sentence of death look forward with so little dread to his last hour; with such an utter absence of either braggadocio and feigned bravery, or fainthearted despondency; of abuse of judge and jury, or stoical indifference, or again of complaining and lamentation. His demeanor was grave, and he spent a great deal of time in prayer, but he was not melancholy; on the contrary, he seemed to possess inward peace and even joy, incomprehensible to the prison warders. Could they have looked into his soul they would have seen that though nature shrunk from the manner of the death awaiting him, the cause of it filled his heart with consolation.

"I die a victim of my sacerdotal obligations," he said to himself. "My death will be regarded by the Church as equivalent to martyrdom, like that of St. John Nepomucene. The Church teaches that such a death washes away sin, and that the individual whose privilege it is to suffer it, receives the crown of a martyr and enters immediately upon eternal felicity. Regarded in the light of faith I am the happiest of mortals; I only fear that I am not worthy of this supreme happiness."

Such were Father Montmoulin's dispositions subsequent to his condemnation. He offered to God the sacrifice of his life, and prayed that it might be accepted. It was more the hope of obtaining this glorious crown than dread of a convict's life that actuated him in his unqualified rejection of Meunier's suggestion that he should petition for a pardon. The lawyer guessed the reason, and did not press him further.

So did Father Regent. "I understand your motive," he said, "and should do the same in your place. You are not bound to take steps to avert a death which will be attended with such great blessings for you."

This utterance of the venerable priest, was real consolation to Father Montmoulin, as it relieved his mind of a scruple which he had felt till then. He had a yet greater consolation in receiving Holy Communion, which Father Regent obtained permission to bring him several times. It was also a comfort to hear that his mother and sister had been set at liberty, and that their maintenance was provided for. He could now look forward tranquilly to the solemn hour when he should pass from the scaffold to the tribunal of the Great Judge, who knew his spotless innocence.

Low Sunday came, and the poor priest in his prison cell could not think without a pang of the children whom he had been preparing for their First Communion. He would never see them again he said to himself. And what would they think of him? And the other members of his flock, would they really believe that their pastor was guilty of murder and theft? He asked for writing materials, and wrote a touching letter to those who were making their First Communion and all his parishioners; a letter which he desired to be read, if the Archbishop consented, on the Sunday after his execution. He also wrote to the Archbishop, to his dear friend Father Regent, and to the solicitor who defended him, expressing his gratitude to them and bidding them farewell. Finally he wrote a farewell letter to his mother and sister, begging them to spare him and themselves the anguish of a last interview. Death would not separate him from them in spirit, and instead of a painful parting on earth, they should look forward to a joyful reunion hereafter. This letter he wished to be delivered at once; the others after his execution.

On the following morning the prisoner was handcuffed and conducted from his cell into a larger apartment, "Is it for execution?" he asked the warders who came to take him. "Yes," they replied. "You would know presently."

Officers of justice assembled in the room to which he was taken. The clerk of the court again read the sentence of death; he then said, that as the fixed time allowed for petitioning for a reprieve or pardon had expired, the sentence now had the force of law. The President next inquired of the prisoner whether he not having appealed against his sentence was to be regarded as a tacit acknowledgment of its justice.

Against this the priest emphatically protested solemnly asseverating his complete innocence. He was perfectly willing to allow, he said, that his judges had acted in good faith and had been misled by circumstantial evidence through no fault of their own. But at any rate now, when he could no longer have any hope of saving his life by denying the truth, when he was in fact about to appear before the judge who cannot be deceived, they might believe his protestation that he died innocent.

The calm and innocent manner in which he pronounced these words made a perceptible impression even upon the Public Prosecutor.

After a brief pause, the President drew a document from his pocket, explaining that with the unanimous concurrence of his colleagues upon the Bench, the majority of whom were of opinion that the guilt of the prisoner was not fully proved, and in consideration of the previous blameless life of the condemned man, he had thought it is duty to memorialize the Home Secretary in his behalf. His representations had had the desired effect, and the sentence of death was commuted to penal servitude for life, and transportation to New Caledonia. The clerk would read the pardon, and the fresh sentence, now in force, to the prisoner.

But Father Montmoulin, who had listened unmoved to the sentence of death, was seen to change color, and stagger as if he had received a blow. He would have fallen, had not one of the warders quickly stepped to his side and steadied him. They were obliged to let him sit down for a few minutes to recover himself; at length he so far regained his composure as to stammer forth a few words of thanks to the President for the trouble he had given himself on his behalf. "But whether this service that you have rendered me, my Lord, is really a boon, God only knows," he added. "I thought to lay down my cross to-morrow, or even to-day; and now a yet heavier one is laid on my shoulders, one which I must bear for it may be many years to come."

The judge looked astonished and somewhat embarrassed. Addressing his colleagues, he said: "This is the first time in all my experience that a prisoner condemned to death did not wish for a pardon, I do not think he is bound to accept it, so if the prisoner prefers death—"

Father Montmoulin interrupted him. "I think I am bound to accept the pardon because I am innocent, and life and death are in my hands. Were I guilty I should desire the utmost rigor of the law as a means of expiating my crime. As it is, I believe I ought not to refuse the prolongation of life which is offered to me, however heavy a burden it may be."

The President and the inferior judges discussed this point, and agreed that the prisoner was right. At the same time they felt more than ever convinced of his innocence. A guilty man would have been overjoyed at

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obtaining a pardon; at any rate, it was out of question that anyone would dissimulate so far as to feign indifference. But their private opinion could do nothing to alter an accomplished fact. The verdict should only be reversed, by another trial, and this would only be granted on the ground of new and incontrovertible evidence of the prisoner's innocence. Such evidence was not forthcoming. So the President once more asked the question:

"Prisoner, do you accept the pardon offered you?"

"I believe my duty requires me to accept it."

"Let the prisoner be handed over to the Governor of the prison that the sentence of transportation may be carried out according to law."

The order was written out by the clerk, signed by the President, and stamped with the seal of the Court of Justice, to be delivered to the Governor. A sergeant of justice was deputed to accompany the prisoner to Marseilles, whence a vessel was to sail in the course of the week carrying convicts to New Caledonia.

Father Montmoulin bowed to the officers of the law, and trembling in every limb, followed the sergeant to an apartment where he was ordered to strip off his clothes, and put on a convict's dress. Despite his entreaty, he was obliged to do this with the sergeant and one of the warders looking on. Tears rose to his eyes as he took off his cassock. It was taken from him and tossed contemptuously into a corner. "There," the sergeant said, "we will give you a neat twill jacket instead of that black scare-crow thing." The linen Father Montmoulin had to put on bore the convict stamp, and the number by which he was thenceforward to be known. "Your name is not Montmoulin any longer," they said to him, "it is number 5,348 and yet you should forget it, it is marked on every article of your clothing. We had a rascal here from Paris who always pulled off his jacket if anyone asked him his number, saying: 'I have no memory for figures; you can look for yourself. What is that you got on your shoulders?'"

"Off with it. I never in my life saw such a thing on a convict." Therewith the man rudely pulled the consecrated pledge of Our Lady's protection out of the priest's hand. "Now on with the striped jacket. What a fine fellow your reverence looks in it! Only your beard is a little stubby still. Anything more you want?"

"I am under the obligation of reciting the Breviary every day, so I must ask you to let me keep the one I have."

The man laughed loudly. "I like that!" he said. "What next? Perhaps you would like to say Mass every day, and preach a sermon to your saintly comrades. It might be useful to them. Set your delicate conscience at rest; you will not see the inside of a Breviary again, and as for what you are pleased to call your priestly functions, you may say good-bye to that tomfoolery forever and a day!"

"I beg you will not speak so disrespectfully of the sacerdotal office," Father Montmoulin rejoined indignantly.

"What the deuce! Just hear him! He thinks one ought to treat the like of him with respect! Are you ready now?"

"I am ready to own that appearances are against me," the prisoner sorrowfully replied; he then added in a tone of humble entreaty: "I may at least take my rosary with me. I have said it every day since my First Communion."

"Nothing of the sort! The rules do not allow convicts to take anything with them."

"It is also a remembrance of my poor mother—"

The warder, who had grown quite fond of the prisoner while under his charge, here somewhat timidly interposed: "You may just as well let him keep the toy, Mr. Sergeant, he can do no harm to himself or anybody else with it."

"What business is that of yours? He shall not take rubbish with him. Now put on his handcuffs, and the prescribed letters on his ankles, while I go and see if the State carriage is ready for his majesty."

So saying, the sergeant left the room. The warder seized the rosary and thrust it into Father Montmoulin's pocket. "You shall not be deprived of the thing, if it will be a comfort to you," he said, kindly, "even if it costs me my place." As true as I stand here, I believe you innocent of the crime for which you are condemned. Forgive me for putting these letters on your legs. I cannot help it. I trust it will not be reckoned to me as a sin, because my calling obliges me to treat a priest in this way."

"You need have no fears on that score, my good man," Father Montmoulin replied. "God will reward you for the kindness you have shown me. Oblige me, if you can, by taking

my farewell greeting to my mother and sister in the Rue de la Colombe. It seems as if I was to be hurried away so soon that I shall not have a chance of seeing them again. It is perhaps better that it should be so. How it would grieve my poor mother to see me in these clothes. Please tell them I shall remember them every day in my prayers."

The entrance of the sergeant, and an end to the conversation. Father Montmoulin was conducted into the presence of the Governor, who read the rules aloud to him, and warned him that in case he should make his escape, and be taken, again on French territory, he would be publicly branded, and condemned to compulsory labor for life. He was then taken by an escort of police to the prison van; one constable got in with him, the sergeant mounted the box of the driver, and away they went out of the prison courtyard to the railway station.

The news that the priest had been pardoned, and was to be removed to Marseilles, soon got abroad in the town, and a crowd of the lowest of the people collected at the station to indulge in a few parting insults, since they could no longer hope to see him on the scaffold. When the prison van drew up outside the station, it was greeted with groans and hisses. The police had some difficulty in getting the prisoner out in safety.

"String him up to the nearest lamp-post," the people shrieked, and a shower of stones was flung at the unoffending clergyman. One stone, thrown by a street Arab, struck him in the face, so that the blood began to flow; the police were obliged to hurry him into the building by a side door, and across the platform to the carriage awaiting him, before the doors were opened to the public. A basin of water had to be fetched to wash the blood off his face; it chanced that the guard who brought it was the very man who at the trial had tendered evidence so disastrous to the prisoner, namely that the secretarian had gone off by train on that momentous night.

The man started when he recognized the priest. "Sir, I said what I certainly believed to be the truth at the time," he said. "Since then I have had misgivings, I may have been mistaken. Forgive me, if my evidence injured your cause."

"I have forgiven you and everyone else long ago," Father Montmoulin replied, holding out his hand to the man.

The train soon started on its way. Through the iron bars of the narrow window of the compartment set apart for the transport of convicts, in which Father Montmoulin travelled, he saw the towers of Aix once more, and behind them the rocky heights of Ste. Victoire, at the foot of which his own parish lay, which, as he thought, he was never again to behold again in this life.

He felt as if his heart would break, so overwhelming was his grief. Till now, since he received the pardon, he had not had time to think over and realize his fate. Now he could do so undisturbed, for the sergeant opposite him sat silent, smoking a short pipe. He had imagined all so different for himself; the short passage to the scaffold, the last absolution pronounced by the priest as he ascended the steps, a final declaration of his innocence before the assembled multitude; then quick, almost painless death, and after that the entrance upon eternal felicity, on which the teaching of the church permitted him confidentially to count. And now, on account of this miserable pardon, just as he thought he was nearing the haven of peace, he was flung back amid the tempestuous waves of the ocean of life. And what life! "Unhappy man that I am," he said to himself, "I was not worthy of the glorious crown towards which I presumptuously ventured to stretch out my hand." For the first time he fully realized the awful burden which the seal of confession lays on a priest. He felt it in his case to be intolerable, and a kind of desperation came over him. With all the force that faith gave him he endeavored to struggle against it; and though his will was steadfast during this storm of temptation, he could not help feeling its terrible bitterness. Everything seemed to him a disgust and a weariness, and the wish arose within his soul: "Would that some accident would happen to this train, and all could be ended, once and forever!"

But the devout priest checked this involuntary thought, and exclaimed with St. Peter: "Lord save me, or I perish!" And then he had recourse

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to prayer. In this dark night of desolation bordering on despair, the words of the Psalmist rose to his lips; the cry of a soul in dire distress sorrowful even unto death. "Out of the depths I have cried to thee, O Lord; Lord hear my voice. Let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication." "Save me, O God, for the waters are come in, even unto my soul. I stick fast in the mire of the deep; and there is no sure standing. I am come into the depths of the sea; and a tempest hath overwhelmed me. I have labored with crying; my jaws are become hoarse; my eyes have failed while I hope in my God."

Gradually peace returned to the troubled soul. The temptation departed, grace conquered; and Father Montmoulin was able to make his further oblation of himself to God. It did not become easy, nor was it bereft of its exceeding bitterness; but it was rendered less difficult, less appalling, by the remembrance of the Redeemer, who for our sakes drank its dregs the chalice of suffering, and endured the cruel death of the Cross.

(To be Continued.)

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