

Mysterious Mr. Berger

I.

One beautiful morning in May, 1877, the door of a small house in the environs of the Dutch village of H— was seen to open and a fine-looking gentleman appeared on the threshold. Casting his eyes toward the hamlet, he remained motionless for a few moments; then, turning his back upon it, he began to walk in the opposite direction.

This gentleman had come to the place a few months before. All that was known of him was that he had arrived from Germany, accompanied by three persons—his sister and two domestics. The three last named attended Mass regularly, but the master of the household had never been seen to enter a church. If he had been a Protestant, nothing would have been thought of this circumstance; but the rumor having gone abroad that he was an unfaithful Catholic, the simple and pious folk of the village were as anxious to avoid his company as he seemed desirous of shunning theirs.

On this bright morning the stranger walked slowly in the direction of the convent, which stood in the middle of a large and beautiful garden, at the extremity of which was a miniature Grotto of Lourdes, always open to the devotion of the public, and very much frequented by the people of the neighborhood. When he reached the spot, his attention was drawn to the sound of a human voice in fervent and tearful prayer. It was that of a woman in distress, and this was the burden of her supplication:

"O Holy Mother of God, hear the prayer of a poor mother! You also had a Son for whom you shed many tears. Ah! you know the depth of the anxieties of a mother for her orphan children—" The rest was lost in sobs.

Mr. Berger advanced a few steps. On her knees in front of the statue a poor woman stretched forth her supplicating hands, tears falling from her sunken eyes, hollowed by poverty and care.

She rose immediately, having heard him approach. Recognizing him at once, she was seized with apprehension, fearful that this irreligious man would make light of her devotion. But, much to her surprise, he extended a kindly hand and said to her, in a sympathetic voice:

"My good woman, I have heard your prayer. Tell me your troubles. Perhaps the Mother of God, who sometimes uses human means to answer her clients, has sent me to you in order to aid you with regard to your children. Tell me what is wrong with them. I shall be glad to assist them by every means in my power."

What! This strange, silent mysterious man, who avoided everybody whom everybody avoided—could it be that the Blessed Virgin had sent him to her in her need? She looked into his calm, serene eyes, filled with compassion and benevolence, and wondered whether he had not been calumniated. Surely such a clear, untroubled gaze could not belong to a renegade and unbeliever. With a feeling of confidence inspired by that gentle, kindly face, the woman replied:

"Mr. Berger, you do not know me, and I had taken the resolution to confide my troubles to Heaven alone. But I feel that I must be frank with you. Perhaps it is the will of God that I should confide my anxieties to you. Five years ago I lost my husband. He was so ambitious, he had worked so hard, and we had already begun to make plans for our daughter Trine and our little Klaus. Unfortunately, he fell ill and died. All our savings went to pay the doctor and the funeral expenses. I redoubled my efforts, aided by my good daughter—little Klaus being still at school—and we were not so badly off as I had feared we should be. But now there is something else; yes, two new crosses seem to menace us. Little Klaus had finished the village school, and he wishes—he has always wished—"

The humble peasant woman hesitated, blushed, fumbled with her apron, and cast her eyes upon the ground.

The gentleman waited a moment, then said, encouragingly:

"He wishes to—?"

"It is a presumption, sir, perhaps," she said, "but he has set his heart on becoming a priest."

"Is he pious?" inquired Mr. Berger.

"Pious! He prays night and morning like an angel. I am poor," she went on; "I cannot pay his expenses, even if he were received. And Klaus weeps night and day, refusing to eat and drink, because he cannot study the things he is so anxious to learn in order that one day he may become a priest. I do not know what I shall do."

"Send your little Klaus to me," said Mr. Berger, after a moment's reflection. "I will see if I cannot do something for him. And now pray what is your other cross?"

"Trine, my daughter, has been asked in marriage by John Klarsen, whom she has known for a long time. He has a fine farm and has asked for Trine's hand several times, but I cannot give my consent."

"And why, my good woman? Does your daughter not like the young man?"

"She likes him very much."

"It seems to me, then, that you are unwise in rejecting his addresses. Will you not tell me your objection?"

"I do not like to tell you, Mr. Berger. It might offend you."

"No, not at all. How could it? Speak to me with perfect freedom."

"Well, Klarsen is not a religious man. For a long time he has been reading infidel books lent to him by a comrade with whom he served his three years in the Conscription; and lately he has ceased going to church altogether. Indeed, he has been heard to ridicule holy things. It would be impossible for me to give my Trine to such a man."

"Not if he promised never to meddle with her own faith? She might in time convert him, you know."

"It would be too great a risk, my dear sir. Sooner would Trine and I endure poverty than take such a risk. We could not do it."

The gentleman regarded the woman with silent admiration, which she, in her trepidation, mistook for reproach.

"Oh, sir!" she exclaimed, "forgive me if I have said anything of which you do not approve, as no doubt I have—if all reports be true. But my faith and that of my children is the dearest thing in the world to me. I dare not place it in jeopardy."

"You have not offended me," was the reply. "On the contrary, nothing that I have heard in a long time has pleased me so much as this evidence that firm and steadfast faith still exists in the hearts of the Dutch people. For as you are, so must your compatriots be."

"I trust in God they are," said the woman fervently. "How could any Catholic feel otherwise?"

"Send your little Klaus to me," continued the stranger. "I pledge you my word not to tamper with his faith or morals in any way. On the other hand I may be able to further his desires."

"Thank God and the Holy Mother!" said the happy woman. "I will send him, as you request. After all, you cannot be an enemy to religion, or you would not do this."

"I am not an enemy to religion," answered Mr. Berger, with a smile. "I hope soon to convince you of that fact."

With these words he departed.

The next morning Mr. Berger was walking up and down in his modest sitting room, wrapped in deep thought, from which he was finally roused by a timid knock, given for the third time on the half-open door.

"Come in!" he said, gently, pausing in his walk.

A boy of about fourteen, pale and thin, advanced slowly to his side. His transparent look gave him a look of spirituality, which the sweet, innocent glance from his fine eyes increased. His high forehead denoted intelligence.

"This must be little Klaus," said Mr. Berger, taking his hand.

"Yes sir," replied the boy. "My mother sent me to you."

"Come, sit down and let us have a little talk."

Klaus took the offered chair, his glance at once resting upon the books ranged along the shelves before him.

"Do you like books?" asked his host. "Are you fond of reading?"

"Oh, I like it very much!" answered Klaus, in a most agreeable voice.

Mr. Berger took down a History of the Church, from which he asked him to read. The boy did so with great expression and perfect comprehension of what was before him.

"That is very good," said Mr. Berger, "very good indeed."

The boy smiled. "I love to read aloud!" he said.

On the table lay a small book with the title "Ordo Breviarii Romani." The child murmured in a low voice, almost unconsciously: "Order of the Roman Breviary."

"You know Latin, then?" said Mr. Berger, surprised.

"Oh, no, sir—not at all!"

"How do you translate those words, then?" he asked.

"I just thought they must mean that."

"Repeat the Latin words aloud as you see them written on the cover."

Little Klaus said them over slowly but correctly.

"You tell me you have never studied Latin? How, then, do you pronounce it so well?"

"If I pronounce it well, sir, it is through hearing it from the altar."

"You have a great talent for languages, my boy," said the man. Taking a Latin book from one of the shelves, he placed it in the boy's hand. "Read some passages in this aloud at home," he said. "Come back to-morrow—come every day—and I will teach you Latin and some other things."

Overcome with joy, Klaus kissed the hand of his benefactor and promised to do as he was told. Then, eagerly hugging the book to his breast, he ran home.

After he had gone, Mr. Berger seated himself at his desk and wrote a long letter in German. Then he took his hat and cane and started for the farm of John Klarsen. On seeing his visitor, the young peasant did not conceal his surprise. The gentleman took a chair, and invited his host to do the same.

"My friend," said he, "I have called on business which perhaps you may not find agreeable, but in undertaking which I wish you to believe I have only your happiness in view. Tell me frankly why you no longer take part in the offices of your religion, and, not content with that, attack religion itself?"

Klarsen drew his eyebrows severely together, replying in a rude manner:

"That is nobody's business but my own, sir. I consider it a great piece of impudence for a stranger to question me thus."

"You were once very pious, I hear," continued Mr. Berger, not at all disconcerted by this reception; "but now I understand you are an avowed enemy of the Church."

The expression of anger on the face of Klarsen changed to a sarcastic smile.

"I should have very little difficulty in explaining the reason to one as devout as yourself. When one has such a fine example under one's very eyes, it is easy to say what one thinks."

The visitor did not at once reply. After a while he said:

"My friend, I regret having scandalized you, even though involuntarily. Circumstances have forced me into a position which is far more disagreeable to me than you can imagine; but I am glad to say it is nearly at an end. Of one thing I assure you; that I am absolutely convinced of the truth of our holy—of the Catholic religion, and that I regard the abandonment of it as the greatest evil which could possibly befall any one in this world. Come to see me as often as you like; we will discuss the subject together. You have, unfortunately, fallen under the influence of persons and books that have caused you to doubt great truths, with which hitherto you have, perhaps, been but imperfectly acquainted. You appear to be a sensible man, open to conviction, I fancy, when you shall see truth irrefutably opposed to sophistry and error. Come to see me; let us talk about things

and get well acquainted with each other."

With these words he took his leave; Klarsen conducting him hospitably to the door, and promising to pay him at least one visit in return for his call. As Mr. Berger passed from the house the farmer said to himself:

"That is a strange person. But it will do no harm to hear what he has to say."

To tell the truth, he was greatly flattered by the visit; Mr. Berger, in spite of his supposed irreligion, being regarded in the village as a man of some importance.

On the Feast of the Ascension an extraordinary thing occurred in the parish church of H—. Mr. Berger was seen approaching the Holy Table with the other devout parishioners. His fervent demeanor was that of one familiar with sacred ceremonials, quite foreign to the attitude in which, according to the belief of the people, he had held himself since coming to dwell among them. And, what was most strange, his sister and the two servants did not seem to be at all surprised at the unprecedented occurrence.

From that time forward he approached the Communion Table very frequently, also assisting at Mass every day. It is easy to imagine that the people ceased to regard him with suspicion; every one saluted him with the most profound respect, and the cure soon became his devoted friend.

Klarsen followed in the wake of his fellow-townsmen. His conversations with a man so learned as Mr. Berger soon showed him the fallacy of his own doubts; in a very short time he returned to the faith a fervor of his earlier years. Then who was more happy than Trine and her mother? Perhaps Klarsen himself; or more likely little Klaus, who was making wonderful progress in his Latin, under the gentle tuition of Mr. Berger. In the month of September he was admitted to the Petit Seminaire of Y—. But before his departure he had assisted at the happy marriage of Trine and Klarsen, where the bride was given away by her kind benefactor, who had long before this time conquered all hearts.

III.

But a trial was in store for the parish. Early in February, 1884, Mr. Berger and his three companions disappeared as suddenly as they had come; and no one, not even the cure, knew whither they had gone. After a residence of seven years—during which, though not a whisper of the identity of the mysterious stranger had been dropped, he had endeared himself to all who knew him—it was natural for people to regret, even to complain, that he had left them without a single word of farewell. But the climax was reached about a week later, when the good cure, ascending the pulpit, read, in a voice full of emotion, the following letter:

"Monsieur le Cure—I thank you for the great kindness I met with in your parish during the time of my sorrowful exile. And I pray you to pardon, and I ask the same grace of your parishioners, the seeming scandal given during the first period of my residence among you. My strange conduct was necessary in order that I might guard my secret and direct my diocese without inconvenience. I beg that you will accept for yourself and will convey to your people the blessing of old Mr. Berger—"

"Jean Bernard Brinkmann, Bishop of Munster."

"Munster, Feb. 18, 1884."

Many of our readers are doubtless ignorant of the fact that during the Kulturkampf the Bishop of Munster, confessor of the Faith, went into exile across the Dutch frontier. He was obliged to conceal the place of his sojourn, his position and his real name, in order to be able to hold correspondence with his diocesans. No doubt he adopted the name of Berger from its meaning, which in French is shepherd; as, though absent from them, he truly remained the faithful shepherd of his flock. In order still further to disguise his identity, he did not attend the parish church, but daily celebrated Mass in the private chapel which he had arranged in his home. To guard against compromising the cure, he had pre-

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served the same secrecy with him as with the parishioners. Later, when he felt confident that he had found a place of safety, he became satisfied that his excessive solitude might become a cause of suspicion; so he began to frequent the church and mingle in the devotions of the peasants; on occasions of great feasts omitting his private Mass and going to Holy Communion with the faithful.

To this day the memory of Monsignor Jean Bernard Brinkmann is cherished in that little Dutch village; and the mourning of the people was deep and universal when it was announced, some years later, that God had called the holy prelate to Himself.—Mary E. Mannix in The Ave Maria.