

A VICTIM TO THE SEAL OF CONFESSION.

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

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CHAPTER V.

Shortly after daybreak Father Montmoulin returned home, wearied out by his long journey in the discharge of his ministerial duties. He had spent the night by the side of the sick man, awaiting the return of consciousness which would enable him to hear his confession and give him the Viaticum. Extreme unction he had administered immediately upon his arrival. When midnight was past, a slight improvement had taken place in the condition of the patient—whose case appeared hopeless—and he regained his senses so far as to answer yes or no by signs to the questions the priest put to him, and to strike his breast with the hand that was not paralysed, when the act of contrition was recited. Thereupon he received absolution, and the Blessed Sacrament was administered to him.

This done, the priest wished to set out immediately upon his homeward journey, but the storm, which raged far more fiercely upon the heights than in the valley below, rendered it impossible for him to leave the shelter of the cottage. "It would be certain death for you, your Reverence," the good people told him; "even one of us would not venture by night in all this storm and rain down the precipitous paths, to Ste. Victoire."

Towards four o'clock the tempest seemed to abate, so the priest, who was anxious to be back in time for Mass at the usual hour of six, started on his way, accompanied by a sturdy peasant to act as his guide, and help him down the more dangerous declivities. No accident occurred, only when they were about half way, a heavy shower of half-frozen rain soaked him to the skin.

On reaching home, his first act was to carry the oils and wax to the sacristy, which could be entered from the cloisters, by passing the foot of the winding staircase we have mentioned; he then rang the Angelus, and began to put the things ready for the Mass, for he naturally thought the sacristan to be absent. He then opened the church, to admit a few old women who came to hear Mass. Before he could get upstairs to change his things, for he was wet through, he was asked for in the confessional, and kept there at least ten minutes listening to the sereps of a tender conscience, and only got free by telling his penitent that he did not feel well; and in fact a shivering fit had come over him.

When he entered his own rooms, he found his mother had been up for some time. He briefly related his adventures, and heard from her, to his great relief, that nothing had happened to alarm her during the night; only once she had been startled out of her sleep, and thought she heard some one trying to handle the handle of the door, but perhaps it was only the noise of the wind. The priest then hastily changed his things, and went down to the sacristy to vest for Mass.

Directly after Mass, old Susan had, as was her custom, repaired to the kitchen, to get breakfast ready whilst the priest made his thanksgiving. She was not in the best of tempers. The visit of her master's relatives from Aix the day before was anything but agreeable to her, for she thought it might lead to her dismissal. Besides, almost all the coffee she had roasted and ground was used up; the cups were not washed, the sugar-basin was half empty. Furthermore the large knife that she always used to cut the bread and butter was nowhere to be found! "They have set the place upside down," she grumbled to herself, "that does not suit me at all. All my life I have been used to keep things in order, and rather than be interfered with I would give notice to-day."

As Father Montmoulin, having concluded his thanksgiving, came along the corridor, he could not help overhearing part of this soliloquy, for old Susan was in the habit of thinking aloud, especially when anything had put her out. So he good-naturedly turned into the kitchen, to see if the storm could be allayed by a few soft words. He succeeded so far, that the old woman began to cry, saying she knew she did not give satisfaction, and could do nothing to please his Reverence, but he would see whether he was better served, if she were sent about her business.

"Nonsense, Susan, who talks of sending you away? Surely I may have my own mother to live with me if I like? We shall want your services all the same, for you will have to help her to keep house. There is something to dry your tears," and he slipped a couple of shillings into her hand. "Now do let us have the coffee, and as soon as you have brought it in, go as fast as you can to the shop and ask Mr. Renard if he can drive my mother to Aix to-day, and what time he will be going. Then go to Mrs. Blanchard and say my compliments and I should be glad if she could make it convenient to call this morning."

Susan wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron, and courtied in acknowledgment of the gratuity. "If I only knew what has become of my big knife!" she sighed.

"Julia must have mislaid it. You will find it before long," answered the good priest as he went to his own room.

After breakfast, during which mother and son talked freely of the pleasant prospect before them, painting in rosy tints the happy days they would spend together, Susan came back to say that the man would be pleased to drive Mrs. Montmoulin to Aix, but he must start to-day not later than eight, and Mrs. Blanchard

would pay her respects to his Reverence between ten and eleven o'clock.

"There is not a moment to be lost," said Father Montmoulin, taking a banknote out of one of the side drawers of his writing table. "Here are £20 for you. You must not refuse to take them. The old widow gave them to me, it is part of a legacy she had lately. I have the same sum for myself. Yes, you must really take it—it will do to pay off the rest of the debt you contracted on my behalf. I do not know how Mrs. Blanchard became acquainted with our straitened circumstances; she appears to have a special gift for discerning any case of need, and assisting it to the best of her ability. She offered me the money so very kindly, that I felt I could not refuse to accept it without hurting her feelings."

"Dear old lady! May God reward her," ejaculated Mrs. Montmoulin.

"We must pray for her. And now farewell for the present, mother; in a very short time I hope I shall see you here again, not to go away any more. I should like to go down to the village with you, but you know I cannot leave the house just now. Thank God, Mrs. Blanchard will be here this morning, and I shall get rid of this incubus that weighs on me, and which since yesterday afternoon has caused me real anxiety. Good-bye. Pray for me." And he kissed his mother affectionately.

"I pray for you every day, do you do the same for me, now give me your blessing before I go," rejoined the old woman, kneeling down devoutly at her son's feet. Then she looked at him with a smile, though tears stood in her eyes, and turning followed old Susan to the gate. In her hand she carried a bag containing some articles of her son's wardrobe which required repairing, for with housewifely instinct, she had looked over his things that morning whilst awaiting his return. As she crossed the courtyard she looked up and nodded again to her son, who was watching her departure from the window.

How different the next meeting of those two was to be to what they imagined! And yet a sort of sad foreboding lay heavy on the young man's heart. "I feel strangely depressed," he said to himself. "I believe I have got a chill. I had better lie down a little, as soon as Mrs. Blanchard has got clear off with the money."

When Susan returned, he asked her to make him a cup of tea, telling her when she had done that, he would not want her any more until the next morning. He would go to bed, and try to sleep off the effects of the chill he had taken. As it was his habit to do this when he felt unwell, the old servant offered no remonstrance. She only asked if she was not to bring him any dinner, and on his replying that he had no appetite, and could, if he wanted anything, find a couple of eggs for himself, she took her departure, saying, "Just as your Reverence pleases."

Father Montmoulin, left in solitude, first recited his Breviary. When this was done, he wrote out a list of theological books from a catalogue, intending to order them that same day. "That comes to nearly fourteen pounds," he said with a sigh, as he counted up the price of the different volumes. "I should never have ventured to expend so large an amount on my library, if that excellent lady had not given me the money on the expressed condition that I should spend it on myself and not give it away to the poor. Well, I shall have enough left to furnish the rooms for my good mother. Dear, how my head does ache! I will sit back in the easy chair, and put a wet cloth round my temples."

Father Montmoulin had only just settled himself in his armchair when the clock struck ten, and a few minutes later a knock was heard at the door. "Come in," he cried, "Mrs. Blanchard to be sure, as punctual as clock work. I must apologise, Madam," he said as she entered, "for troubling you to come round this morning; I have been out all night, and I seem to have got rather a bad cold."

"So I see, and I am very sorry for it," answered his visitor, a lady already advanced in years, short in stature, but apparently active and robust. Her pleasant, rosy face was framed as it were, in an old-fashioned cap of quilted lace, with two carefully arranged curls of snow-white hair on each side. Her blue eyes were full of concern as she looked at the priest, and her countenance assumed a look of motherly kindness. Setting down the basket which invariably accompanied her on her visits to the sick and needy, she took the chair he placed for her on the other side of the table at which he usually sat.

"Pray do not take the cloth off your head," she entreated. "I have already heard that you had to go to the hamlet on Montalot for a sick call. To think of such an expedition as that on such a road and in such weather! It really would have been wiser not to say Mass this morning, but to have gone straight to bed. You must not mind my saying it, but indeed you do too much, you over-tax your strength; remember you owe it to us, to your flock, to take some care of yourself!"

"I will be very obedient, and drink a cup of tea and go to bed, as soon as our little business is settled," the priest answered with a smile.

"Our business is not pressing," rejoined the old lady, "that can be left for some other time. At present you need rest, and ought not to do anything to try your head."

"It is precisely that I may have my mind at rest that I beg you will take the money with you this morning," the priest replied. "We shall have done all in five minutes' time, and to tell the truth, I feel the responsibility of having so large a sum in my keeping. I am alone almost all day long in this lonely building, and at any moment I may be called away to the sick."

"If that is so, if it will be any relief to you, I will take the money away with me most willingly. But pray, Father, do not trouble yourself to count it all over to me; I am quite certain that it is right to a penny."

Whilst she was speaking, Father Montmoulin had fetched the handkerchief containing the money, and opened it on the table. Without heeding the good lady's protestations, he counted it all over to her, and finally asked her to sign the receipt he had prepared. It ran thus: Received this day of Father Montmoulin on account of the collecting committee of St. Joseph's Guild, the sum of twelve thousand francs (£180) for the re-building of the Hospital of this place, directed by the Sisters of Charity, Ste. Victoire, 20th February, 1888, signed Marie Blanchard.

In a bold decided hand the old lady gazed at the receipt, and then she handed the pen back to the cleric, and handed the pen back to the cleric. "You are an excellent man of business," she said with a smile. "One would think you had been brought up in a merchant's office."

"So I was," he rejoined. "My father was in business. Besides you know, I must have everything in black and white to lay before the Committee at its next meeting, or I shall be condemned to refund the whole sum, and what would become of me then? I should have to go all around the world on a begging expedition before I could raise so large an amount, as this. But joking apart, how do you propose to take the money to your house?"

"Nothing is simpler. If you will lend me the handkerchief in which it is wrapped, I will lay it in the bottom of my basket, the lid of which has concealed various things before now. No one will suspect that instead of articles of clothing or comestibles it contains £180. Now I will say good-bye, my dear Father. Say an Ave for your poor, useless old friend, who often troubles at the thought of the account she will have to render. We know not how soon."

"You have not much to fear. Remember our Lord's words: 'Come, ye blessed of my Father! For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink; I was naked, and you covered me. As long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, ye did it to me.' This is what our Lord will say, when good Mrs. Blanchard knocks at the gate of Heaven with her basket on her arm, which is worth a great more than £180 pounds."

The pastor spoke so earnestly that his words brought the tears to his visitor's eyes. "Thank you, Father," she said, "what you say is a great encouragement to me. It is a delightful lesson that 'Christian charity teaches us to view the brethren of Christ in the poor, my Christ. Himself.' Would that I could do far more for our Lord in the person of His poor, in return for all He did and suffered for my salvation. May I ask your blessing, Father?"

She knelt down; then rising she took leave of the priest. "Farewell, Father. No, I cannot let you come further than the door, I can find my way out perfectly well. You must not come down on my account. Say an Ave for me instead!"

Father Montmoulin did not persist in accompanying her. As soon as she had gone he prepared to undress and lie down to rest. He felt a vague, unaccountable disquietude; an interior voice seemed continually saying: pray for her, pray for her. He thought he would put his coat on again, and go down after her, but then again he said to himself he was a little feverish, and over-tired. Still he could not go to sleep, though he said his beads as a kind of lullaby.

We must now return to the sacristan, who had been waiting all the morning in the lumber-room in a state of suppressed excitement. He heard the Angelus rung, and he heard the priest go into the church directly after. Should he make the venture now; the old lady was probably up, and the bedroom door would be open. No, it seemed too risky, the priest might come up-stairs at any moment. Besides, he did not know for certain where the money was concealed, he might have to search some time for it. Now when once Mass had begun, he would be safe, he would slip up then, for the old lady would probably go down to Mass, and even if the old rotten doors were locked it would not matter much, a good kick and the hinges would give way. He waited therefore, until the Holy Sacrifice was being offered; but as he was in the act of issuing from his place of concealment, he peeped through a chink in the door, and who should he see but old Susan on her way to the kitchen! Now he might have two old women to deal with, and if one ran off and gave the alarm he was lost. Yet, taking off his boots, he crept up as far as the entrance of the tribune; there he saw Mrs. Montmoulin; he would have to pass her, and this he did not dare to do. "If she calls out, all in the church will hear," he said to himself, and withdrew once more to his lurking place.

Was his project to be defeated after

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all? Must he spend his life in this remote corner of Provence with nothing but the miserable pittance of a sacristan? And he could not do that now, for all of his boasting about the legacy he could not remain in the place. And only yesterday evening he thought he was going to live in clover, if he could but get off to America with the sum of money, the amount of which his imagination greatly overrated.

The Mass was over and Father Montmoulin had gone to his rooms. Not very long after, Loser saw Susan leave the house accompanied by an old lady. "Now my worthy pastor is all alone," he said to himself. "Most men in my position would make short work of him. But what a coward I am getting! I consider there is nothing more after death, and I and my fellow men are but mere animals, and yet I have not the pluck to act on my convictions, for all the arguments of modern science. When I was in the army, I shot a couple of poor devils from behind, that was little short of murder. Yet I cannot knock down this defenceless priest, who in his way has done me a good turn sometimes."

The man tried to talk himself into a bolder mood, and at last, when he had drained his brandy flask, he resolved to go up to the kitchen and wait his opportunity. Then, just as ten o'clock struck, he heard foot-steps and saw Mrs. Blanchard entering by the cloisters. "She has come to fetch the money!" he exclaimed. "It is now or never."

With the eagerness of a beast of prey he snatched up the knife, and ran up the winding stairs, reaching the corridor just as the old lady disappeared into the priest's room. A moment later he had his ear to the key hole. "What, his Reverence is not well—all the better for me," he said to himself. "Ah, now they are coming to business"—he heard the banknotes rustle, and recognized the clink of the gold pieces—"Only £180 after all! Still, it is worth a little trouble; the old goose wants his blessing! Let her have it; now is my time."

Quickly stepping back into a dark corner close to the head of the stairs, he made ready to strike his victim. But Mrs. Blanchard went in the opposite direction, to the tribune, where she paused to say a prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. "So much the better," muttered Loser. "It makes matters easier. Now she will go down the winding stairs to the cloisters, and I can get a blow at her securely."

Slinking along upon tip-toe, he followed the unsuspecting old lady to the tribune, which, formerly the nun's choir, was shut off from the body of the church by a high wooden screen. Before this screen he saw her devoutly kneeling. "One might almost snatch her basket and make off," the man reflected. "That would be no good though, for I could not get away with the booty till night, and I should be arrested. No, I must play the man, and silence her."

After a few minutes Mrs. Blanchard crossed herself and rose from her knees. On reaching the winding stairs a means of exit wherewith she was quite familiar, she laid her hand on the rope which served in lieu of a banister and began cautiously to descend the dark steps. Suddenly she stopped. "Is there any one behind me," she asked anxiously, for she had heard Loser following at her heels.

"I suppose I was mistaken, I wish I had gone the other way, I feel so frightened, I do not know why. God is always present," she added aloud. A few steps more brought her to the narrow landing at the entrance of the lumber-room.

Then all at once a hand clutched her throat from behind; at the same instant Loser thrust open the door, which stood ajar, flung his victim in and stabbed her in the side. With a stifled cry the old lady sank to the ground. Her death was almost instantaneous, but for some time the murderer did not relax his hold and stand upright on his feet.

(To be Continued.)

DRANK TOO MUCH WATER.—W. W. Lee, of Pottsville, Pa., died at the hospital there from the effects of drinking eight quarts of water in the space of ten hours. Shortly after the was seized with hemorrhages of the lungs, and soon expired. Prior to his illness Lee had been hale and hearty.

AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION.—The returns of the Victorian referendum on the question of Australian federation show a vote of 145,014 in favor and 9,605 against the measure. The vote in Tasmania shows 13,800 in favor and 800 against.

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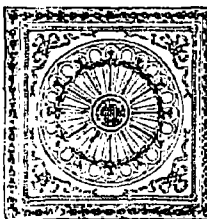
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C.M.B.A. of Canada, Branch 26

(ORGANIZED, 13th November, 1883.)

Branch 26 meets at St. Patrick's Hall, 92 St. Alexander street, on every Monday of each month. (The regular meetings for the transaction of business are held on the 2nd and 4th Mondays of each month, at 8 p.m.)

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Organized 1885.

Meets in its hall, 157 Ottawa Street, on the first Sunday of each month, at 8 p.m. Spiritual Advisor, REV. F. STRAUSS, C.S.C.R.; President, JOHN WHITE; Secretary, J. J. COLLIER; Delegates to St. Patrick's League: J. Whitty, D. J. O'Neill and M. Caser.

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Total Abstinence Societies.

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