

# A VICTIM TO THE SEAL OF CONFESSION

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

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## CHAPTER XII. THE CROSS-EXAMINATION.

At the close of the conversation reported in the preceding chapter, the two speakers had reached the door leading to the priest's apartments. There they found the landlord of the Golden Rose waiting to inform them that he had taken the liberty of preparing breakfast for them in an adjoining room. He felt sure that Mr. Barthelot must have left Aix too early to take anything before his departure.

"True, I had only time for a cup of coffee before starting," the magistrate replied, "and when our enquiry is ended, I shall be happy to avail myself of the invitation. But we must get forward with our work; that telegram to Aix cannot be despatched too soon," he added, turning to the Mayor. However, he allowed himself to be persuaded to take a glass of Madeira and some cold chicken, whilst Susan and old Jim were summoned.

The old man declared he had only come to ring the Angelus at noon, and had gone away immediately after; he had neither heard or seen anything unusual. He had seen nothing of the sacristan, and would take care how he did his work for him again, if it was to get him into trouble with the police.

Susan had to be brought up between a couple of policemen, and on first appearing before the magistrate not a word could be got from her but tears and sobs. All at once, however, she dried her eyes, and was voluble in her abuse of the Mayor, the magistrate and all the officers of the law. What right had they, or any one to send the police for her, an old woman of seventy, against whom not a word could be said, as if she were a common thief. Perhaps they were going to accuse her of having murdered the poor old lady? No wonder if they did, if they could do such a crying wrong to a good and holy man like Father Montmoulin, as to charge him with the crime. Times were indeed changed! It all came of having a man set over the community, who did not fulfil his duty, and who—well, let them ask his wife what sort of a man he was! The old woman, having spent her wrath, relaxed into sobs and lamentations.

The magistrate could scarcely repress a smile at this personal attack upon the Mayor, and he made a sign to the latter to let it pass. He then reproved the police for having been disrespectful in their treatment of so respectable a person. He told her that it was in order to clear the priest from suspicion that he had called her to give evidence, so that for her master's sake she must answer the questions addressed to her. This pacified her somewhat, and she told her story with tolerable coherence: how the knife had been missing the first thing in the morning, that her Master had told her before ten o'clock that he was unwell, and would not want her any more that day; that she was going out of the house she met Mrs. Blanchard coming in, and heard and saw nothing of her till evening, when her little maid came running in to say her mistress had not returned home.

"What did you answer the girl?"

"I exclaimed, Good heavens, some misfortune must have happened to her!"

"What made you say that?"

"Because his reverence had told me she was coming to fetch a large sum of money for the new hospital."

"Did any one else know that Mrs. Blanchard was going at that time to fetch the money?"

"No indeed, do you imagine that I am such a tattler? I did not say a word about it to any living soul."

"You say you met Mrs. Blanchard coming to the convent. What time was it then?"

"The clock had just struck ten. She said good morning to me, and asked if she could find Father Montmoulin alone. I said yes; his mother had just left, and no one was with him."

"Had his mother a basket or bag in her hand, when she left?"

"Yes, she was carrying a little bag which his reverence had given her. I think it contained some linen that wanted mending."

"Was the bag heavy or light?"

"I cannot tell. I wanted to carry it downstairs for her, but she would not let it out of her hand."

The magistrate and the mayor exchanged a knowing glance.

"Do you know perhaps where the Reverend gentleman's mother lives?"

"Yes, in the Rue de la Colonne in Aix. I do not know the number. She has a little shop for woollen wares near the market."

The magistrate made a note of the address. "You are sure that your master was alone in the convent when Mrs. Blanchard went to see him, the sacristan was not there?"

"No, the sacristan took himself off on Sunday evening and has not been back since."

"Well, Susan, what is your opinion: if Father Montmoulin was the only person in the house when the old lady met her fate, on whom does the suspicion fall?"

"How should I know? Certainly not upon his reverence, there is not a better or more saintly man than he! I would sooner believe the devil did it himself, or sent some rascal to kill the old lady in order to bring this trouble upon a good priest, and then carried him off."

Everyone present smiled at the old servant's very original alternative, certainly not in keeping with modern ideas. But she was highly displeased. "What is there to laugh at in that?" she continued. "Every-

one knows the devil has his own instruments, and it is nothing wonderful for him to carry anyone off. It should make a good Christian tremble, instead of laughing. And you take care, Mr. Mayor; you may profess not to believe in the devil, but I should not be surprised if he came to fetch you one day!"

"Ha, ha, well done, Susan!" exclaimed the stout doctor, who had entered the room during Susan's peroration, and caught her last words. "Well done! Give it the old sinner hot and strong! I would not have given you credit for such eloquence! The clericals ought to return you to Parliament. I believe you would like the devil to carry off all these scamps of Liberals!—All in good part gentlemen. I have the honor to place my services at the disposal of the representatives of the law."

"This is our medical practitioner, Dr. Corbillard," said the Mayor by the way of introduction to the strangers present, while the witness was told she might withdraw. "I think Doctor, you might have had the civility to come a little sooner."

"Not a single moment! I always act on the principle: first to see to the living, because you may do them some good; it does not matter to the dead how long they wait. Just when your message came I was called to see a sick man four miles away among the hills; I have only just returned and am now at your service."

The post-mortem examination then took place. Father Montmoulin's knife was found to be the instrument with which the wound was inflicted. The candlestick which Charles had, as will be remembered, let fall in his fright at the sight of the skull and crossbones, was found and recognized as the property of the priest. This the magistrate considered as a corroboration of his theory that he had lured his victim down to the sacristy under the pretext of the money being there, thinking the winding staircase would afford the best facilities for the execution of his hideous plot.

"Now we have the whole connected chain of evidence," he said with no small satisfaction. "We will let the accused feel all the force of it at once, and I shall be very much surprised if he does not confess forthwith."

Sosaying, Mr. Barthelot re-entered the priest's sitting-room, and taking his seat at the table with the clerk, he ordered the accused to be brought before him.

Father Montmoulin slept the sleep of the worn out until, soon after day-break, he was aroused by the unusual commotion outside the convent walls, caused by the concourse of the villagers who had flocked thither in ever-increasing numbers. When first he opened his eyes, he thought he had had a bad dream and was thankful to think it was over. But the next morning he caught sight of the constable who sat watching him, and of the basin of water in which he tried to cleanse his face, and he knew that it was no phantasm of one night that weighed upon him, but stern and terrible reality. All the events of the preceding night crowded upon his mind—Loser's confession, the search throughout the house, the discovery of the body and the blood-stained knife. The future then rose up before him in darkest colors. He had been taken into custody under strong suspicion of having committed a horrible murder with robbery, presently he would be taken to prison like an ordinary criminal before the eyes of all his parishioners. He already heard their voices below his window. What a terrible scandal! what a disgrace for him! Then he would be brought to trial, and be impotent to do anything except assert his own innocence of the crime whereof he was accused. Would he be believed? He did not dare to hope that such would be the case. The jury would pronounce him guilty, and the judge would pass sentence upon him. And then the guillotine stared him in the face!

Father Montmoulin would have been more than human, had not this dreadful prospect affected him profoundly. "If this terrible doom would fall on me alone, he said to himself, I could bear it, but my mother and my sister will be involved in my shame, and what sad scandal it will give in my congregation, and far beyond the narrow limits of this parish."

Again he went over all in his mind. Loser's confession, although inspired by nothing but fear, was yet, as he could not but admit, made with the object of obtaining sacramental absolution, and consequently a confession, which he was bound under all circumstances to keep secret. He dare not let it be known that Loser went to him to confession the evening before, for that, under the existing state of affairs, would almost amount to an accusation against him. He had, it was true, seen him before he knew that he came with a view to confession, and the mere fact that he had seen him had nothing to do with the confession. Besides, it was evident that if he were to declare that he had seen Loser, it would be a strong evidence in his own favor. But Father Montmoulin had already been asked whether he had seen the man since the afternoon of Sunday, and he answered in the negative, because, as he told himself, Loser had only come to him for the sake of confession, and to admit that he had been there at all seemed likely to endanger his sacred obligation to preserve silence. Therefore he decided to abide by what had already been said, since he could not, well retract his

statement without indirectly giving rise to the supposition that Loser had been to confession to him, and everyone would suspect what his confession had been.

All the various grounds of suspicion which told so strongly against him lay heavy on Father Montmoulin's heart. He knew that the embarrassment which he had been unable to conceal on the occasion of the mayor's entrance and the discovery of the body, must place him in a very unfavorable light. Could he not explain this unfortunate circumstance by saying: Yes, I knew of the crime that had been perpetrated, but only through the confession. So long as no particular individual was brought under suspicion, or into a position of difficulty, this could not be a violation of the seal of confession. Yet it might lead to it. No one except Loser had been to confession to him, or had been near him at all, after the murder, and if through the inquiries of the police, or by any accident, the fact that Loser had been to him that same night were discovered, his admission that he had heard of the crime from the lips of a penitent would be equivalent to an accusation against one man; the only penitent who came to him, the only person he saw in the convent was Loser, therefore he was the murderer. No, there was no doubt; nothing in the world should induce him to exculpate himself by saying that he was told of the fatal deed in the confessional. Thus no means of escape was left him.

Another idea occurred to him. The sacristan had come upon him by surprise whilst he was counting the money on Sunday afternoon. Might he not at least mention this fact to the magistrate, since it was wholly unconnected with the confessional, and it was certainly calculated to throw suspicion on the right person. If Loser had not been to confession subsequently, Father Montmoulin would certainly have spoken of the circumstance, but now he deemed it more advisable not to give this hint as to the real criminal, justifiable as it undoubtedly was. "After all," he said to himself, "it may be conjectured that I was through his confession that I was able to detect the criminal. No, I will do nothing that will cause him to be suspected, lest I should even in the remotest degree occasion doubt to arise as to the inviolability of the seal of confession. I would rather die than appear not to have guarded it most faithfully!"

Such was the heroic resolution the conscientious priest formed, and when all hesitation was at an end, peace returned to his soul. He calmly recited his morning prayers, and then took up his breviary and began to say the hours.

The constable whose duty it was to keep his eye on the priest, was not a little astonished to see with what tranquillity and resolution he performed his prayers, while from the courtyard below the uproar grew louder and louder, and some voices openly denounced the priest and called for his death. "It is an odd thing," the man said to himself, "if I had not seen that bloody knife, I should declare the fellow was innocent. However I have often heard it said that the clergy are all of them consummate hypocrites." So saying he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and proceeded to fill it afresh.

About ten o'clock Father Montmoulin was summoned to appear before the magistrate. He was received courteously, and given a seat opposite to his interrogator. After the usual questions as to name, birth, etc., which the clerk duly wrote down, the magistrate said: "It is unnecessary to say a word about the unfortunate occurrence which obliges me to examine you, Rev. Sir, you are only too well acquainted with the circumstances already. I must however lay before you the overwhelming evidence against you which the preliminary investigation has brought to light, and which have led to a charge being brought against you, from which I do not see how you can clear yourself. Let me advise you in your interest to make a clean breast of it; it is the only means of escaping a capital sentence."

Father Montmoulin politely thanked the magistrate and assured him that he was innocent of the crime imputed to him.

"It will avail you but little to assert your innocence in the face of the facts we have here," Mr. Barthelot continued more sternly. "It is proved that Mrs. Blanchard came to you

yesterday about ten o'clock, for the purpose of fetching a considerable sum of money that was in your hands; she was foully murdered at a time when there was no other person under the roof with her besides yourself.—How do you account for this?"

"Is it proved that I was the only person under the roof with her?"

"Undoubtedly. The only person who could have disturbed you was your old servant, and you took the precaution of dismissing her, saying that you would not require her services until the next morning."

"I was not well."

"One would imagine that to be a reason for wishing her to remain in the house."

"I was tired out, and only needed rest."

"And yet you were up and about between ten and eleven at night! But we will let that pass. At any rate the woman was not here at the time of the murder. Nor was the sacristan, since you granted—or perhaps offered?—him leave of absence the evening before. You yourself allowed that he did not come back to your knowledge."

The answer: "He might have come back without my knowledge," rose to the priest's lips, but his fear of even approaching the secret he had to keep, prevented him from uttering this perfectly justifiable reply. Instead of that he contended himself with the vague remark that some one else might perhaps have gained admittance to the building.

"The crime is not one which any tramp could have committed," pursued the magistrate. "The criminal must have had an accurate acquaintance with the house, and above all, must have known that Mrs. Blanchard was going at an appointed time to fetch a large sum of money from you, and that she would go down that dark winding staircase with it in her possession, unaccompanied by you—that is, if your account of the matter is correct. I take the liberty of imagining the facts of the case to be somewhat different. Now tell me: How could a stranger possibly have obtained the necessary information? Did you tell anyone that the lady would go out that back way between ten and eleven with the money in her pocket?"

"I did not know it myself," the priest exclaimed.

"And you would have me believe some stray tramp knew it! or have you grounds for suspecting any individual?"

If Loser had not been to confession to him, Father Montmoulin would probably have replied that the sacristan might very well have come back from his pretended journey, laid in wait for his victim and struck her down. He did not dare to mention this now, lest he should be thought to be violating the secrecy of the confessional. So he only remarked that he would not venture to bring the accusation against any person in particular.

"And how can you explain your knife, your handkerchief—both stained with blood—and the poor lady's basket being found in your kitchen? You will perhaps say the murderer put them there in order to cause you to be suspected. But he would have attained his end had he merely made use of your knife, and left it lying by the corpse. A stranger would hardly think it safe to carry knife, cloth and basket up to your kitchen, where you or anyone else might have caught him, instead of making off instantly with his booty."

"I cannot explain why, but certainly it was done."

"You cannot satisfy justice with these evasive answers. Now look here: do you know where this candlestick comes from?" And Mr. Barthelot suddenly produced the candlestick which the poor little Charles had lost.

"Certainly I do," Father Montmoulin answered. "It is one of the candlesticks that I use at Mass; I missed it yesterday morning."

"Just like the knife! Perhaps you do not know where that was found. Under the body of the murdered woman!"

Father Montmoulin turned pale. He felt that the weight of evidence against him was heavier than he supposed. His eyes grew moist, and he could scarcely control his voice as he answered: "Appearances are indeed against me, that no one can deny. Nevertheless I am innocent of the crime; God is my witness."

"It would be wiser on your part to make a full confession of this fatal act, as I told you before, instead of attempting to impose on me by mauling and posturing," said the magistrate angrily. "I hate scenes; once more I ask you will you acknowledge your guilt or no?"

"I can only repeat that I am perfectly innocent. My God! Whatever do you imagine would have induced me to commit such a crime?"

"That is a psychological problem, of which perhaps the solution is not so very far to seek. Why, you are poor, you are in want of books, as the poverty-stricken appearance of your bookshelves testifies, as does the order for the bookseller which was found lying on your desk. You wanted to furnish rooms for your mother. I am told she has a struggle to make both ends meet; here was an opportunity to help her, and perhaps others too, and the temptation was too much for you. You see the idea that you did it for your mother's sake makes me more lenient in regard to what is in itself a dreadful crime, and I promise you, that every extenuating circumstance shall be urged in your favor and your mother's, and you shall not suffer the full rigor of the law, if you frankly confess your guilt."

"My mother!" Father Montmoulin exclaimed. "How can my mother be implicated in this affair?"

"I feel convinced that your mother carried the money away in the little handbag she had with her, if we fall that is, to find it concealed on these premises. At all events, your mother will be arrested as accessory to the deed."

"For Heaven's sake have pity on her! It will be her death," cried the priest. But the magistrate showed no sign of relenting. "Confess your

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guilt, and your mother shall be treated with the utmost consideration. Otherwise I shall order her to be arrested. And you too shall be taken to Aix; but if you persist in asserting your innocence, you will be dealt with as a common criminal. Do you imagine that your profession will untie you to any indulgence; a clergyman who can perpetrate such a deed, deserves to be put to public shame ten times more than a vulgar murderer."

"I can do nothing more than assert my innocence, and leave the rest to God," Father Montmoulin responded calmly. The magistrate shrugged his shoulders and passed the protocol, after it had been read over by the clerk, to the accused for signature. The unfortunate man felt as if he were signing his own death-warrant. Then Mr. Barthelot called in the police and gave him into custody. The prisoner held out his hands without a murmur, yet he could not restrain a shudder as the handcuffs closed on his wrists. He raised his eyes to the crucifix, and was enabled to maintain outward composure. The Mayor and the other government officials then re-entered the room.

"Our task is ended for the present," said the magistrate. "The police officers, with the assistance of the Mayor, to whose prompt and sagacious action we owe the speedy discovery of the murder, will complete the search of the house, and take possession of the prisoner's papers. He shall be removed at once to the prison at Aix, and we must see that his mother does not escape the hand of the law. It is not necessary to provide a closed conveyance for the prisoner; he certainly is not deserving of such attention, and it is just as well to show that the law is impartial in its treatment of the clergy."

"I am quite of your opinion sir," replied the Mayor, with a low bow. He then gave the required orders to his subordinates. In vain the good-hearted Dr. Corbillard endeavored to obtain some relaxation on behalf of the prisoner. "I am no friend of priests," he said, "but I must in common justice testify that our pastor here has always shown himself most kind and charitable in regard to the sick, and find it very difficult to believe in his guilt, strongly as circumstances witness against him. Besides, his guilt is not yet proved, and until it is, he ought not to be treated as a convicted criminal."

"Perhaps you will have the goodness to leave it to me to decide what treatment he is to receive, and whether his guilt is to be considered as proved or not," the magistrate replied laughingly.

"That is what it is!" rejoined the Doctor, in a tone of annoyance. "This is but a fresh manoeuvre in the plan of campaign against the clerical party. Hear the people outside shouting: Down with the priests!"

"The others retorted angrily that it was no such thing, and declined making any alterations in their arrangements. The Doctor turned to leave the room, muttering under his breath, Just as he got to the door he paused, and addressing the prisoner said: 'I have not attended your sermons, Father, nor have I troubled you in the confessional; yet I have always respected you as a kind and good man, and I do not believe you to be capable of any wickedness. Keep up your courage! If there is a God in heaven, He will interfere in your behalf.'

"Thank you, Doctor," Father Montmoulin replied. "He will make my innocence clear as the day before His own judgment-seat, if He does not do so before an earthly tribunal." (To be Continued.)

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