

THE STORY OF THE HOLY VASE

It was the fourth century after Clovis, and the Archbishop Hincmar...

A tap at the door disturbed the Archbishop's meditation, and in reply to his "Entrez," the massive door leading from the sacristy into the choir opened and his secretary stood before him.

"Reverend Father," he said, "a monk has just come asking for oil from the Holy Ampoule to anoint one of the Brothers who is ill, and when I went to the minor canons, he said I found it empty!"

The Archbishop wheeled round in his chair with an exclamation of surprise. "Empty!" he said. "Only yesterday morning I carried it to the bedside of the Pere Gaston, and after anointing him and coming away I noticed there was enough oil left to supply the Holy Thursday, when a supply is blessed for the year."

"So I thought, Reverend Father," said the secretary. "Never since the time of Clovis, when an angel so miraculously brought it from heaven, has the flask been empty—and now!"

The Archbishop arose from his chair and paced back and forth very much disturbed. "It is strange," he said. "You found the Holy Ampoule empty as usual with the sacred vessels used at Mass?"

"Yes, Reverend Father," answered the secretary. "And no one has had the key but yourself?" added the Archbishop Hincmar.

"No one, Reverend Father," said the secretary. "I carry the keys with me all day, and at night they are put in a nail near my bed."

"Most strange, most strange," said the Archbishop again, "but there is something to be done, seeing that the oil is gone. The faithful will have to use the common oil of Catechumens until Holy Thursday, when I will bless new oil for the Sainte Ampoule. Meanwhile, Frere Felix, he said, 'you had better try and investigate the matter. If you find out anything, please report to me at once.'"

The secretary bowed and withdrew. Left alone the Archbishop sat down and tried to resume work on the sermon he was preparing for Easter; but the mysterious tampering with the Holy Ampoule disturbed him too seriously for him to return readily to his work, and presently he laid down his pen and pushing aside the papers before him he arose and went to a shelf where lay some manuscript in leather bindings. Selecting one whose cover showed signs of more wear than the others, the Archbishop returned to his seat and unlocked the cover. The manuscript he drew out yellow with age and the ink faded by time. It set forth in good churchy Latin that in the fifth century of our Lord, Clovis being about to be crowned King of the Franks, an angel had descended from heaven bearing a flask of most delicate workmanship in which was the oil of Christ for the King's coronation, by right of which, henceforth forever, the Kings of France were to take precedence over all other kings of the world. It was the Holy Ampoule was to be cherished most carefully at the Cathedral of Rheims and made use of when occasion required, either at the coronation of the French sovereigns, or when the Catechumens, the sick or the candidates for confirmation were to be anointed.

Long after the Archbishop pondered over the sonorous Latin, then he replaced the manuscript and glanced at the clock. It was nearly time for the office at Tenebrae to be sung in the Cathedral that night.

It was the Saturday before Palm Sunday, four days before the mysterious disappearance of the oil from the Sainte Ampoule. High up on the top floor of a narrow building in one of the poorest streets of Rheims a young girl lay mortally ill. In spite of the wasting fever that held her in its grasp, her face was unmistakably beautiful; a dark, puerile face, all sweetness and light, and we are to judge by the glance that she occasionally threw at two kneeling figures near her bed; an elderly woman, who, in youth, must have assembled her daughter; and a young man, tall and strong, whose fair hair and beard offered a striking contrast to the girl's dark beauty.

As the two figures knelt they prayed aloud; reciting alternately a petition from the Psalter of Jesus, until finally, the monotonous repetition of the words seemed to soothe the sufferer and she sank into a troubled sleep. The prayer being ended, the man and woman arose, and withdrawing to the other end of the room conversed in low tones.

"It is now the sixth day of the fever," the woman said, "and she grows no better. I know not what to do, Antoine."

"What says the leech?" answered the young man.

"He is greatly troubled replied the mother. 'He left some herbs to be made into a hot posset, and told me to give it to her every hour; but so far the fever is no less, and he says that unless it is broken by tomorrow her strength will not hold out.'"

The young man crept across the room and looked long and earnestly at his betrothed, so ill now, and they were to have been married in Easter week!

"G' Jesu!" he murmured, "suffer not my beloved to be taken from me, nor the consummation of our marriage."

He made the sign of the Cross over Renee's dark head, then, with his own head bowed, he passed from the room. Too well he knew the slender thread on which her life hung. The blessed saints would surely inspire him to find some cure.

High Mass was over in the glorious Cathedral of Rheims on Palm Sunday. Antoine, his fair head towering over his companions, came out on the square in front of the vast edifice, and turning to his left, walked down one of the narrow streets of the city. A clatter of horses' hoofs snote on his ear and presently the Archbishop's carriage passed him, attended by a single outrider. Antoine nodded as he recognized in the man on horseback, Frere Felix. Further on he met a barefooted monk and seeing him he paused.

"Know you, Brother," he said, "where the Archbishop has been in such state this morning, instead of singing the high Mass?"

"Verily I do," answered the monk, "the Pere Gaston lies dangerously ill of a fever, and the Archbishop has been at his bedside with the miraculous Ampoule to anoint him with the oil, lest perchance he die."

Like a flash the thought came to Antoine—the Sainte Ampoule! Here indeed, was cure for Renee if he could obtain it; but could he?

As the oil was blessed verily on Holy Thursday, the last few days of Lent the supply was naturally rather low. Hence it was more common to reserve the small quantity left in case it was needed to anoint the sovereigns of France, the clergy, or the religious; the ordinary oil of Catechumens being employed for the laity. Well Antoine knew, therefore, that his request for the Sainte Ampoule if he made it, would have to be kindly but firmly refused.

"Thinking thus, he arrived at Renee's door and hastened up the dark, narrow stairs to the floor that she and her mother occupied. A sound of weeping met his ear as he tapped lightly at the door, which was opened by the mother with finger on her lips, the while her noiseless sobs shook her. Antoine entered quietly and closed the door.

"How is she?" he said, looking towards the straw pallet in one corner of the room.

"Alas! yes," said the mother, "but it is the sleep of stupor. We cannot rouse her. Look, she scarcely breathes; the leech fears she will die about sundown, or else surely at midnight."

"She shall not die," said Antoine. He stretched out his hand as he spoke, strong with a resolution suddenly taken; and in a moment he became a part of himself. "Courage, mon amie," he said, "I go hence; but I will return before another day with something that will, I think, cure la petite cherie."

His blue eyes gleamed, his voice rang with hope; the mother felt, as if a new horn had blown, and she said, "Go, Antoine, go," she said, "and I will kneel here and pray. Jesus and the Sainte Vierge will hear my supplication."

The young man crossed the room and bending down reverently kissed the slender brown hand that lay on the coverlid, marking as he did so, the place where the mother's hand had been. The ever would be vanished, he thought, so strong was his faith in the idea that had come to him.

Of the right or wrong of the matter he would not let himself think. Renee must be saved, and only through the Sainte Ampoule could that be done, therefore the Sainte Ampoule she must have. But how to get it? His brother, Frere Felix, the Archbishop's secretary, was the custodian of the keys, and well Antoine knew that he would not give him the holy vessel or its contents, therefore he must take it by stealth.

He walked toward the Cathedral that afternoon and arriving there found the cure saying vespers. The Archbishop was not in his stall, so he at least was out of the way. Antoine breathed more freely.

Vespers ended, the congregation streamed out of the sacred edifice, but Antoine remained kneeling near a massive stone pillar; as he knelt he saw his brother cross the nave and enter the sacristy. The difficulty that had so far confronted him as to how he was to get hold of the key to the closet where the sacred vessels were kept, was suddenly solved. Frere Felix slept in a small cell built next the organ loft with a library opening off it. Antoine could conceal himself in the library and after his brother was asleep he could secure the keys, get the holy oil, return to the keys to their hanging place over the door, and make all speed in reaching Renee. It was about 7 o'clock now and he had not supposed, but of that he thought nothing. His brother would fall asleep immediately. Softly Antoine ascended the stairs to the organ loft until he reached his brother's room, which was, as he had expected, unlocked. The rooms were familiar to him, and he knew there was a cupboard in the wall of the library where he could hide with little fear of discovery. It was a long time for Antoine to wait, especially as he was so near the great organ, that when compliance was sung at 8 o'clock the thunder of the mighty instrument was deafening. Antoine knew his brother would retire immediately after the service. He scarcely breathed when at last he heard Frere Felix's heavy tread ascending the stairs; now he had crossed the organ loft and was entering his bedroom.

Antoine listened with all his ears. The secretary, no doubt, was tired after the long services of Palm Sunday, but to-night it seemed to the impatient watcher as if he were unnecessarily slow in retiring. Once he entered the library, but it was only to replace a manuscript of the holy office used on Palm Sunday to its leather case that lay on a closed shelf near the wall.

In half an hour all was silent and after waiting ten minutes more and hearing no sound, Antoine left the cupboard and advanced on tiptoe to the door that separated the library from the sleeping room. He listened and knew by his brother's regular breathing that he was asleep. Lightly he tiptoed into the room, guided by the pascal moon which shed a soft radiance on the bare white walls of the Frere's cell.

Yes, there were the keys hanging on the heavy nail just above the small iron bed. He held his breath as he reached forward and grasped them; pausing for a second to see if his brother stirred, he turned and sped from the room. Across the organ loft, so dark and ghostly, he ran; and then down the stairs, and now he was in the great, empty, silent Cathedral. Stay! was that a shadow cast by the moon, or was it a marble statue, or perchance some saint with raised arm and gleaming eyes, waiting to avenge this sacrilegious act?

Antoine waited not to see; before him rose Renee's dying face, as it looked when he last saw her. Might it not even now be too late!

He has reached the sacristy at last. Quickly he walked up to the massive door of the cupboard and unlocked it; within was a second door, whose iron bars were thickly studded with nails, this, also, Antoine unlocked and opened. It moved heavily and slowly, or it seemed to his fevered impatience. There they stood on the different shelves, the massive gold and silver vessels used in the Church services. Here was a gold paten, flashing with jewels, and near by stood a carved chalice of priceless worth. But Antoine saw them not, his eyes and his hands were on the Sainte Ampoule at nearly the same moment. Taking a small glass jar from his pocket he quickly filled it with the oil from the sacred vessel, and even to the last drop. Renee should not be stinted if quantity would work her cure! He closed and locked the doors again, after replacing the Holy Ampoule in the same place where he had found it. It took only a few minutes to return the keys to the nail above his sleeping brother's bed; and in five minutes more he emerged from a small side door in the Cathedral, and was speeding through the silent streets to Renee. Faster and faster he ran. A few belated pedestrians turned and looked after his tall flying figure; but no one stopped him. It was 11 o'clock when he finally climbed the stairs and knocked gently on the door of his betrothed's room. It was opened softly by the Mere Chocarne, Renee's mother.

"How is she?" gasped Antoine, for he was breathless with his run and the rapid mounting of the steep stairway.

"Since 7 she has been sinking," said the mother—her tone slow and lifeless as of one who had no hope. Antoine crossed the room and knelt down by the young girl. Yes, she was very far gone. The fever was broken, but her hands were icy cold—her lips blue, on her brow lay a clammy sweat, and her chest rose and fell with her labored breathing.

With trembling fingers Antoine unfastened the glass jar and then slowly and daintily he poured the contents over the girl's head and forehead and on the hands that lay so white and still outside the coverlid. Then he clasped his own hands in an agony of expectation and prayer.

"Oh Marie, refuge des pecheurs, pray for her," he said. A few more hours and the fever would be vanished, he thought, so strong was his faith in the idea that had come to him.

Of the right or wrong of the matter he would not let himself think. Renee must be saved, and only through the Sainte Ampoule could that be done, therefore the Sainte Ampoule she must have. But how to get it? His brother, Frere Felix, the Archbishop's secretary, was the custodian of the keys, and well Antoine knew that he would not give him the holy vessel or its contents, therefore he must take it by stealth.

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now it is bad news I must tell you. "Now, what?" said Antoine, in alarm. "Your mother, mon frere," replied the countryman, "she lies mortally ill; they had me ride with all haste to summon you. I have a mare here saddled and bridled; and if you are quick you can reach your mother's bedside by sundown."

Antoine stood for a moment like one stunned. Was trouble never to end? With a few more words between him and the man he began hurriedly to dress, and stopping only long enough to swallow a mouthful of food and ask the goldsmith to take a message to the Mere Chocarne, he mounted the waiting horse and was soon galloping through the city and out into the country beyond.

It was Monday morning in Holy Week when Antoine left Rheims, and it was Maundy Thursday before he returned. His mother's illness had taken a favorable turn and she was out of danger when he left her. It was toward evening when he rode into the city, accompanied by the countryman, who was to take back his horse.

Down the familiar, narrow streets rode Antoine, his heart full of joy. Right he would see Renee, who, no doubt, was now sitting up, looking anxiously for his return. If Renee improved rapidly perhaps they could be married two or three weeks after Easter, if not, then in the summer.

Thus thinking, Antoine mounted the dark, narrow stairs that led up to the Mere Chocarne's rooms.

The door opening on the landing stood ajar, and far down the stairs Antoine heard a low hum of voices that made him quicken his steps. Was it Renee's voice that he heard in that low plaintive sort of chant? Doubtless her thoughts were turned to the solemn and tremendous sacrifice that the Church commemorated to-morrow! He ascended the last step of the stairs and reached the door, when suddenly he paused, in his heart a terrible fear that he could not analyze.

"Requiem aeternam, dona eis, Domine: et lux perpetua luceat eis," chanted a solemn voice.

Like a man in a dream Antoine pushed open the door and paused on the threshold, unobserved by any one. "Absolve, Domine, animas omnium fidelium defunctorum ab omni vinculo delictorum."

Ah yes! Absolve all holy and faithful souls who have preceded us to the place of refreshment, light and peace. Absolve in particular her whose slender delicate form is stretched out on a bier before the eyes of her agonized lover.

Antoine stumbled into the room. "Antoine Dieu!" he said, and then darkness closed over him, and in spite of his strong young manhood he fell down by the side of his lost love like one dead.

Again the Archbishop Hincmar sat in the sacristy, and once more there was a knock at the door, and there appeared not his secretary, but a young man with fair hair and beard. One who entered with bowed head and heavy eyes full of grief and pain.

Many years in dealing with souls had made the Archbishop an adept in recognizing a need, and one glance showed him that here was a man in mortal agony.

Antoine advanced and knelt down before the man who had been his friend from childhood.

"Oh mon pere," he said, striking his breast, "I have sinned; for it was I who stole the oil from the Holy Ampoule," and then in a voice broken by sobs, and with many pauses, he told the story of Renee's illness, of his despair, of the sign of the Sainte Ampoule, and that he had gone away and returned to find his betrothed dead.

"She died at 8 o'clock on Maundy Thursday morning," he concluded, in a dull, hopeless voice.

"She seemed to be getting well, mon pere, but sank suddenly and died in five minutes."

At 8 o'clock thought the Archbishop, the very hour when I consecrated new oil for the Holy Ampoule. And then he turned to the stricken soul near him with words of comfort and pardon.

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Bleeding Piles and Erysipelas. Two Severe Cases Which Illustrate the Extraordinary soothing, Healing Virtues of Dr. Chase's Ointment. Scores of people do not think of trying Dr. Chase's Ointment for bleeding piles because they have used so many other treatments in vain and do not believe their ailment curable. It is by curing when others fail that Dr. Chase's Ointment has won such a record for itself. It will not fail to promptly relieve and completely cure any form of piles, no matter how severe or of how long standing.

Mr. James Uriah Pye, Marie Joseph, Gushborough Co., N.S., writes: "I was bad with bleeding piles for about four years and could get no help. Dr. Chase's Ointment cured me in a very short time, and I cannot praise it too highly for this cure. Mrs. Thomas Smith was troubled with erysipelas in the feet and legs and was all swollen up. I gave her some of the ointment, which took out the swelling and healed all the sores. She had tried many treatments before, but none seemed to do her any good. I am telling my friends about the wonderful cures which Dr. Chase's Ointment made for Mrs. Smith and myself, and would say that it is only a pleasure for me to recommend so excellent a preparation."

Wherever there is irritation, inflammation, ulceration or itching of the skin Dr. Chase's Ointment will bring quick relief and will ultimately heal and cure. On this account it is useful in scores of ways in every home for the cure of eczema, salt rheum, scald head, chafing, itching peculiar to women, pin worms, piles and all sorts of skin diseases and eruptions.

Dr. Chase's Ointment, 60 cents a box, at all dealers, or Edmondson, Bates & Company, Toronto. To protect you against imitations the portrait and signature of Dr. A. W. Chase, the famous receipt book author, are on every box of his remedies.

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