

A Victim to the Seal of Confession.

A True Story, by Rev. Joseph Spillman, S. J.

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(Montreal True Witness.)

CHAPTER II.—(Continued)

"80 hundred-franc notes is 8,000 francs; 50 twenty-franc notes is 1,000 francs; that makes 9,000 francs in notes, 75 gold Napoleons added to it makes 10,500 francs; 215 five-franc pieces, 1,075 francs more, and 425 francs in smaller coins. Altogether the 12,000 franc (480) which are to be given over to Mrs. Blanchard. Upon my word 'tis a goodly sum! I never had so much in my keeping before."

Thereupon the good priest began to count some of the rolls of silver over again, and as he worked was he in this occupation, that he failed to hear a knock at the door. On it being repeated rather loudly, he started and called out, "Come in," in rather a frightened tone. In came the sacristan, and when he saw all the money on the table he made an attempt to conceal his astonishment. "Bless my soul!" he exclaimed, as he ran his eyes greedily over the little heap of bank notes, the glittering gold coins, and the various pieces of silver money. "I beg your pardon, Father, but I really had no idea your reverence was so rich."

"Not a penny of this belongs to me," answered the priest, by no means well pleased that the sacristan, of all people, should find him engaged in counting a large sum of money. He mistrusted the man, certainly his antecedents were not such as inspire confidence. He was an unprepossessing looking fellow, of average height and powerful build, not more than forty years of age, although he might have been taken for ten years older. There was a bold, bad look in his dark eyes, and his moustache, twisted upwards at the ends gave him a somewhat rakish appearance. A broad scar passing over the upper part of his nose and left cheek, did not add to the attractiveness of his countenance. In fact it would not have been easy to find anyone more unsuitable in appearance for the office he held. Albert Loser—such was his name—was a native of Lorraine, and had served in a company of Franciscans during the Franco-German war on the French side, and as he was wont to boast, had shot down not a few Prussians in cold blood. After the war was over, in reward for his exploits in the field, he received a medal, with a right to have a situation provided for him in the civil service. Several posts had been given him in succession, but his irregular conduct and neglect of duty generally led to his dismissal within a short space of time. His only recommendation, or rather claim on his country, was the scar-cut across his face, which he alleged to be the work of a Prussian Hussar during a skirmish. In the course of his wandering he had come about a year ago to Provence, and by his gift tongue had ingratiated himself with the Mayor, who happened to be looking out for a sacristan, and offered the vacant post to the "hero of many battles." Loser accepted it on trial; "I never could tolerate priests," he said to the Mayor, "but beggars must not be choosers." Nothing better having presented itself since, he had kept the situation, thanks to the favor he had found with the Mayor, although he had given the priest grave cause for dissatisfaction.

It will be readily imagined that the appearance upon the scene of such a man as this was rather disconcerting for Father Montmoulin, who remarked the covetous look in his eyes as they rested upon the gold. It flashed through his mind in an instant that he was all alone in the rambling, old-fashioned building with this man whom he knew to be unscrupulous, not a soul being within call. Involuntarily he started to his feet and stood between Loser and the table whereon the money lay, placing his hand on a chair, as the only weapon of defence within reach, and repeating in a determined manner: "This money does not belong to me, it had been entrusted by St. Joseph's Guild, and is intended for the building of a new hospital. Mrs. Blanchard is coming to fetch it tomorrow or the next day."

You need not be alarmed, your reverence," rejoined Loser with a mocking smile, for he guessed the good priest's thoughts. "I shall not take you for one of the accused Prussians, whose game I stopped—all is fair in war, and for the sake of one's country. There is not a more harmless man in creation in time of peace. I cannot say so to a gony upon my honor. And as this money is for the sick and needy, I will not ask so much as a penny of it. And do you think I would dream myself to fish one of those pretty bank notes—all of a hundred francs, I believe—either by fair means or foul? No, Father, I would not have evened you with such a rash judgment! But it will come of your mistaken idea that only your pious folk have any idea of honor. It is quite true that I have not been to the Sacristan for twenty years or more, and don't mean to neither, in spite of your reverence's fine sermon about confession, yet none shall say that Albert Loser is not an honest man!"

And as he uttered these words in tones of righteous indignation, striking his breast in a theatrical manner, he was busy plotting a scheme which was diametrically opposed to the virtues he claimed for himself. The simple-minded priest only thought at the moment how he could best get the man to his duties. "I am very sorry, my good fellow," he said, "if I judged you somewhat harshly; but just tell me, how can one expect a man to be very conscientious who has neglected to fulfill his bounden duty towards God and his own immortal soul for twenty or five and twenty years?" Qui sibi nequam, cui bonas? Will a man who is his own enemy be a friend to others?"

"Well, well, Father, one would think you had preached enough for today! Who knows if there really is a God, and if there is, whether he troubles himself about such insignificant creatures as you and me. And as for immortal soul, science has long since shown that we have nothing of the sort. But I did not come here to discuss these matters with you, Father. Of course God exists for you, and you must have an immortal soul, it belongs to your profession."

"You forget yourself strangely, Loser!" interrupted the clergyman, pressing with difficulty the just anger he felt at this godless way of talking. "What did you come to ask me?"

"Ah, true! The sight of all this wealth for the Church and the poor put my own business out of my mind," Loser replied. "I wanted to go for a holiday till next Saturday. You can get along quite well without me in the week. I should like to go to Marseilles, where a friend of mine has heard of a situation which I think will suit me better than being a sacristan. Where have I put his letter to?" he continued, feeling in his pockets.

"Never mind about showing me the letter," answered the Priest, while the man was still fumbling in his pockets. "Go to Marseilles by all means, and I hope you will meet with something desirable. I will bring the Angelus myself, I am generally up before you are. Old Susan can open and shut the Church; leave the key on the kitchen table when you are going?"

"I shall start to-night. I can easily catch the last train from Aix. I am much obliged to you for giving me leave of absence. And may I venture, seeing your Reverence is a flash of cash just now, to ask for a little loan—a mere trifle—one of the hundred franc notes I see there."

"I have already told you that this money is not mine to dispose of. And if it were, it is quite against morale to lend you money."

"Well, if you consider me a thief—" "It is quite against my rule, and that is enough. But if a small gratuity out of my own pocket will be of service to you—and the priest held out a five-franc piece to the man, for the sake of getting rid of him.

"I will accept it as my well-earned due," answered Loser, as he slipped the coin into his waistcoat pocket. "I will not take it as an alms. I am not a beggar. Besides I shall soon be out of my financial difficulties. I expect a legacy, an aunt in Lorraine, quite a rich woman, is said to be dying. I wish your reverence good day!" and with a low bow, and another greedy glance at the money on the table, he took his departure.

"Thank heaven that hateful man is gone," exclaimed Father Montmoulin, with a sigh of relief. "I must confess I am right glad that he is going away tonight. I should hardly feel it safe to pass the night alone with him in this desolate old house, now that he has discovered how large a sum I have in my keeping. Heaven forgive me if I do him wrong, but the man seems to me most untrustworthy. He is quite capable of making a feat of going away and coming back secretly to night. My best plan will be to take the money to the Mayor. Besides it might give an opportunity of getting on more friendly terms with that good gentleman; hitherto he has always sided against me."

While thus soliloquizing, Father Montmoulin wrapped up the money, after counting it again hastily, in one of his large red and white cotton handkerchiefs, and deposited it for the time being in the drawer of his desk. Just as he was taking the key out of the lock, the clear merry tones of a boyish voice were heard through the open window. Looking out, the worthy priest saw his mother with his sister's two children in the act of crossing the courtyard.

"Is that really your mother, he exclaimed, "be has put all the chick away! Hullo there, the key is left in the desk, let us have a look inside."

"Po! my word there is the whole blessed lot, wrapped up neatly in a handkerchief quite handy to take away. Shall I do this office for him?" The man's hand was already on the

claimed, his eyes sparkling with pleasure. "Here I am, as you see, Francis, and I hope I find you well and happy," was the answer that came up from below; the children adding their greetings.

But their uncle leaving the door of his room open behind him, was already hastening along the dimly lighted corridor to the stairs, which led down into what was formerly the cloisters. He met his mother just as she reached the archway which connected the outer building with what in by-gone days was the enclosure. He welcomed her and embraced her affectionately; then, drawing her out of the dark passage into the daylight, he scanned her features anxiously, for it was some months since he saw her, and he had heard from his sister that she had several times been unwell.

"Last winter has not improved my appearance, has it?" she said cheerily. "I have not grown younger; look what ugly wrinkles have made their appearance, and my hair has turned quite white."

"I think your white hair is very becoming to you and as for the wrinkles we will see if we cannot smooth them out, and give you round rosy cheeks again," rejoined the young priest. "I have good news for you, he continued. In a few weeks time we will have your room fitted up for you beautifully. At present my funds are rather low. But come upstairs now, we must have an extra strong cup of tea in your honor. Look here, Charles, run down to the baker's, will you, 'he third shop in the village street, and fetch two or three rolls and a dozen sweet cakes. Here is some money. Now, Julia, you must see if you can help make the coffee."

"Oh, I can make coffee all alone, and good coffee too," answered the girl, while her brother scampered off to the baker's in high glee. If only Susan had left enough coffee ready ground," she added.

She ran lightly upstairs, for having been at Ste. Victoire before, she knew very well about the old convent, only pausing for a moment to listen to her grandmother's injunction to put on an apron, and be sure not to soil her Sunday frock. Father Montmoulin, meanwhile conducted his mother with a somewhat more sober step to his room.

Little did he suspect that, while the scene we have described was being enacted below, Loser was still spying about his room, lurking in the dark angles of the corridor. It is necessary to explain that the old convent, built on a ledge of rock, formed three sides of a quadrangle; the church on the left, and a corresponding wing on the right, being connected by a wide facade. The front of the building, two stories high, looked down into the valley where the village lay. The priest occupied a good sized room in the angle where the two corridors leading respectively to the church on the one side and to the right wing on the other met. In former times this had probably been the Abbess' room, as it commanded a view of both corridors, and the double row of cells opening into them. Communicating with this sitting room was a small bedroom the only one to which access could not be had from the corridor. On the other side there was no adjoining room, as a space had been left to allow of the corridor being lighted by a window in the outside wall, without which it would have been almost completely in darkness. Opposite the priest's rooms, in the inner angle of the building, was a small apartment separating the row of cells; it was very dark, as the window was small, but there was a door on either side leading to the two wings. In this room, probably once the kitchen of the good pastor's simple meals; the kitchen of the convent being a spacious apartment with a vaulted roof on the ground floor.

To this little kitchen Loser had betaken himself on quitting the priest's presence. He made a critical survey of the narrow, ill-lighted chamber, with its twofold means of exit. When, in obedience to the priest's directions, he laid his bunch of keys on the table, he pulled open the drawer, and began to examine its contents. Amongst these was a sharp carving knife, with the initials F. M. engraved on a silver plate let into the handle; this he took up, and felt the edge with his finger. "That is by no means blunt," he said to himself, then holding it like a dagger, he made a swift lunge with it in the air, before replacing it in the drawer, which he closed. "We shall not want that," he muttered, "though it might be the shortest way. No, no, I hate bloody work."

At that moment he heard Father Montmoulin calling from the window to his friends below, and immediately afterwards saw him hasten downstairs. Taking for granted that the exchange of greetings would occupy some time, Loser ventured to go back to the priest's room. "Confound it!" he exclaimed, "he has put all the chick away! Hullo there, the key is left in the desk, let us have a look inside."

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Who comes now? Why our Sacristan to be sure!" exclaimed the host, as Loser made his appearance in the doorway. "Not overcooled yet by our good Pastor's sermon this morning. But I see you have a travelling bag, where are you off to now?"

"I am off to Marseilles by the last train," Loser answered, raising his voice so as to be heard by all present. "I have come in for a small legacy in Lorraine, an old aunt of mine has just died, awfully rich old woman. Of course the priests have grabbed the principal part of her property, for the poor old soul was one of your pius sort. However, she has had the sense to leave a trifle to her godless nephew, somewhere about a couple of thousand pounds. Now those devils of Prussians, who have not forgot to be the brave Franciscan who carried their outfit at Barle-Dac, and blew up a bridge at Fontenay under their very noses, will not give up the money to me. I must get legal advice, and perhaps I shall not be back until next Sunday, if they are slow about it."

(To be continued.)

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Hammocks! Hammocks! Hammocks!

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MISCELLANEOUS.

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