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The Priest's Rose,

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Father Montresor, parish priest of the poor little village of Belmont, in Brittany, walked along the hot, dusty road towards an outlying cottage a mile from his house, wherein lay a sick person whom he intended to visit. The good priest's thoughts were fixed upon the subject of his poverty, but they were not selfish thoughts. "If only I had the disposal of a small annuity," he reflected, "beyond the pittance upon which I live, how much good I should do with it. I could carry to this poor fellow, Bagrelle, for instance, a basket containing nourishing soup, and perhaps a bottle of rich wine, which, alas! would certainly be of more use to the good man than the stereotyped phrases of secular or religious consolation which are all I have to offer him. Then there is the Holy Altar within the Church itself; within a few weeks is the Festival of Corpus Christi, and the Seigneur himself knows whence I shall obtain flowers to decorate withal."

"Fool and sinner that I am!" he reflected presently; "if God would have other service from me than this poor Cure of Souls, will He not reveal Himself in His own good time?"

As his thoughts reached this point the good cure started and paused. A shabby man lay half in and half out of the ditch by the road side, lay and groaned as though in pain, and begged for help. Father Montresor bent over the poor fellow.

"Are you hurt, friend?" he asked, "or sick?"

"It is my foot, Father," said the man; "I think I have broken the ankle bone."

The priest examined his patient, and found it was as he said.

"Have courage, my son," he said; "I will bring you to my own house as best I can—see, I raise you—can you bear so much pain?"

The man groaned, and replied that it was impossible that he should stand; the pain was too great.

"Lift me in your arms, Father," he suggested, "you will find I am not heavy."

The priest—by no means a giant in strength—shook his head sadly as he attempted to comply with the suggestion; as a matter of fact, having been but half fed for many a year, he had become but half a man in muscular power. But, to his surprise, he found himself able to carry the injured stranger without much difficulty.

"Thus does the good Seigneur find strength in time of need, yea, even for the weakest!" he commented inwardly. But the sufferer lying in his arms replied as though to this thought—"Not in our own strength we may triumph, but in His alone."

"You speak wisely, my son," said the priest; and he added, "one would not suppose you to be so light a man, for yet I carry you easily, which proves the propriety of your remark. See, here is my house; I will place you upon my own bed, and attend to your hurt."

The injured man was grateful, though he said little. He lived with the priest for two weeks, the cure faithfully attending him. During all that time the visitor shared his scanty rations which, without division, were scarcely sufficient to keep a grown man in health and strength. At the end of that time, the stranger professed himself able to walk once more and took his leave. He was grateful, and his smile as he bade his benefactor farewell, was like the coming forth of the sun from behind the clouds.

"You have been a good friend to me, Father," he said; "I have had your bed and you have been forced to rest upon chairs; you have gone hungry because I have eaten your food, but you have never complained. In return, I can give you but my thanks and this little rose tree."

Water it this day at noon, and it will soon provide flowers for your altar." The priest blessed his new friend, and watched him away. He placed the little rose tree in a pot, which he filled with earth.

"I will water it at twelve," he laughed, because poor Pierre bade me do so, but I see no particular virtue in that hour."

At twelve Father Montresor was busy with a baptism, and afterwards—recalling the fact that the stranger had recommended mid-day as the hour for watering the little rose tree—he watered it with the water which had been blessed and used for the baptism.

There had seemed to be a few buds upon the rose plant when the cure had potted it; but when on the following day he looked at his little tree, he was amazed to find that it was absolutely covered with magnificent blossoms.

Never had he seen such beautiful flowers. They were both red and white, full, perfect blossoms that delighted the eyes and perfumed the air around them.

The cure clapped his hands with delight. "It is as though they had burst forth on purpose for the festival to-morrow!" he cried, and forthwith he began to decorate the altar, making it more beautiful than he had ever seen it before.

Many of the richer folk living within driving distance of the church, who came for the morrow's celebration, gazed with astonishment and admiration at the roses with which the church was decorated.

"They are marvellous—most beautiful!" each one exclaimed, generally adding, "whence came such beautiful blossoms?"

And the priest, making no secret of it, would explain that he knew nothing of the nature of the plant, which had been presented to him but yesterday, the gift of gratitude for ordinary humane attentions towards a stranger.

"The poor man was sincerely grateful; it was all he had to give, therefore the gift became specially blessed, et voila tout."

One of the worshippers at the church was so struck with the beauty of the roses that he said, "If the tree should bear more of them than you can use, Father, I would be a willing purchaser for all that you can spare; I am a dealer in flowers, and could do with any number of such roses."

When, on the following day, the priest found that his little tree was as thickly covered with blossoms as yesterday, he remembered this saying, and sent a lad with a large basketful, bidding him deliver the flowers and receive their equivalent in money.

To his delight and astonishment the boy presently returned with seven francs, together with a message from the dealer that such another basket would always fetch a similar sum, and perhaps more than this, if the tree should blossom out of season.

Each day that wonderful rose-plant bore a certain number of blossoms, and each day the priest sold such as were not required for the church, and the sum he encashed by the sale of his flowers mounted steadily upwards until it had reached 100 francs.

Then with joy he set himself to commence a work which had been the hopeless, though cherished, ambition of his day-dreams: a cottage hospital for the poor of his district.

The work, once begun, continued rapidly and prosperously. Each day the rose-tree contributed its harvest of blossoms, which, being sold, produced their equivalent in francs; and the little hospital grew from day to day until it was nearly completed.

Whenever a child was born in the district and was brought to the village to be admitted by the priestly ordinance within the fold of the Holy Church, Father Montresor would pour the sanctified rose afterwards over his precious rose plant; and if it had languished in its bearing before this it quickly recovered its fullest fruitfulness, and bore even more blossoms than before.

So the hospital rose daily until it was finished, roof and walls, and then the priest began the work of fitting it with beds and the various appliances required; and presently—just a year, all but a week, from the day on which he had received the rose-tree—the House of Mercy stood ready, a completed work, furnished within and comely without, a beautiful and perfect and compact little building.

"It shall be opened on the day of Corpus Christi," said the priest; "the Bishop has written to announce that he will be present; ah! he shall see what I have done for the love of God and His poor."

Then it occurred to him that his vestments were very shabby indeed. They would not do at all for the high ceremony he intended to hold; he would be ashamed to appear before the Bishop and the others in these rags; they did well enough for use in the church on ordinary occasions, when no one was by to see excepting his poor villagers; but now—why, of course, he must have a set of new vestments for the Great Function.

But, alas! there was no money in his purse. His private resources went no further now, in spite of the opulence of his hospital fund, than of old; if anything, he was poorer, for in the recklessness of prosperity on one account, he had spent his money somewhat too rashly on the other, forgetting that personally he was not enriched by the income of his wonderful rose-tree.

The good father looked ruefully over his canonicals. They were literally in rags—a sorry sight, and unfit for the eyes of his superior. It was absolutely necessary that he should have a new set.

"I will use the rose-money for one week," he said; "the vestments are, in a way, required for the hospital, for there must be an opening ceremony, and at that ceremony I must surely appear in decent attire; therefore the expenditure is fairly to be set down to the hospital account."

But, to his horror, the little tree bore but a few poor blossoms that day, and on the morrow there was scarcely one. The priest examined it in despair; it had never failed before; it seemed somewhat parched at the roots; there was a little baptismal water remaining in the vessel which he kept for it, and this he now carefully poured through a

watering-rose over the plant. But it seemed to blight the little tree, and the few roses that were in bud withered immediately and died.

Then the priest's eyes were opened and he cried out: "I have sinned—I am a dishonest steward," and he carried the new vestments which he had bought to the shopman who had sold them—"Take them back," he said, "for I have no money to pay for them."

Then he returned and prayed, and within two days the rose tree was in full bloom once more.

The Bishop came to the opening ceremony. He frowned to see the Cure in his ragged vestments. "You are now a rich man, brother," he said, "you might have spared a few francs in order to attire yourself decently in God's service; I have heard that you are most successful in flower-growing for the market—see that in your gardening you neglect not the more serious duties of your calling."

Father Montresor flushed with shame, but said nothing.

At parting the Bishop said, "You have done well in building this little House of Mercy, brother, and I have shown my appreciation by coming here this day; but now that it is completed, I may tell you that harsh things are said without of the Cure who neglects his spiritual duties in the pursuit of a cherished hobby; moreover, it is not seemly that a priest should demean himself by becoming a merchant in garden produce. Think over what I have said, and act according to the dictates of your own conscience."

This was a great shock to the poor Cure. All the world—the world of his own parish—was well aware that Father Montresor had never neglected his duties, nor yet any person of business having claim upon his attention. But the Bishop's words made havoc nevertheless of his peace of mind, and he walked over to the town in order to see the flower merchant who was in the habit of buying his roses. His object was to enquire what price could be given for his rose tree, if sold outright. "I may no longer sell the blossoms," he reflected; "but the hospital must be kept up; there is no nurse in charge, and no money to buy medicine and food for the sick. The tree must be sold."

The merchant was pleased and excited to hear that the wonderful rose was for sale.

"I will give you two thousand francs for it," he said; "and if the tree does as well as I expect of it, I will make further an annual donation to the hospital of two hundred."

"I will consider and tell you my decision," said the priest, sadly, and went his way.

It was a walk of several miles to the town and the day was hot; so

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