

The Storyteller

"ONE OF THE LEAST."

You say it is a long time since I have told you a story, little one—what more can I recall out of the past that you would like to hear?

Something about the good Padre Paul who ministered so many years in the beautiful Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Well, it was not so long ago, not more than twenty years, that this story I am going to tell you happened. I was seventy years old then, and the Padre was eighty.

Fifty years, summer and winter, he had said Mass in the little church that he loved so well, and it was there that he went to his reward. He was ready, the good Padre, and, thank God, though his end was cruel, it was without pain.

It was a time when feeling against the negro race ran high, when men thought nothing of lynching and hanging any black man whom they believed they had caught in an evil deed. It mattered not that he might be innocent; his skin was black and that was enough. You say it is much the same way now. Well, my little one, so it is—men's hearts do not change, and until some law is passed that will restrain the white man, the same lawlessness will prevail, and the innocent, as well as the guilty, will suffer.

It was one Sunday after the last Mass, and the Padre had not yet gone home. He moved slowly around the chancel handing me the books, for I was his sexton and deputy then, and had been for several years—ever since I grew too old to work in the fields. I had passed into the little vestry to lock up the paten and chalice with the other sacred vessels, when I heard the door of the church open in a hurry, and the sound of a heavy foot running across the hard, earthen floor. I dropped the key of the closet in my pocket and pushed open the swing door near the chancel, the Padre also had turned and I noticed that a shaft of light from the chancel window rested on his beautiful silver hair. The man who had entered was a negro, tall and gaunt, though just now he was crouching at the chancel steps. His breath came in gasps, as if he had run far and fast, and he was evidently in mortal fear.

'Mercy, Massa,' he said, 'de bloodhounds am after me! Sabe me, Massa, sabe me!'

The old priest came down from the sanctuary and stood near the poor, cowering wretch.

'My son,' he said, in the gentle, musical voice we all loved, 'tell me quickly what is the matter and I will try and help you.'

In hurried, broken tones, and with short, gasping sobs, the man told his tale. He had been accused of a crime of which he passionately declared he was innocent, and finding his accusers were without mercy, he had run away; he had been in the woods three days, almost without food, until he found the bloodhounds were on his track. He had run the last three miles without a stop, pursued by the dogs and a party of men bent on lynching him.

The Padre's mild blue eyes flashed. Yes, he had always been the enemy of disorder and riot. Many a time I have seen him, with no influence but his voice and presence, quiet the roughest set of men, Indians, Mexicans, or whites, it was all the same to him, and we all acknowledged his power over us.

In spite of his age the Padre could still act quickly. He opened the door at the foot of some narrow, winding stairs and turned to the black man, who seemed half senseless from fright.

'Go up in the bell tower,' he said, 'and stay there until you are summoned.' Then as the man ran rapidly up stairs, he shut and locked the door.

'Santos,' he said to me, 'the man is starving; go ask old Thomassie for some food and take it up to him. You can ascend from the little door in my study.'

I gave a last look at the Padre, the dear Senora Wentworth's son, who had gone to her reward this many a year. The fair hair of fifty years ago was now white as snow, the blue eyes were dimmed with age, the tall form was bowed, but in the Padre's breast beat the same true, loyal heart that had felt for us, our joys and our sorrows, all these years. Why did I not stay with him to guard and protect him with my arm that at seventy was still strong? I know not, little one, alas!

Left alone, Padre Paul went on with his work, and what followed was afterward told me by one of the men, a Mexican, less rough than the rest, who repented bitterly of his rashness in joining the maddened throng. It was only about three minutes after the negro had

found refuge in the tower when a howling mob reached the church door. Some of the men held the hounds in check while about a dozen of the ringleaders entered the church.

They were white men, most of them, and with all the white settler's hatred and contempt for the blacks. The foremost man addressed the Padre, who had descended from the sanctuary steps to the chancel rail.

'Father,' said the man, who, although a Protestant, was not without some respect for the Padre's age and office, 'we think a negro has taken refuge here. Have you seen anything of him?'

'Yes,' said the Padre, 'I have.'

'Then you must give him to us, Father,' said the man. 'We have hunted him for ten miles and are determined to give him the punishment he deserves.'

'My son,' said the Padre, 'have you given this man any fair trial, are you sure of his guilt?'

A murmur ran through the throng.

'Try a black devil by law?'

'Eat him up first!'

'Starve him out!'

'Lynch him!'

Some one had opened the outer and inner doors of the church, so that those outside heard all that went on in the building. The murmur was taken up by those without. It was plain that the crowd was becoming impatient and dangerous. The Padre heard and understood, but he did not flinch.

'Men,' he said, and his tones had the ring of authority, 'this man, hunted and hounded, deprived of law and justice at your hands, came here and found refuge in God's house. He appealed to me and passionately declared himself innocent of crime. I have placed him in safety and there he shall stay until I deliver him to the Sheriff to be tried by fair laws.'

The church was filling up now and the men pressed forward threateningly. It was something that they had been held in check so long. Suddenly there was a roar and commotion outside.

'Down with him!'

'Shoot the black devil!'

'Tear him to pieces!'

Overcome by curiosity the negro had looked out from the bell tower and had been instantly seen and recognised by some of those in the crowd. The men in the church paused a moment, but their temper was up, and a second later they charged into the vestry and out of the covered gallery that led to the Padre's house. It took them only a moment to see they were on the wrong scent, and in a body they swept back in the church. In those few seconds the Padre had placed his back against the door that led to the bell tower, and there the now thoroughly maddened men found him.

Why did he not give in?

He must have seen that it was hopeless, that the men would conquer anyway, but there was no thought of self or surrender in the calm, fearless gaze that Padre Paul turned on the rough crowd that began to close in on him.

'Father,' said the first spokesman, 'if you do not stand aside and let us ascend to the tower we will have to remove you by force.'

'Look here, Father,' said another man, who seemed less swayed by passion than the others, 'why do you want to save this black trash, anyhow? One nigger more or less in the world don't matter.'

The Padre drew himself up to his full height, his eyes blazed, and his voice deepened.

'For shame, man!' he said. 'What did He say, the Crucified, "Inasmuch as ye do it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye do it unto Me."'

For a moment the men drew back abashed. Some of them there were who had not entered a church for years, but there was no doubt that all knew and recognised the application of the text.

'You tell me,' the Padre continued, 'that the man is guilty. Did any one see him commit the crime, and if crime has been committed are you sure it was this man who did it?'

'No, Father,' answered the ringleader, 'but he was found near the place, so we were sure it was he. No other black man was near, though we scoured the country for miles.'

'And because you could find no one else you take this man,' said the Padre. 'You would deprive him of the life God has given him. You would hurl him into eternity without a moment's preparation, if you could, and all without even the certainty of his guilt.'

I think the men were growing tired and were disposed to give it up. There is nothing like gaining time in such a crisis; and rough as they were the Padre's words had not been without effect.

It needed now only for some one of their number to lead them one way or the other, but, alas! the wrong one made himself heard. It was the father of the girl who had been robbed and beaten who would not yield.