

rudely to his every salutation. But the good Cure's patience never failed: he remained unfailingly gentle and kind. There seemed no limit to his forbearance, which so exasperated the *ci-devant* farmer that his prejudice developed into a fiendish hate. To gratify this ignoble passion, as well as to introduce some variety in his monotonous life, Duret conceived a plan which he at once proceeded to put into action.

One bitterly cold night, when the wind was blowing a hurricane, and the snow beating against the windows, covering every projecting rock, and filling the deep gullies with treacherous whiteness, Alphonse Duret decided it was time to play the practical joke on the Cure of which he had for some time been thinking. Wrapping himself up warmly in his splendid fur coat, he rode his sure-footed little mare down the mountain side, and knocked loudly at the presbytery door.

'Who is there?' asked the Abbe Leray, hastily springing out of bed.

'It is Alphonse Duret,' answered the visitor.

The priest was already at the door.

'Come in—come in!' he cried. 'What has happened? Have you lost your way in the snow?'

'No, Father,' rejoined the man, with the greatest respect. 'I am all right, but you must hasten. Paul Maillot over yonder fell from the roof of his house this evening, and they think he will die. He was calling loudly for you, and the wife begged me to come for you. It is to bad on such a night; but I suppose it can not be helped. These people *will* have the priest.'

'For me, it is nothing but my duty,' called the Cure from the inside, as he dressed rapidly. 'But I thank you very much for coming. God will reward you.'

'I don't know about that, Monsieur le Cure,' answered Duret, with a laugh that grated unpleasantly on the ears of the priest. But Duret's laugh always affected him thus; it was very bitter.

In five minutes he was ready. Overjoyed that his black sheep had undertaken the difficult journey for a neighbor in spiritual need, he hastened to the church, got the Blessed Sacrament and the holy oils, and was ready to depart.

'Get up behind me, Monsieur le Cure,' said Duret.

The priest mounted. As he was carrying the Blessed Sacrament, he made no effort at conversation; and supposed that Duret, aware of this, refrained from talking for the same reason. They were obliged to proceed slowly because of the snow. Duret, wrapped in a heavy fur coat and gloves, with a fur cap pulled down over his ears, was warm and comfortable; but the poor priest, wearing a threadbare cassock and thin overcoat, suffered severely.

At last, as they emerged from a narrow pass, Alphonse turned and said, quite respectfully still:

'Monsieur de Cure, you will have to alight here. We are nearly at Maillot's, but I am sure my mare could not make the rest of the journey without falling. You can easily get there on foot; it is but a few yards distant. See, over yonder! The snow has probably banked the windows, and hidden the light.'

The meek and patient servant of God slid from the horse's back, and found himself standing in the snow, without mark or boundary to guide him.

'Thank you, and God bless you, Duret!' he said fervently.

Duret had gone only a few steps when he turned, and again, with his bitter laugh, exclaimed:

'You are very welcome, Monsieur le Cure. But I think you will need all your unfailing good-humor to carry you to any cottage hereabouts. So far as I know, there is none. That was only a joke. Ha-ha! I thought I would give you a little practice at night-walking, so that you might be familiar with the paths, provided you ever were really needed. It will be easy to scatter absolutions as you plunge through the snowdrifts.'

So saying, with another loud, mocking laugh, he rode away, leaving the poor Cure alone in the dark, in the face of a driving wind, in a desolate wilderness of ice and snow.

In spite of his quiet, gentle nature, the Abbe had plenty of pluck and endurance. He knew that his life depended upon the courage he should display in the fearful and hazardous journey he was now to undertake. Bravely, then, he began to retrace his steps; now veering to one side and now to the other, as, forced by the howling, merciless wind, he was carried hither and thither in his toilsome, hazardous march. Once or twice he was on the point of falling over a precipice in the darkness, but he regained his equilibrium just in time. After he had gone what seemed to him an incredible distance, the snow ceased falling, and in a few moments the moon broke through the clouds. After that the way was not difficult. But it was only after several weary hours of exertion that he saw the village before him; in the early dawn.

He managed to drag himself to the church, replace the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle, and kneel for a

brief space in thanksgiving to the God who had brought him safely home. Nor did he forget to ask repentance and pardon for the man who had so basely deceived him. All the first impulses of anger that had assailed him when the cruelty of the trick had burst upon him, were now forgotten in the gentle and merciful resignation of this true follower of his Divine Master. Afterward he had only strength left to stagger to the house and open the door. Then he fell in a dead faint at the feet of his mother, who had been sitting up all night praying for his safe return.

When he recovered consciousness, he found himself surrounded by nearly all his immediate parishioners. The cries of his mother, who thought him dead, had brought them, one after the other, to her aid. As soon as he was sufficiently recovered to speak, they plied him with questions. His soutane was muddy and torn, his face cut and bleeding; they felt instinctively that he had been the victim of foul play.

He told the story as it had happened, carefully avoiding names. He was well aware of the nature of the people among whom he lived: peaceable, even stolid for the most part, when all went well, but terrible when aroused to anger or revenge. Yet in all that crowd of devoted peasants there was not one who did not suspect Duret; and the good priest trembled, feeling that it was so.

When Alphonse Duret next came to the village, he was greeted with black looks by many, and was pointedly avoided by others. Wondering how much they knew, he thought it best to absent himself, at least for a time.

II.

The farm which Duret occupied was one of the most lonely and desolate in that lonely and desolate region. It had been part of the patrimony of his father, who had never laid eyes upon it; and it was only as a last resource that the son took up residence there. An old cousin presided over his household, which was further increased by one female servant and two farm laborers.

Very soon after his midnight adventure, Duret began to drink hard. The life he led in the mountains having become unbearable, he endeavored to drown his harrowing and gloomy thoughts in liquor; but the attempt was vain. Finally, the cousin felt obliged to summon the doctor, fearing that Duret might be seized with an attack of delirium tremens. The physician gave him some medicine to soothe his nerves, informing him at the same time that if he did not change his habits the end would come speedily.

When the Cure heard that Duret was seriously ill, he immediately forgot all the injury the man had tried to do him, and prepared to pay him a visit. He carried over some books and papers, but the sick man would not receive them. On the contrary, he sent him a most insulting message, which the cousin was prudent and polite enough not to deliver. She was a pious old soul, loving Duret as though he had been her own child. The priest returned home, assuring her he would pray for Alphonse, and begging her to send for him whenever she could think he could be of use.

Some time after, having continued his dissolute course, Duret again became very ill; and his cousin, fearing he would die, determined to make another effort to have him see the priest. It was a cold but bright morning in February when the messenger left the farm. There seemed no immediate danger of bad weather; but by the time he reached Nestard's heavy snow clouds were darkening the air, menacing one of those fearful storms that often occur in the mountains in winter.

This prospect, however, did not daunt the Cure in the least. In a few moments he was ready to accompany the lad on his homeward journey. As he was about to start, his mother, who had been busy in the kitchen, tried to prevent him. Seizing him by the hand, she pointed to the lowering sky and said:

'Jean, my son, remember how near you came to death before upon yonder mountain. For my sake as well as your own, I beseech you wait until to-morrow, when the fury of the storm will have passed. Duret is not in immediate danger of death.'

For answer the priest patted the wrinkled old hand; and, gazing tenderly into the wistful eyes, he said:

'Dearest mother, Our Lord has confided this little flock to my care. What if, through my neglect or procrastination, the blackest sheep of all should be lost eternally? Will you, who have loved the Good Shepherd so well, and have sacrificed so much to make me a priest, be the first to tempt me to be faithless to the charge God has given unto my hands?'

The eyes of the poor mother filled with tears; a sob arose in her throat. After a moment's silence she kissed her son and said:

'Go, my Jean, and do your duty. You are in the hands of God. May He bring you safely home! In any case, you are right: I would rather see you dead than unworthy of your sacred calling.'