

'That is right—that is brave, mother!' said the priest, pressing her hand and imprinting a kiss on her cheek. 'And listen, mother, one more word. If anything should happen to me, if I should die on the mountain and be unable to reach that poor lost sheep and bring him back to God, promise me that, should he live, you will do all in your power to effect that which the Lord did not permit me to do.'

The poor mother shuddered; she felt as though it were her son's last request. But she only said:

'I promise, dear Jean!'

'God bless you for that!' he replied, and, without another word of farewell, he stepped out into the biting wind.

When the Abbe Leray and his companion left Nestards it was only three o'clock, but the storm clouds gathering above them made it seem almost like night. As they toiled up the mountain paths, beating their way against the wind, they feared the tempest might burst upon them at any moment. They reached Duret's farm as the first snowflakes were beginning to fall.

'Am I in time?' asked the priest, as the door was opened.

'Yes,' answered Duret's cousin, who had been waiting for him. 'But I am sorry I sent for you, with this terrible snowstorm coming on. And, more than that, my poor Alphonse has been railing against priests and religion all the afternoon. O Monsieur le Cure, I fear he will not see you! But, in any case, whether he does or not, you must pass the night here; for it promises to be an awful one.'

'I shall go to him, nevertheless,' said the priest, and without further delay went into the sick-room.

He was greeted with a shower of oaths and curses, and ordered to leave the house. Finding that his presence was useless, he left the room.

'But you shall not leave the house, Monsieur le Cure,' answered the cousin. 'One would not turn a dog out to-night.'

She had hardly spoken when the sick man rushed into the room, brandishing a knife, and threatening to kill the priest if he did not depart that very moment. Without a word, the Cure rose to go, thinking that he might be able to spend the night in an outhouse; but Duret seemed to divine his purpose. Half-clad as he was, he followed the Cure until he had passed well away from the farm buildings and was already on the mountain road. The Abbe Leray then resolved to retrace his steps homeward; for to remain on the mountain-side in such a snow-storm was to invite certain death.

It was not long before he heard shouts behind him, and turned to see the lad who had accompanied him running after him with a lantern.

'Here, Monsieur le Cure, take this!' he said. 'The mistress sent it to you, with a box of matches. She asks me to beg your pardon for having brought you here, and on such a night.'

'Tell your mistress,' said the priest (the lad related it afterward), 'not to be disturbed; she only did her duty. Tell her also that whatever I may endure or suffer this night on my homeward way, even though it be death, I shall offer to Almighty God for the conversion of that poor soul.'

'But, Monsieur le Cure,' pleaded the boy, 'do not go. Come back. I can hide you somewhere till morning; even the mistress need not know.'

The Cure shook his head and smiled, as he answered: 'No, no! It is unlucky to turn back, you know, Marcel. I shall go on.'

And that was the last any human being ever saw of the Abbe Leray alive.

The next morning his mother, who had not gone to bed all night, opened the door as soon as the first streak of light told that day was at hand. The snow had long ceased falling, the wind had abated, and dawn was just breaking above the white-capped mountains.

Something was lying on the path in front of her—something black—something that stretched stiff, straight arms, like a cross, along the snow. On one side a lantern, with the candle burned to the socket, lay overturned; on the other, a pyx, closed and empty. From the candle, entirely consumed, they could guess that the Cure must have been hours on his journey; and the empty pyx told that at the last, wearied, bewildered, lost, he had consumed the sacred species, and lain down to die in the darkness, not fifty feet from his own house, his own church, where he had spent the sanctified years of his priestly life. And later, when they traced his footsteps in wandering, concentric circles round and round through the deep snow, they found that he must have spent several hours within sight and sound of the sheltering walls, behind which his mother wept and prayed for his return. They placed the body in a rough coffin, and laid it in front of the altar,

where he had so often dispensed for them the Bread of Life.

It was a fortnight before a priest could be brought from below to officiate at the funeral obsequies. On the morning of the interment, when the Mass was about to begin, the congregation were astonished to see a man enter the church, pass up the aisle, and take his place beside the mother of the dead priest, who sat alone in the front pew. It was Alphonse Duret; and, great as was their indignation, no one ventured to remonstrate: all were afraid of him.

From time to time they saw the man was sobbing; and saw also that the stricken mother, herself quietly weeping, would place her hand upon his arm, as though to restrain and console him. When Mass was over, the officiating priest preached a short sermon, relating the circumstances of the Cure's death as well as he knew them, and enumerating the saintly deeds that had from the first distinguished the dead pastor who had given his life to save a wayward sheep of his flock. The preacher, who was a stranger, concluded as follows: 'Oh, that that misguided man could listen to my words to-day, could kneel beside the corpse of the martyr who sacrificed his life for the salvation of that erring soul! It could hardly fail to pierce his heart, to bring him to repentance and pardon.'

'That man is here, and I am he!' cried Alphonse Duret, springing to his feet; and then, passing into the aisle, and standing beside the coffin, he told the story of his intercourse with the dead priest from the time he had arrived at Nestards. Concealing nothing, he dramatically and forcibly related the incident of several months before, when he had perpetrated so cruel an imposition upon the Cure; how he had left him in the middle of the night upon a lonely mountain path, piled high with driving snow; how he had jeered and mocked at him; how, on the night the faithful shepherd had been summoned to his bedside, he had driven him forth to his death.

'And now,' he continued, 'after asking pardon of the poor mother whom I have bereaved of her son, of the flock whom I have deprived of their pastor, of the God whom I have insulted, outraged, and blasphemed, I say to you, when all is over—when you have laid the saint in his last resting place—do with me what you please. Tear me limb from limb if you will, for I deserve it; or hang me to the nearest tree, or fling me from some frowning precipice. Whatever death may be decreed me, I shall submit without a word. But first let me make my peace with the God whom I have so long derided and despised; let me go to confession. That is all I ask. And let me say in conclusion that I have made provision during her lifetime for the poor mother of whom I have made a veritable *Mater Dolorosa*. I have done!'

The people of Nestards and its environs are true Christians; but how could they be otherwise when she who had lost her only son, her all on earth, fully and tenderly forgave his murderer? She had made a promise, and she kept it to the letter. She was still living at Nestards when I last visited it, occupying a small cottage with the cousin of Alphonse Duret, the rent of whose two farms was ample provision for both, their simple wants being few. Duret has been for several years a monk of La Trappe.—*Ave Maria*.

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