

Literature, &c.

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THE MIDNIGHT MASS.

AN EPISODE IN THE HISTORY OF THE REIGN OF TERROR.

The person who demanded admittance appeared to interpret the terrified silence which had seized the nuns on hearing his knock, into a signal to enter. He opened the door himself, and the affrighted women immediately recognized him as the man whom they had detected watching the house—the spy who had watched one of them through the streets that night.

The stranger was tall and robust, but there was nothing in his features or general appearance to denote that he was a dangerous man. Without attempting to break the silence, he slowly looked around the room. Two bundles of straw, strewn upon boards, served as a bed for the two nuns. In the centre of the room was a table, on which were placed a copper-candlestick, some plates, three knives, and a loaf of bread. There was but a small fire in the grate and the scanty supply of wood piled near it, plainly showed the poverty of the inmates. The old walls which at some distant period had been painted, indicated the miserable state of the roof, by the patches of brown streaked across them by the rain, which had filtered, drop by drop, through the ceiling. A sacred relic, saved probably from the pilage of the convent to which the two nuns and the priest had been attached, was placed on the chimney-piece. Three chairs, two boxes, and an old chest-of-drawers completed the furniture of the apartment.

At one corner near the mantle-shelf, a door had been constructed which indicated that there was a second room in that direction.

An expression of pity appeared on the countenance of the stranger, as his eyes fell on the two nuns, after having surveyed their wretched apartment. He was the first to break the strange silence that had hitherto prevailed, by addressing the two poor creatures before him in such tones of kindness as were best adapted to the nervous terror under which they were evidently suffering.

"Citizens!" he began, "I do not come to you as an enemy." He stopped for a moment, and then continued: "If any misfortune has befallen you, rest assured that I am not the cause of it. My only object here is to ask a great favor of you."

The nuns kept silence. "If my presence causes you any anxiety," he went on, "tell me so at once, and I will depart; but, believe me, I am really devoted to your interests; and if there is anything in which I can befriend you, you may confide in me without fear. I am, perhaps, the only man in Paris whom the law can not assail, now that the kings of France are no more."

There was such a tone of sincerity in these words, as he spoke them, that Sister Agatha (the nun to whom the reader was introduced at the outset of this narrative, and whose manners exhibited all the Court refinements of the old school) instinctively pointed to one of the chairs, as if to request the stranger to be seated. His expression showed a mixture of satisfaction and melancholy, as he acknowledged this little attention, of which he did not take advantage until the nuns had first seated themselves.

"You have given an asylum here," continued he, "to a venerable priest, who has miraculously escaped from massacre at a Carmelite convent?"

"Are you the person," asked Sister Agatha, eagerly, "appointed to protect our flight from—?"

"I am not the person whom you expect to see," he replied, calmly.

"I assure you, sir," interrupted the other nun, anxiously, "that we have no priest here; we have not, indeed."

"You had better be a little more careful about appearances on a future occasion," he replied, gently, taking from the table a Latin breviary. "May I ask if you are both in the habit of reading the Latin language?" he inquired, with a slight inflection of sarcasm, in his voice.

No answer was returned. Observing the anguish depicted on the countenance of the nuns, the trembling of their limbs, the tears that filled their eyes, the stranger began to fear that he had gone too far.

"Compose yourselves," he continued frankly. "For three days I have been acquainted with the state of distress in which you are living. I know your names, and the name of the venerable priest whom you are concealing. It is—"

"Hush! do not speak it," said sister Agatha, placing her fingers on her lips.

"I have now said enough," he went on, "to show that if I had conceived the base design of betraying you, I would have accomplished my object before now."

On the utterance of these words, the priest, who had heard all that had passed, left his hiding-place and appeared in the room.

"I can not believe, sir," said he "that you are leagued with my persecutors; and I therefore willingly confide in you. What do you require of me?"

The noble confidence of the priest—the saintlike purity expressed in his features—must have struck even an assassin with respect. The mysterious personage who had intruded on the scene of misery and resignation which the garret presented, looked silently for a moment on the three beings before

him, and then in tones of secrecy, thus addressed the priest:

"Father, I come to intreat you to celebrate a mortuary mass for the repose of the soul of—a—of a person whose life the laws once held sacred, but whose corpse will never rest in holy ground."

An involuntary shudder seized the priest, as he guessed the hidden meaning in these words. The nuns unable to imagine what person was indicated by the stranger, looked on him with curiosity and alarm.

"Your wish shall be granted," said the priest, in low, awe-struck tones. "Return to this place at midnight, and you will find me ready to celebrate the only funeral service which the church can offer in expiation of the crime to which I understand you to allude."

The stranger trembled violently for a moment, then composed himself, respectfully saluted the priest and the two nuns, and departed without uttering a word.

About two hours afterward, a soft knock at the outer door announced the mysterious visitor's return. He was admitted by Sister Agatha, who conducted him into the second apartment of their modest retreat, where every thing had been prepared for the midnight mass. Near the fire place the nuns had placed their old chest of drawers, the clumsy workmanship of which was concealed under a rich altar-cloth of green velvet. A large crucifix, formed of ivory and ebony was hung against the bare plaster wall. Four small tapers, fixed by sealing-wax on the temporary altar, threw a faint and mysterious gleam over the crucifix, but hardly penetrated to any other part of the walls of the room. Thus almost exclusively confined to the sacred objects immediately above and around it, the glow from the tapers looked like a light falling from heaven itself on that unadorned and unpretending altar.

The floor of the room was damp. The miserable roof sloping on either side, was pierced with rents, through which the cold right air penetrated into the rooms. Nothing could be less magnificent, and yet nothing could be more truly solemn than the manner in which the preliminaries of the funeral ceremony had been arranged. A deep, dread silence, through which the slightest noise in the street could be heard, added to the dreary grandeur of the midnight scene—a grandeur majestically expressed by the contrast between the homeliness of the temporary church, and the solemnity of the service to which it was now devoted. On each side of the altar, the two aged women, kneeling on the tiled floor, unmindful of its deadly dampness, were praying in concert with the priest, who, clothed in his sacerdotal robes, raised on high a golden chalice, adorned with precious stones, the most sacred of the few relics saved from the pilage of the Carmelite Convent.

The stranger, approaching after an interval, knelt reverently between the two nuns.

As he looked up toward the crucifix, he saw, for the first time, that a piece of black crape was attached to it. On beholding this simple sign of mourning, terrible recollections appeared to be awakened within him; the big drops of agony started thick and fast on his massive brow.

Gradually, as the four actors in this solemn scene still fervently prayed together, their souls began to sympathize the one with the other, blending in one common feeling of religious awe. Awful, in truth, was the service in which they were now secretly engaged! Beneath that mouldering roof, those four Christians were then interceding with Heaven for the soul of a martyred King of France; performing, at the peril of their lives, in those days of anarchy and terror, a funeral service for that hapless Louis the Sixteenth, who died on the scaffold, who was buried without a coffin or a shroud! It was, in them, the purest of all acts of devotion—the purest, from its disinterestedness, from its courageous fidelity. The last relics of the loyalty of France were collected in that poor room, enshrined in the prayers of a priest and two aged women. Perhaps, too, the dark spirit of the revolution was present there as well, impersonated by the stranger, whose face, while he knelt before the altar, betrayed an expression of the most poignant remorse.

The most gorgeous mass ever celebrated in the gorgeous Cathedral of St. Peter, at Rome, could not have expressed the sincere feeling of prayer so nobly as it was now expressed, by those four persons under that lowly roof!

There was one moment, during the progress of the service, at which the nuns detected that tears were trickling fast over the stranger's cheeks. It was then the Pater Noster was said.

On the termination of the midnight mass, the priest made a sign to the two nuns, who immediately left the room. As soon as they were alone, he thus addressed the stranger:

"My son, if you have imbrued your hands in the blood of the martyred king, confide in me, and in my sacred office. Repentance so deep and sincere as yours appears to be, may efface even the crime of regicide in the eyes of God."

"Holy father," replied the other, in trembling accents, "no man is less guilty than I am of shedding the king's blood."

"I would fain believe you," answered the priest. He paused for a moment as he said this, looked steadfastly on the penitent man before him, and then continued:

"But, remember, my son, you can not be absolved of the crime of regicide, because you have not co-operated in it. Those who had the power of defending their king, and who, having that power, still left the sword in the

scabbard, will be called to render a heavy account at the day of judgment, before the king of kings; yes, a heavy and awful account indeed! for, in remaining passive, they became the involuntary accomplices of the worst of murders."

"De you think then father," murmured the stranger, deeply abashed, "that all indirect participations are visited with punishment? Is the soldier guilty of the death of Louis, who obeyed the order to guard the scaffold?"

The priest hesitated.

"I should be ashamed," continued the other, betraying by his expression, some satisfaction at the dilemma in which he had placed the old man—"I should be ashamed of offering you any pecuniary recompense for such a funeral service as you have celebrated. It is only possible to repay an act so noble by an offering which is priceless. Honor me by accepting this sacred relic. The day perhaps will come when you will understand its value."

So saying, he presented to the priest a small box, extremely light in weight, which the aged ecclesiastic took, as it were, involuntarily; for he felt awed by the solemn tones in which the man spoke as he offered it. Briefly expressing his thanks for the mysterious present, the priest conducted his guest into the outer room, where the two nuns remained in attendance.

"The house you now inhabit," said the stranger, addressing the nuns as well as the priest, "belongs to a landlord who outwardly affects extreme republicanism, but who is at heart devoted to the royal cause. He was formerly a huntsman in the service of one of the Bourbons, the Prince de Conde, to whom he is indebted for all he possesses. So long as you remain in this house you are safer than in any other place in France. Remain here, therefore. Persons worthy of trust will supply all your necessities, and you will be able to await in safety the prospect of better times. In a year from this day, on the 21st January, should you still remain the occupants of this miserable abode, I will return to repeat with you the celebration of to-night's expiatory mass." He paused abruptly, and bowed without adding another word; then delayed a moment more, to cast a parting look on the objects of poverty which surrounded him, and left the room.

To the two simple-minded nuns, the whole affair had all the interest of a romance. Their faces displayed the most intense anxiety, the moment the priest informed them of the mysterious gift which the stranger had so solemnly presented to him. Sister Agatha immediately opened the box, and discovered in it a handkerchief made of the finest cambric, and soiled with marks of perspiration. They unfolded it eagerly, and then found that it was defaced in certain places with dark stains.

"Those stains are blood stains!" exclaimed the priest.

"The handkerchief is marked with the royal crown!" cried Sister Agatha.

Both the Nuns dropped the precious relic, marked by the king's blood, with horror. To their simple minds, the mystery which was attached to the stranger, now deepened fearfully. As to the priest, from that moment he ceased, even in thought, to attempt identifying his visitor, or discovering the means by which he had become possessed of the royal handkerchief.

Throughout the atrocities practised during a year of the Reign of Terror, the three refugees were safely guarded by the same protecting interference, ever at work for their advantage. At first, they received large supplies of fuel and provisions; then the two nuns found reason to imagine that one of their own sex had become associated with their invisible protector, for they were furnished with the necessary linen and clothing which enable them to go out without attracting attention by any peculiarities of attire. Besides this, warnings of danger constantly came to the priest in the most unexpected manner, and always opportunely. And then, again, in spite of the famine which at that period afflicted Paris, the inhabitants of the garret were sure to find placed every morning at their door, a supply of the best wheaten bread, regularly left for them by some invisible hand.

They could only guess that the agent of the charitable attentions thus lavished on them, was the landlord of the house, and that the person by whom he was employed was no other than the stranger who had celebrated with them the funeral mass for the repose of the King's soul. Thus, this mysterious man was regarded with especial reverence by the priest and the nuns, whose lives for the present, and whose hopes for the future, depended on their strange visitor. They added to their usual prayers at night and morning, prayers for him.

At length the long-expected night of the 21st of January arrived, and, exactly as the clock struck twelve, the sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs announced the approach of the stranger. The room had been carefully prepared for his reception, the altar had been arranged, and, on this occasion, the nuns eagerly opened the door, even before they heard the knock.

"Welcome back again! most welcome!" cried they; "we have been most anxiously waiting you."

The stranger raised his head, looked gloomily on the nuns, and made no answer. Chilled by his cold reception of their kind greeting, they did not venture to utter another word. He seemed to have frozen at their hearts, in an instant, all the gratitude, all the friendly aspirations of the long year that had passed. They now perceived but too plainly that their visitor desired to remain a com-

plete stranger to them, and that they must resign all hope of ever making a friend of him. The old priest fancied he had detected a smile on the lips of their guest when he entered, but that smile—if it had really appeared—vanished again the moment he observed the preparations which had been made for his reception. He knelt to hear the funeral mass, prayed as before, and then abruptly took his departure; briefly declining, by a few civil words, to partake of the simple refreshment offered to him, on the expiration of the service, by the two nuns.

Day after day wore on, and nothing more was heard of the stranger by the inhabitants of the garret. After the fall of Robespierre, the church was delivered from all actual persecution, and the priest and nuns were free to appear publicly in Paris, without the slightest risk of danger. One of the first expeditions undertaken by the aged ecclesiastic led him to a perfumer's shop, kept by a man who had formerly been one of the Court tradesmen, and who had always remained faithful to the Royal Family. The priest clothed once more in his clerical dress, was standing at the shop door talking to the perfumer, when he observed a great crowd rapidly advancing along the street.

"What is the matter yonder?" he enquired of the shopkeeper.

"Nothing," replied the man carelessly, "but the cart with the condemned criminals going to the place of execution. Nobody pities them—and nobody ought."

"You are not speaking like a Christian," exclaimed the priest. "Why not pity them?"

"Because," answered the perfumer, "those men who are going to the execution, are the last accomplices of Robespierre. They only travel the same fatal road which their innocent victims took before them."

The cart with the prisoners condemned to the guillotine had by this time arrived opposite the perfumer's shop. As the old priest looked curiously toward the state criminals, he saw, standing erect and undaunted among his drooping fellow prisoners, the very man at whose desire he had twice celebrated the funeral service for the martyred King of France!

"Who is that standing upright in the cart?" cried the priest breathlessly.

The perfumer looked in the direction indicated, and answered—

"The Executioner of Louis the Sixteenth."

A WHISPER TO GENTLEMEN.

BY FANNY FERN.

JUPITER Ammon! don't I wish I was a man, just to show the masculines how to play their part in the world a little better! In the first place, their ain't a mother's son of you that has got as far as A B C, in the art of making love, (and I've seen a few abortions in that way myself, as well as the rest of the dear sisters.) What woman wants to be told that her feet and eyes are pretty, or her form and smile's bewitching! Just as, if she didn't know all her fine points as soon as she is tall enough to peep into the looking glass!

No, you ineffable donkey, if you must use the small coin of flattery to pay toll at the bridge of her affections, let me whisper a secret into your ears. Compliment her upon some mental attraction she does not possess (if you can find one!) and don't wear the knees of your pants threadbare at her feet, trying to make her believe that she is your first love. We all know that is among the first things that were, after you were out of your jacket and trousers.

What a splendid husband I (Fanny) should make, to be sure, had Providence ordained I do you suppose when the mother of my glorious boys wanted a sixpence to buy their shoe strings, I'd scowl at her like a hyena, and pull my port monnaie out of my pocket as if I were pulling a tooth? Do you suppose when her blue eyes grew lustreless, and the rose paled on her fair cheek, trotting around the domestic tread mill day after day, that I'd come home at night sulky and silent, and smoke my cigar in her face till her eyes were as red as rabbits, or take myself off to a club, or a game of nine pins, or any other game and leave her to the exhilarating relaxation of darning my stockings.

Do you suppose I'd trot along like a loose pony at her side in the street, and leave her to keep up with me, or not as her strength would permit! Do you suppose I'd fly into a passion, and utter words to crush the light from out of her young heart, and then insult her by offering her a healing plaster in the shape of a new bonnet?

And don't you suppose when the anniversary of our wedding day came round, I'd write a dainty little note and leave it on her toilet table, and let her know I was still a married lover!

Pshaw! I'm sick of you all! You don't deserve the love a generous, high souled woman! If you want a housekeeper, hire one and be done with it. If you want a wife—but you don't.

One woman will answer as well as another to sew on your buttons, and straps, and strings, and make your pudding, and—so on, and so forth.

Do you suppose we have cultivated our minds and improved the bright and glorious gifts of intellect to the best of our capacity, to minister unto your physical wants? Not a bit of it. When that's over, we want something rational.

Do you ever think of that, you selfish wretch, when you sit with your feet upon the mantle piece reading the newspapers all to yourself, or sit from tea time till ten o'clock,