

IN THE Clutch of Rome.

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BY "GONZALES."

CHAPTER VIII.
THE ARCHBISHOP'S SCHEME.

Archbishop O'Connor of San Francisco had read with much satisfaction, the account which the newspapers had given of the taking of the veil by the rich Miss Allison of New York. His fellow priests of the Atlantic Coast had secured a rich addition to the church treasury, and to him was given the commission to see that an equally to-be-desired prize, should be gleaned from the Pacific Coast.

The bishop's handsome residence on the summit of a high hill, commanded a view of the bay and the golden gate. The priest stood in the embrasure of a window in his private apartment, looking down on the glittering lights of the city, and over the waters of the bay, where from distant ships, colored lamps flickered and flashed and died away in the distance. He was a good man in the main, but relentless and unscrupulous as to the attainment of any desired object, for the good of the church.

O'Connor, archbishop of San Francisco, was a handsome, unclerical looking man of large stature, whose rounded outlines evidenced a body well nourished and cared for; and, being an ecclesiastical of high standing, it goes without saying, that his soul was in an equally good condition. In striking incongruity with the comfortable ensemble of his appearance, was a certain gloomy, brooding shade in his large, handsome, grey eyes. Eyes, which were as hard as steel at times, but could, as occasion demanded, soften and plead. Tonight they were as hard and cold as the white marble clock on the mantle, whose sharp, metallic click fell in the silence of the room like hall stones against a window pane. His grace walked many times across the room and back, and stopping suddenly, and resting his hand on the rich draperies of the mantle, fastened his expressive eyes, which had grown colder and sterner as he walked, on the miniature marble temple, from whose diminutive pillared portal, time gave nine sonorous notes. As the last note vibrated through the room, the bishop glanced in the mirror at his (as always) faultless attire, turned the gas low, and passed through the thickly carpeted halls to meet expected guests.

The room in which he waited was deep maroon, in all its appointments, from the thick velvet papered walls and ceiling to the soft pile of the carpet on the floor. Even the globes which shaded the gas jets were darkest ruby in tint. A life-sized painting of the virgin occupied the space over the low mantle. Pieces of rare bric a brac were scattered here and there, and the aesthetic drapes on the chairs, and the painted sliver sachets, from which the furnace-heated air of the room drew forth faint perfumes, were so many delicate and scented remembrances of the ladies of his diocese. For the bishop, like all men of voluptuous appearance and aesthetic taste, was a favorite of the grand majority of the sex, feminine (don't credit them, if they disclaim it) and many were the gifts, substantial and superfluous, which the daughters of the church bestowed upon him.

The archbishop had not long to wait. Soon, two priests, Father Fairfax, of St. Mary's, and Father Fabio St. John, of the Church of the Blessed Sacrament, were ushered into the room. The priest of St. Mary's was a man, long past middle life, devoted to nothing but the good and advancement of the church, in the sanctified order of which "he had lived and breathed and had his being," for five and forty years. To Father St. John, a handsome man of Spanish and American parentage in the first blush of early manhood, the mysteries of the holy temple were mysteries still. Like a flowery writer, whose theme exceeds in beauty his subject, so this youthful priest lost sight of all that was prosaic and hard in his religion, and, by virtue of the power bestowed upon him, administered the rites of the church before her gorgeous altars, in a religious ecstasy.

As the archbishop welcomed and seated his clerical guests, the look which passed between himself and the elder priest, said as plain as spoken words. "We must proceed with caution." The subject-matter to be discussed tonight, in this crimson-dyed, subtly scented room, was well understood between the archbishop and the priest of St. Mary's. Summons to the head of the priesthood were of frequent occurrence, and always obeyed unquestioned by the subordinates. After an exchange of a few common-place words, the reverend host crossed the room to a carved, ebony table, where on a silver tray stood a pink, Bohemian glass decanter filled with port wine together with its tall companion glasses. Filling them, he presented them to his guests. Father Fairfax sipped the purple contents of his glass with as littleunction as he would have drunk a glass of milk. He was old, and the blood ran slow and cold in his veins and the wine would send a warmth through them; that was all. Young Father Fabio declined the offered glass with a

polite, "excuse me, your grace, I rarely drink."

"Tut, boy, drink," said his grace, "make this one of the rarities. Drink to the good of our holy church."

Father Fabio, thus admonished, lifted the glittering glass from the tray and held it untasted till his superior had resumed his seat, which he did with a brimming glass in his hand. As soon as the glasses were emptied and disposed of, the archbishop at once introduced the business of the meeting by saying:

"My friends, I have many things of importance to communicate to you this evening. You, my son," turning to the younger man, "have a sacred mission to perform."

"A sacred mission," reiterated Father Fairfax, "and may the holy mother"—and he inclined his head reverently towards the painting of the virgin facing him—"and all the blessed saints above us lend you their aid and give you grace to accomplish it."

Roman priests are early taught to obey implicitly the orders of their superiors. So Father Fabio merely bowed his head, and waited.

"A few months ago," continued the archbishop, "as you may be aware, the abbot of the St. Ignatius in Spain, died. In her last confession, she revealed the fact of having, in a moment of sentimental weakness, enabled a girl, intrusted to her care and destined for the veil, to escape in order to consummate a marriage with a Protestant. That Protestant is now one of the wealthiest and most influential men of this state, of which he was once governor; I refer to James Maxwell, United States senator from California. It is very possible he may one day fill the president's chair. With our help, I verily believe, it could be accomplished."

"Power in some form is a lodestone which attracts all humanity. The people, who, by virtue of their right to vote and thus create their rulers, make the rulers and would-be rulers their slaves; and the Roman Catholic vote, disguise it as they will, is at once the hope and fear of these ambitious office-seekers, vain-glorious Protestants though they be. And we priests hold in our hands the motive power which sets in motion and controls this element, which, like fire, may prove a good servant or a terrible master. The preface read, now listen to the subject proper, my young friend;" continued his grace. "Your mother was a Spanish lady, and she came from Granada, I believe?"

"She did, your reverence, and she has been dead several years."

"So I have been informed. My her soul rest in peace." And his reverence laid his shapely head back against the delicately-wrought, slumber cushion on the back of his chair, and fastened his mesmeric eyes on the cameo-cut face before him.

"No doubt your mother often talked to you of her beautiful country and filled you with a strong desire to visit it." A pause, which he knew the mind of the young priest would feel. Then, "I am pointing out to you a very pleasant path of duty, for you will be in close communion with a woman, young and lovely, and with whom you can, if you choose, converse in the poetic tongue which was your mother's, and which will bring her image ever before you, and be a potent charm against all evil. In fact, you, Fabio St. John, ordained priest of God and Rome, are to return this stolen jewel to us."

"The path has been already opened for you," said Father Fairfax. "Miss Dillon, whom you know, has a firm footing in the household as governess to the children. She is a member of my congregation and under my direct supervision as regards her conduct in this delicate case."

"With so valuable and efficient an aid de camp as Miss Dillon, placing you in direct communication with the lady and her family, I really do not see the need of my inexperienced help in this matter," said Fabio meekly.

"Obey your superiors unhesitatingly and without question in all things, was, I believe, young man, the first and last lesson given you to learn in your priestly instructions. You evidently did not learn it," said his grace, severely.

"I really have no intentions of disobeying any orders your grace may impose upon me, I only distrusted my power to do what you evidently think the united efforts of Miss Dillon and Father Fairfax unable to accomplish."

"Be guided ever by the judgment of your elders and ecclesiastical superiors, Father Fabio, and you will scarcely go wrong. And now listen and mark well my words and their import, and shape your course accordingly. The first great advantage you have over Father Fairfax is your youth and your Raphael face. Don't blush, 'tis a gift from God. Even religious teachings will make a deeper and more lasting impression on a young and beautiful woman, when they fall from lips that the breath of youth still lingers on. You have not to deal with hard and crude material, but with a young Spanish woman, who was born and bred in the faith; and, though by her union with a Protestant, and an indiscriminate mingling with the world of fashion, she may have become somewhat hardened, she will—I have little doubt—like all her countrywomen, become as plastic as wax, in skillful hands.

The very fact of your being able to speak her musical language, and your mother being a countrywoman of her own, will give you an advantage none others possess. As time goes on, you will tell her that this dead Spanish abbot does not find rest for her soul; that the deep sin she committed, when she betrayed her trust, was of too serious a nature to be absolved by priestly absolution; that in order to give this poor wandering spirit rest, she herself must return to the bosom of the church. Naturally she will bring her children with her. As for her husband, well, time and political ambition works wonders. I have, I think, clearly defined the outline of the work you, Fabio St. John, are to fill in."

His workmen merely bowed. It was long past midnight when the three priests finished their conference, and the archbishop offered the hospitality of his house for the remainder of the night to Father Fairfax, saying:

"You, Fabio, are young, and, I imagine, care little for the darkness or the rude gambols of a cold, nor a wind."

"I am ever indifferent to the darkness, your grace," replied Father Fabio with ironic politeness, "as for the wind," he continued, "I have learned to love it. I always go where it blows the hardest after a duty visit to some locality not quite pure in its moral or physical atmosphere."

His grace lightly pressed his full underlip with his well-cared-for teeth, and observed, with a meaning smile, "It is well to travel true with the wind, my dear young friend; by always avoiding a contra course, you will escape many rude buffetings; and now, good night."

The young man found the cold biting air of the early morning, a grateful change from the heavy enervating influence of the luxurious crimson room he had left. And he buttoned his long overcoat closely over his slim elegant figure—in stature he was a trifle above the middle height—and walked rapidly along the dimly lit streets. Tonight his adored and revered mistress, grown bold and incautious with increasing familiarity, had allowed an unsuspected, cloven hoof to peep forth from under her silken skirts, and it had filled him with the same repulsion an ardent lover feels, when he accidentally discovers some gross mental or physical defect in a being he has heretofore believed without blemish. His father, whom he scarcely remembered, had been an American gentleman of means and culture. He had married the handsome daughter of a well-born Spanish gentleman, according to the rites of her creed. He had loved her and had been loved devotedly till he died, leaving his young wife in easy circumstances, and with a young son, whom, she being of a very devout nature, had educated for the priesthood. The boy being of a gentle nature, and developing very early in life a great reverence for all things spiritual, this had been an easy thing to do. But Father Fabio, though always meekly submissive to those having an authority over him, and to his superiors in rank or age, had inherited a certain independence of mind and a power of keen self-reasoning from his American father. And shining bright in his character (too bright perhaps for the sensitive eyes of the general world) were two perfect gems, honor and justice. Self-denying ever when he could benefit some fellow creature in greater straits than himself; self-annihilating never.

Suddenly the young priest stopped in his rapid walk, before a large stone mansion in the most aristocratic portion of San Francisco. The citadel which he, a knight of the holy order, was, in the name of the religion to enter and plant innumerable banners gorgeously colored and illuminated with mottoes of cant, stood in its substantial and architectural beauty, wrapped in darkness, save from occasional cold gleams which fell over it from an electric light on the street corner. After a short survey of his future battle-ground, the youthful priest hastened towards his own humble home which he soon reached, with a very whirlpool of emotions seething through his brain. Sleep came with the dawn, and did not leave him till close upon the hour for early Sunday morning mass.

The Church of the Blessed Sacrament was not a large edifice, and the congregation though numbering many people of assured position in its ranks, was not, on the whole, a fashionable one, though the young pastor mingled with the first of the city, in both Catholic and Protestant circles. The duty of the day over until the hour for evening vespers should again call him before the altar, Father St. John betook himself to his small though well filled library to think over the ways and means of procedure in the case set before him by his ecclesiastical superior, the previous night. His gathered thoughts, however, were quickly scattered by a knock at the door, followed by the entrance of his housekeeper. She had been his nurse, and never having any children of her own, her maternal instinct and authority was all concentrated on him—with the information that a lady awaited him in the parlor. "A poor body seeking a way out of some trouble, I suppose," said the priest, preparing to obey the summons.

"I don't think so," said Mrs. Gibbs. "She looks as if trouble would run off her like water from a bronze image."

"Ah," muttered Fabio, under his breath, and his heart (alas, not well trained, Jesuitical heart) beat quickly under his black cassock.

"Miss Dillon"—Miss Dillon it proved to be. Dressed in a tailor-made costume of reddish-brown cloth, and wearing on her head a little velvet toque, so near the color of the fluffy fringe across her forehead, that as she stood before the priest, a beautiful, animated bronze figure, he involuntarily thought of his housekeeper's not very flattering smile.

Father St. John's visitor did not leave him till the first stroke of the vesper bell, which called him to the church to perform the evening service, fell on the air.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RESCUE FROM THE CONVENT. Anxiety was rife in the Maxwell residence. Miss Dillon, apparently in perfect health the day before, had been taken suddenly ill in the night, and the following day found her no better. Dr. Murphy, a doctor of her own choosing, had been called in, and had hinted at a nervous disorder, that resort of doctors in all cases not distinctly understood by themselves, or not desirable to be understood by their patients.

Mrs. Maxwell had been assiduous in her attentions, and even Martha had visited the room of the sick governess. The afternoon found Miss Dillon still nervous and miserable, and demanding the attendance of a priest. Father Fabio left his spiritual patient and found a servant ready to conduct him to Mrs. Maxwell, who was waiting with some anxiety to exchange a few words with him in regard to Miss Dillon's condition. She received him in her boudoir, a room at once beautiful and chaste, with its furnishings of azure and cream color, and permeated with a faint scent of violets.

The young priest felt a flush rise to his cheeks as, in obedience to a sign from the fair woman Rome had so nearly lost, he sank on to a small divan, opposite the chair she herself had chosen, which by chance stood against the wall, directly under a portrait of her absent husband.

The young priest, who had a keen sense of all things beautiful, animate or inanimate, looked at her with the pleasurable sensation pervading his being that all truly artistic natures feel, when they enter a conservatory where the rarest and loveliest flowers are kept, and do not even see the warning notice: "A heavy fine for picking the flowers," the very refinement of their love crushing out the vulgar sense of acquisitiveness. For such as these, the above warnings have no meaning. It is another class who gloatingly gaze and stealthily gather the blossoms, and find that the withering heat of their greedy hands have killed all the beauty and perfume; and in disgust, they cast away their hideous remains.

The flush which for an instant spread over the young woman's face, was caused by the knowledge of the means employed, that had gained him admittance to this treasure chamber, where a coveted and misplaced jewel of Rome reposed on cushions of silk. "The most artistic thing in this artistic room," was his mental verdict, as he noticed the graceful pose of the perfect form and face before him.

In answer to the lady's anxious inquiries regarding the condition of Miss Dillon, he assured her she need have no apprehensions; the spiritual balm he had, by the grace of God bestowed upon her, had, in conjunction with medicines of the physicians given her rest and comfort.

"Miss Dillon," he continued, "is a woman of deep religious feeling and acute conscientiousness, and physical derangement caused the memory of any neglect of duty to become a scourge. Then it is, that the consoling power of our blessed religion asserts itself."

"If daily intercourse with her makes me competent to judge," said Mrs. Maxwell, pleasantly, "I should say Miss Dillon's life is a blameless one, and her sweet face, which is to me like a mirror of her inner life, shows no dark spots."

"Miss Dillon is a very worthy woman, and a true daughter of our holy church," he said, "but even a pure woman, Mrs. Maxwell, is but human, and the inherent evil common to all humanity will spring into life like weeds in some bed of choice flowers. As a skillful hand is required to free the bed of flowers from the weeds, not disturbing the form of the whole, so the garden of one's inner life requires a careful cultivator. Our blessed church foreseeing this, has instituted the sacred confessional. I say, our blessed church, for I know you are one of the true faith. And with the privilege of my office, may I ask the name of your confessor?"

The deep blue eyes had a merry gleam in them as she said:

"Oh, certainly, Father; for the last ten years, my husband has been my confessor."

"Have you been married so long as that, Mrs. Maxwell?"

She bowed her graceful head in assent. The priest continued insinuatingly: "Have you never felt the need of a helping hand to smooth the many rough places, and to allay the doubts and fears which must have sprung up in

the track of those years? Have you never felt the need of spiritual guidance? Have not worldly pleasures and fashionable pursuits filled up too much of your life?"

"I do not think I have failed in any duty of life, your reverence. And in the little trials and troubles which have come to me, I have ever found my husband an all-wise counsellor."

"I have not the honor of a personal acquaintance with your husband, unless a casual meeting in some assemblage can be so called. He has a very noble face (glancing at the portrait on the wall in front of him) and I think man or woman might very safely go to him for help in troubles."

Mrs. Maxwell's deep blue eyes shone through a mist.

"He is all in all to me; my rescuer from a horror of the past, my happiness, and the very essence of my present life. The life to come has no terrors to me, for I have faith to believe that we shall be united through all eternity."

"You say he rescued you from some unhappy state?" said Fabio with well feigned interest.

"An unhappy state is no name for the fate he saved me from," said Mrs. Maxwell, the warm vehemence of her Spanish blood manifesting itself in her sparkling eyes, and low, forcible tones of voice. "But for him, with his manly daring, I should be today a living, entombed nun—unless death had come to my relief—instead of a loved and honored wife and mother."

In his heart Father Fabio congratulated her on her escape, but his duty was to play the part assigned him; so he allowed a smile of priestly indulgence to play around his sensitive mouth, as he said: "A bride of Christ is supposed, and surely ought to be the most honored and blissful of brides." "But," he added quickly, "doubtless you are fulfilling the mission the great Father intended you should and the blessing of the good priest who united you to the man you so devotedly love has abided with you always."

(To be Continued.)

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