

IN THE Clutch of Rome.

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CHAPTER XI—Continued. BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE.

The troubled priest sank back in his chair with his face buried in his hands, and a flood of pious memories of his mother's and his own life came over him. His grace resumed his seat before the writing-desk, and his words fell like cold, cutting hail after a thunder-storm.

"St. John, you are too great a criminal to be tried in my court. True, I might take you from your priestly office, and with the flaming sword of my authority drive you forth from your church as did the angel of the Lord drive from Paradise the first great rebels. Oh, why did you study for and take upon yourself your priestly vows to love and cherish, above all other considerations, the holy mother church, to live for her and her only, to work for her while your life lasts; if needs be, to die for her; to do what, to the eyes of the uninitiated might appear as evil, for her good and welfare? Surely, these duties and false scruples of yours did not spring into instantaneous life."

"Most reverend sir," said Fabio, with face still bowed, "they were begotten and born in your red reception room upstairs. Yourself and Father Fairfax are responsible for their troublesome existence. But believe me, I will, if in my power, and with the help of the virgin (crossing himself) and all the Heavenly powers, strangle them in their infancy."

Archbishop O'Connor regarded the sorrowful attitude of the youthful priest before him, and his eyes lost a shade of their metallic luster. Perhaps the ghosts of long-silenced doubts that had lived in his own sympathetic and ardent youth appeared to him—the spring-time of his religious faith, when he, too, as the young priest before him, could still hold the church, with her temples of stone, her jewels, marble altars, gorgeous robes, vessels of gold and silver-plate, waxen candles, and all the pomp of worship, separate from his God.

Vaguely the ecclesiastic remembered his earlier and purer love for this insatiate, voluptuous Hydra. Verily, the centuries have given birth to a third daughter of the horse leach, and she ever cries, "Give, give."

But the prelate had grown to love this luxurious rival of the Master. He arose from his seat resolved to push this wavering atom into the mass. Feeling satisfied that in time it would merge into and become one with the grand and brilliant whole.

"Forgive me, my dear young friend, if in my zeal and loyalty to the cause, I have spoken harshly. Go to your home. Unlock the temple of the Lord which His august command has given unto you to keep holy. Kneel before the sacred altar and throw open to Him the dark recesses of your heart. Be assured, that He will find the darkness with His holy light and all the wretched monsters who live and revel in that darkness, will flee." And he held out his firm white hand. Fabio took the offered hand, over which the velvet glove had again been drawn, but there was no warm, forgiving clasp; simply the deferential, faint pressure due his superior and host on taking his departure from his house. Then, with a coldly polite "good-night, your grace," Father Fabio went out into the night.

The archbishop increased the light of the reading lamp and passed in review the book-lined sides of the long room, in search of some book to read away the hours till he had a mind to sleep. He glanced listlessly over the labored works of theologians and rows of sober brown volumes whose enfolded pages discolored cold, scientific subjects. Books of travel and biography met with no greater favor. At last he paused before a case of folios, whose rich red and gold exteriors, like the heavy-lidded eyes and scarlet lips of a woman of pleasure, gave promise of yielding a fascinating, unprofitable and too often cloying sweetness. His grace selected a volume of Anacreon poetry and tossed the breviary aside to give it place on the table. Then, unlocking a cabinet, he took from one of its compartments a bottle and a glass. Filling the glass with a portion of the amber-hued fluid which the bottle held, he carried it carefully to the table and placed it beside the book. The sound of distant foot-steps broke the silence. He hastened to the cabinet, re-locked it, and stepped quickly to the closed door to listen. The foot-steps died away.

Thank Heaven he was not disturbed—the priests attached to the cathedral opposite were going to their rooms.

Throwing himself at full length upon the couch, and with his senses lulled into accord with the voluptuous theme of the poet by occasional slow sips of the fragrant wine—the one thing made by man which old time has made a favored darling of—Archbishop O'Connor read away the early hours of the night, and Father St. John, the young son of the church who would ask troublesome questions, walked rapidly to his home, and exchanged his street attire for a

black robe, unlocked a small door in the rear of the church; entering, he fastened the door securely and lit a taper on the altar of Mary. Prostrating himself on the cold, polished floor, he prayed in anguish of heart, even as the Son of the real Mary prayed, when He asked: "If possible, let this cup pass from me."

Man created the church, clothed her in scarlet and jewels, and exalted her above all things. Her priests are sworn to sacrifice life, and what the uninitiated would in their blindness deem a sacrifice of honor, if need be, and she demanded it. Father Fabio must drink of the cup. The midnight stillness of the church was broken by the heavy gasping sobs of mental anguish from the black-robed figure prostrate before the altar of Mary. For one hour, Fabio St. John prayed to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost; and the virgin and all the saints to give him spiritual strength to do the right; prayed that the bright sun of faith might burst through the clouds of doubt that hung over him.

At length he arose, crossed himself, and knelt a few minutes before the high altar, the sacred altar where he had celebrated the sacrifice of the mass, and in his religious ecstasy, had been unconscious of his material body, and had communed in spirit with the saints in glory.

Tonight, as he prayed, something of this feeling had come to him, and he felt the presence of the "Lord in His Holy Temple"; yes, the church was the stronghold of the Lord, the fold where the sheep of the Master were to be tended and fed till He demanded them. And should he, a trusted shepherd, throw down the crook and say:

"I will not reclaim this sheep who has strayed from the fold, because she has found rest in a beautiful valley, and the wolf may not disturb her at night-fall. And in my endeavor to bring her back, I shall surely tear her delicate fleece and perhaps wound her tender body. No; he had pledged himself a shepherd of the Lord, and when He demanded of him His flock, he would have no idle excuse to offer for not bringing back the straying one. Torn fleece will grow again and bruised flesh will heal. But he who lives in a fool's paradise, will die in a wise man's hell." Thus soliloquized Father Fabio in the temple of the Lord. Firmly resolved to do his avowed, priestly duty, he extinguished the tapers and left the church.

CHAPTER XII. WEAVING THE NET.

Miss Dillon had recovered her health, and apparently her sickness, and the priest's visit had left no imprint on two of the family; however, the episode had left a secret mark.

Visions of a golden rose plucked by the papal hand from the luxuriant garden of the church, and bestowed upon her with his blessing for services done his great cause, filled the sleeping and waking hours of Miss Dillon. No poet ever wore his wreath of laurel with such pride as a Roman Catholic this golden papal flower. Thus, for the one the priest had left the promise of the blooming of a flower of imperishable beauty, while into the very mouth of the other, he had thrust a sprig of worm-wood. But the rose and the worm-wood both grew in the garden of the church. Several weeks had gone by since the visit of the priest to the home of Senator Maxwell. The senator had made a flying visit to his home at Christmas time and had observed nothing unusual in the manner of his wife, whose first impulse had been to tell her husband of the visit of the priest, and the occasion of it, and all that visit had been to her. But intuition told her that her husband, not recognizing the prerogative of priests, would chide her for confiding to a stranger the details of their troubled courtship, and her husband's visit was short and sweet, and she hesitated to say that which she knew would embitter it.

Martha had noticed a certain change in her sister-in-law, but attributing it to her condition, had passed it by, as a matter of course.

Father St. John sworn to do his duty, waited a space of time; then, one afternoon, called at the Maxwell mansion, ostensibly to see Miss Dillon. On his way through the grounds, he met Miss Martha and her niece, who were going out for exercise and pleasure. The young priest touched his hat to Martha, who bowed stiffly in return. But the child, who had often met Father Fabio when out with her governess, ran to him and extended her hand.

The priest exchanged a few words of pleasantry with the little girl, as he held her dainty little gloved fingers, and as the child hurried after her aunt, he turned and looked after her and thought: "It were indeed a work well done, if I can train this bright young creature in the true faith." Yes; he now felt the end would justify the means. The lovely mother and her children must be brought within the pale of the church. Miss Dillon had seen the approach of the priest from a window, so opened the door with her own hand ere he could ring for admittance. She ushered him into a little ante-room and after a few minutes of conversation, she left the room and glided swiftly up the stair-case to the rooms of her employer, knocking at the door. It was opened by the maid whom

she had disturbed in the act of brushing her mistress's hair, and who stood before the half-open door, hair brush in hand, with a stony look upon her face, for Miss Dillon was disliked by all of the servants of Mrs. Maxwell's household, partly on principle, she being in position of governess and companion, neither lady nor servant. Miss Dillon smiled sweetly and glided through the half open door with the undulating motion of a snake, and with an apology for her untimely intrusion, stood before her unsuspecting victim, who sat enveloped in heavy masses of her hair.

In a very matter-of-fact tone, she informed Mrs. Maxwell that Father Fabio, paying a visit to herself to learn if she had entirely recovered her health and spirits, had mentioned that he had very recently received news from Spain. "It did not wait to learn what its nature might be," she added, smilingly, "feeling certain, my dear Mrs. Maxwell, that you would like to see Father St. John yourself, and hear from your dear romantic home by word of mouth."

Mrs. Maxwell flushed hotly and a refusal to see the priest on any pretext rose to her lips.

Miss Dillon moved a step nearer, and fastened her yellow eyes on the face of her mistress, and in a low soft voice said: "Let me fasten your hair, Senora." (Miss Dillon knew very little Spanish and used that little to advantage sometimes.) "I am glad of a chance to handle it," and her white fingers, with light, mesmeric touch, arranged the masses of hair into a coil; and keeping one hand on Mrs. Maxwell's forehead, she reached with the other to the dressing-table, and selected a high carved comb. As she fastened it in its place, she said, still in a low, purring tone:

"Ah, Senora mia, this head was indeed intended to wear the graceful mantilla. By the way, how deeply the Spanish mother of St. John instilled in his mind a love for Spain." Then to the maid: "Anna, I will no longer usurp your rights. So dress your mistress as quickly as you can."

Like a stone image stood Anna, ignoring the governess.

Mrs. Maxwell arose and said: "Bring me my house dress, Anna, and Dora, please tell Father St. John I will see him at once."

When the door closed after the governess, Mrs. Maxwell stood in reflective silence, while her maid assisted her to change her attire. She did not want to see this priest again. Her native land had not been so kind to her that she should greatly wish to hear of it, or of these with whom it was connected. Indeed, her sweetest memories of Granada were the hours she had passed there with her lover, who was now her husband. And joyfully had she left that land of poetry and passion, of which today she was about to hear. Then, why should she see this priest? What was the something which was stealing over her hitherto cloudless domestic life? Why did that black-eyed priest who had spoken to her words of awful import, haunt her? Whose image was before her, and whose words were burning in her brain, as her maid brushed her hair? And to the evil spirit had materialized and she was going direct to his hateful presence. This hall Spanish priest had made the first rift in the lute. The sweet music of her domestic life had a horrid discord to it. Would it become more and more discordant and then forever mute? She shuddered; superstitions inborn in generations upon generations, may be dormant, quiescent, in many lives, if happily they never come in contact with some congenial element and are revived into intense life; so what wonder this young, finely organized and sensitive lady who had been born and reared in the faith, should feel its presence awakening within her, by the subtle medicines administered by those pledged to keep alive and to revivify the germs of the belief they made their life study.

Mrs. Maxwell resolved to see this priest, and tell him plainly that she would abide the consequences of her own acts, strong in the support of her husband.

After Mrs. Maxwell had left the room, Anna sat down with her mistress's cast off dress on her lap, and exclaimed: "There's somebody rotten in the state of Denmark, and it's my opinion it's Miss Dillon."

A quick knock at the door interrupted her soliloquy, and before she was fairly on her feet, Miss Martha entered the room.

"Well, Anna, I was sure I heard some one talking, but you seem to be alone."

"Yes, Miss; but I always have my thoughts and I sometimes talk aloud to them."

"H'm!" said Miss Martha, a little severely. "I am inclined to think your practice is a good one. Gives you a better idea of their propriety. But where is Mrs. Maxwell?"

"In the reception room, ma'am, with a Catholic priest, which I suppose is her affair, not mine."

"You never said a truer word, Anna." Then, as her dislike of Roman priests was greater than her dislike of gossiping with servants, she said:

"Do you happen to know, Anna, if the priest came to see your mistress, or the governess?"

"Well, ma'am, since you ask me, I will say it's my opinion that he came to see Mrs. Maxwell over Miss Dillon's shoulder. You may be sure a Catholic priest never comes into a house like this without an object. If the governess had been his object, he would not have hatched up a yarn about having news from Spain, to entice Mrs. Maxwell to see him. It's no use, Miss Martha, it's on my mind, and I must out with it. I pass a good many hours with your sister-in-law in the privacy of her chamber, and I see her when it is not needful for her to keep up appearances, and I know that ever since that yellow-eyed cat of a governess was sick that day and Father what-do-you-call-him got into the house and had speech with Mrs. Maxwell, she has been a changed woman. It's my humble opinion that it was a put-up job, Miss, too, as things is turning out."

"I verily believe it was," said Martha, as she sank in a chair. This plain-spoken, humble-tiring woman, though she was, had confirmed suspicions which had been troubling her own mind ever since she had encountered the priest on his first visitation, suspicions which had caused her to forego her walk and hasten back to the house. But she said to the maid: "Anna, you are aware of the condition of your mistress. Her low spirits at times are but natural; and after all, you know her belief is the same as Miss Dillon's."

"Miss Martha, excuse me, but I have been maid to your sister-in-law through two trials, and if anything, she is more serene and happy at those times. As to her being of Miss Dillon's persuasion, I never gave it thought, by any outward sign she gave. If she had any of it in her, you may be sure it was all but dead till that female Jesuit got into the house. And what's more, I happened into the nursery the other day, and there sat Miss Jeannie telling her prayers on a string of beads."

Miss Martha arose from her chair with horror depicted on her face.

"I thought the nurse was a Protestant, Anna."

"So is she, ma'am; least way she is not a R man. But Jeannie, you know, is under the direct management of the governess, and the nurse being young and rather flighty, pays little attention to such things as that. I simply told her that idiots acted like that and passed on about my business."

Then Miss Martha, standing tall and severe, said in impressive tones:

"Anna, I hate the principle of outsiders concerning themselves with the private affairs of families with whom they may be sojourning. Still, in this case, I feel that the Lord will be with us. My brother's wife must not be caught in the toils of the scarlet woman. You, Anna, as you love your mistress, must help me to keep the beast from devouring her and her innocent children." And Miss Martha extended her hand toward the girl who clasped it with error. Thus, these two women, honest in purpose, and pure in heart, and as bigoted in their non-Catholicism as the Catholics they so hated, who, like all bigots could see no atom of good in a creed they were prejudiced against, made this solemn compact to circumvent, with the Lord's help, whom they firmly believed knew not a papist—the enemy each saw invading the home each in her particular sphere called for a time her own.

With a gloomy brow, Miss Martha went to her own room to meditate and pray, and her humble ally proceeded to arrange her mistress's belongings.

St. John, left alone in the large room with its magnificent appointments, sank wearily into the nearest chair, and his thoughts grew bitter. "Why am I selected from all the army of priests who would be more than glad to perform this service for the church?"

After a while he arose for the purpose of calming his rebellious thoughts and walked to where a large oil painting representing an oriental feast of flowers, hung.

He was listlessly gazing at its varied features, when a light rustle near him, made him start.

Mrs. Maxwell stood before him pale and calm, with extended hand. He took the offered hand, bowed politely over it, and inquired after her health.

"I am in my usual state of health, Father St. John, mentally and physically."

And, gracefully seating herself, she, with a gesture, invited the priest to also be seated. Father St. John was not deceived. The slight emphasis she had placed on the word "mentally," together with the defiant look in her eyes, told him that the germ he had planted had developed into active life. But he gave no sign. He artfully commenced his conversation on the current topics of the day. Insensibly, his at first cold listener grew interested, and drawn out of herself, by the handsome, magnetic presence of the young priest, who claimed her friendship on the ground of nationality. Before an hour had passed by, Mrs. Maxwell with the glamour of the religion of her youth, and of generations of ancestors upon her, sat drinking in the sophistries of the priest before her. By degrees, and very carefully, he told her of the sad death-bed of the abbess; how she had declared that her soul would find no rest till the young girl entrusted to her care, which trust she had betrayed, was back in the true path. And the father who had

confessed her was firm in his belief that his absolution of the dying abbess was void in the sight of God. The sin of the abbess was unpardonable until the evil should be in a measure eradicated. Father St. John had become in his half-forced zeal to do his duty to the cause, eloquent and overwhelming in his arguments. Mrs. Maxwell, pale and tearful in contention for her sin—standing black and hideous row before her—brought his intercession to the most Most High for her forgiveness.

"And, oh Father, intercede for the unhappy spirit of the abbess. It seems as if my careless words of anger to her that night in the convent garden were a fatal prophecy, and I were destined to be the cause of her undoing."

The priest raised the weeping woman, placed her in a chair and stood before her.

"My dear daughter," he said in low, earnest tones: "Remember, the gates of Paradise opened to the out-cast Peri when she brought to the angel at the gate the tear of a repentant sinner. Oh, Senora Querida, come back body and soul into the blessed sanctuary, and bring with you to their eternal salvation the innocent little ones the great Father has given unto you. And your beloved husband, Senora, husband also, only in the eyes of the world" (Father St. John's voice faltered at these words), "surely he will consent to have your pledged vows sanctified in the sight of Heaven."

Mrs. Maxwell arose from her chair, unable to speak.

"Oh, Father Fabio, this will be the hardest trial of all. My husband will never consent to have our marriage, which is legal and honorable among men, renewed by a marriage service read over us by a priest of any faith, certainly not by one of ours."

"My daughter, trust me; the Lord will give you grace to overcome this difficulty. Come next Thursday to the confessional. There lay bare your inmost soul to God. If you are truly repentant, he will grant you absolution for the past and give you grace for the great work of redemption before you."

(To be Continued.)

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