

CONVENT OF THE SACRED HEART.

WRITTEN BY HENRY STYLER FOR THE PROGRESSIVE READER.

CHAPTER IX.

Sunday morning broke over the world in its glory. The bells of the churches called their worshippers, and thousands with light hearts and joyous countenances wended the streets to unite at the shrines consecrated to their respective beliefs. Within the walls of the Sacred Heart, worship had become reduced to the business of life, and the observance of forms and ceremonies the occupation, even to meanness, to an intolerable enmity, a burden and a penance of itself.

The sisters gathered in the dimly lighted chapel. They were depressed by the dissipation of the preceding evening, and many had reproving compunctions of conscience which the assurances of the priests could not remove. Zeld had a bosom friend, a confidante, as far as that were possible amid such restraining influences. It was a foolish thing to do, to confide in this friend, the good Sister Hildah, but there are times when to share a grief with another casts off a part of the burden, and sympathy is sweet for the soul. There are times when we must have a comforter. After the light was extinguished in the dormitory, Zeld had stepped to Hildah's cot, which was side by side with hers, and putting her arms around her neck, had whispered to her the thing which had happened and the terrible consequences she feared. "If the bishop absolved you, you have naught to fear, for there is no higher authority," was the assuring response. Perhaps Zeld, of all the sisters that morning assembled, was the only one who feared punishment. The others argued that as the priests participated, and were primarily the cause, and had repeatedly granted pardons, the matter would not be referred to. They were miserably mistaken. The face of the superior was dark as a storm-cloud, and they saw that evil portended.

"Have you questioned your consciences?" she asked in a reproving and exultant voice. "Do you find no cause for reproof in the outrageous proceedings of last evening?"

There was a painful silence—every one, as it were, holding their breath in their suspense.

"I knew you would blame the priests," she continued, "but know you the priests must never be censured. You tempted them, as Eve tempted Adam and brought sin and death into the world. She was punished, just as you will be punished, and I am thankful God has given me the power to inflict such chastisement on you now as will save you from years in purgatory. Sister Eudocia, as hitherto the most exemplary, I begin with you; and for the sake of Jesus you will have the cap, and then be retired to a cell, with one loaf of bread a day, until I release or further punish you. May you pray unceasingly, and find forgiveness."

The cheeks of Eudocia whitened, and she remained motionless, her fingers clutching her beads. The superior then called ten sisters by name, who for the next month were to kneel on pens, during services, and wear pens in their shoes. She mentioned ten more who were to be subjected to the gag every morning for a month, and if they resisted, a month for each resistance.

She paused and glowered on the shrinking sisterhood, helpless as lambs in the hands of the butcher. Were the vials of her wrath spent? Far from it, for she had reserved until the last the essence of her cruelty. The pause was to emphasize the coming sentence.

Here, however, a new element was unexpectedly introduced. Sister Hildah arose. She had given her oath to reveal to the superior all secrets entrusted to her. Would she betray her friend, or forfeit her oath? Religion had so warned and blighted her sense of right and justice that she had yielded, and now arose to betray the most sacred obligation.

"I have questioned my conscience, Mother Superior," she said slowly, gasping for breath, such was her constraint, "and find that I have committed sin. I have listened to Sister Stantia, who told me that the bishop sought to kiss her and she struck him!" An awful silence reigned. The superior was too surprised to reply. She now had cause, plain to all, for making the penance of unheard-of severity. She arose majestically and exclaimed:

"It is well, Sister Hildah, that you have relieved your mind. Such a secret kept would have sank you to the lowest hell. You do not wish me, I am sure, not to give you penance. You will have only bread for the month, and for drink I will give you the water of my bath. Blessed for its especial holiness, it may cleanse you of sin."

"Sister Stantia, arise!" The trembling girl could not do so; the scene before her grew dark and whirled around until she clutched the seat to prevent falling.

"You cannot stand under the load of your sins? I am not surprised. You have been convicted of lying—and more, against a priest—worse, a thousand times worse—against the bishop. The Devil only could have invented this falsehood. The father of lies, only, could speak thus of God's blessed

one. You have tried; you have sought to injure the church; and have rebelled against Jesus Christ, and even the Virgin Mary, his blessed mother, will wrathfully resent that insult. You sought to be burned! I will reserve the full measure of my sentence until consultation. At present you will be confined in a cell. You will receive daily a wafer and a glass of water. No one must speak to you. You must speak to no one. On Sundays you will be allowed to come to the chapel. You must kiss the floor as you enter. You will prostrate yourself before me, and lick the dust from my shoes. Then you will retire to your cell, for the prayers the sisters repeat are too holy for lips like yours."

The fearful conditions of this sentence were its unlimited time, and the impending greater punishment which might at any time be expected. The superior was irresponsible, uncontrollable, and the thick walls and barred doors allowed none of the deeds of infamy to be revealed. "After the hour of dinner, there will be a season of atonement in the chapel," summoned the superior. That was the euphonious manner of speaking of the execution of the imposed sentence. Rome, when she summoned a heretic to the flames, softly said there "should be no shedding of blood!"

There was no necessity of the rule imposing silence, for a shadow rested gloomily on the minds of all those poor sisters, and the lecture droned by the nun was not heard. They arose at the signal and marched into the chapel. The sentences were to follow in the order received, and two sisters were to "seize Eudocia and drag her before the judgment seat." It is strange to record—it will test the credulity of the reader, and yet it is true, that these sisters, so loving, refined and gentle, had become so degraded by their religious belief and training—I will not say education—that they arose with the alacrity of furies, seized the unresisting girl, and literally dragged her to a seat in front of the platform on which the superior sat. At a sign another sister brought the cap. It was made of heavy leather, shaped like the crown of the head, and thickly set on the inner surface with needle points. As the sisters' hair is cut short, the cap fits closely, and is drawn tight by a strap under the chin. It is a horrible punishment and quickly grows unendurable. While the two sisters held Eudocia's arms, the other adjusted the cap, and drew the strap with all her strength. A moan of anguish escaped the victim.

"The gag," called the superior, greatly enjoying the scene. A gag was brought, an iron bar with rings at each end having straps which, when the bar was placed in the mouth, could be buckled back with a force sufficient to dislocate the jaw. The sister roughly forced the bar into Eudocia's mouth, and drew up the straps until the blood oozing from the corners of the quivering lips trickled down to her chin, and dropped on her bosom. Human nature could not endure this terrible pain, and the victim suffered from convulsions and happily became unconscious. Then the instruments were removed, and the sister executioners taking her up in her chair carried her down into the cellar and left her on the floor of the cell assigned her, to recover as she might.

"May this be a lesson to you," said the superior. "Sister Stantia, stand before me, and kiss the floor in token of obedience."

Zeld was unable to arise; her physical powers utterly failed under the strain imposed on her. The sisters each side of her carried her to the place designated, and losing their grasp she sank to the floor. "Carry her to her cell," the superior harshly commanded, and the sisters again grasping her arms, carried or rather dragged her away. With a fierce glance at the ten sisters sentenced to the gag, she said: "There will be interesting exercises for you tomorrow morning. Let us invoke the presence of the Holy Master, and recollect that it is inflicted for your good, out of the full heart of the Blessed Jesus."

The reader may turn with disgust from these pages and exclaim: "Such horrible things should not be described, if they are true; and if not, the fancy should not be allowed indulgence. Quite true. I agree that such detail are horrible, that they tax credulity to the utmost. At the same time they are true, and for that reason there is a necessity of presenting the facts with all the vivid words can portray. The disclosures that have been made have been ignored. The press subsidized; or for fear of Catholic influence has cast obloquy on those nuns and priests who have dared to tell a part of the dreadful story. The half cannot be told. Imagine the other half, which the writer has not described, because too shocking for expression."

CHAPTER X. The month's sentence had nearly expired, yet no appeal for mercy had been made or respite given. The superior was sitting in her room in close conversation with the bishop, presumably on matters pertaining to the welfare of the church; but really on a subject of more personal interest.

"You gave her severe penance," queried the bishop.

"Most severe; enough to break the proudest spirit."

"And do you note any yielding? Is she more tractable to discipline?"

"Not at all. She will die before she yields. I give her a wafer a day. Slender diet—ha! ha! ha!—slender diet yet there are days she does not touch the wafer, even."

"Well, if she die, we shall have a martyr who died imitating the forty days' fast of the Blessed Jesus. We will canonize her, St. Stantia of the Sacred Heart! That sounds well, and will make the name of the convent famous."

"You ridicule," said the superior, deprecatingly.

"Not at all. But, dear Mother, do not be too severe. Do not go too far. I cannot lose the game now, after all the trouble I have taken."

The conversation was here interrupted by the entrance of Frantz. After salutations he said: "I have been absent in the mountains and that is why I have not come before. I have a desire to see Sister Eudocia, and do not find her with the others."

"Most unfortunately for you," replied the superior, sweetly; "the sister Eudocia this morning came to me and said she had been sinning in thought—a remarkably conscientious sister she is—and desired my permission to pass the day in a cell by herself, without interruption."

"I will be no intruder to her. I must see her."

"You would not be so rude as to break over a lady's express command, I trust, Father Frantz?" sweetly asked the superior.

"That would depend upon the urgency. Tell me where she is."

"Nay, if you do not know the rules of politeness, I will teach you."

"Tell me, or I will search for her."

"Search, if you please. She is beyond your finding," replied the superior, defiantly.

The keen wit of Frantz told him that defeat was in that direction. With the tact of a diplomat he replied:

"Very well, tomorrow will do. I stand corrected by your judgment, as usual. I will come tomorrow; and say to Eudocia, I grant her pardon for all sins committed, and there must be no penance for the day."

"Now you are a gentleman," said the superior, approvingly. "I will inform the fair devotee."

As the door closed on Frantz, she burst out with uncontrolled laughter: "Was not that adroit? I threw him off completely. Yet tomorrow," she added thoughtfully—"tomorrow—well, that may be trusted to bring its own apology."

Frantz was not satisfied, yet there was no means of gaining information. To question the sisters was useless, for they would not dare confide in him, even had they not received instructions from the superior. He moodily walked up and down the hall between the rooms, and after a time went into the sitting-room where the sisters were sewing. He glanced over the busy groups, silently making various articles for the fair soon to be held. Eudocia not being there, the place had no attraction, and its busy life was barren and lonely. He went out and began his walk in the passage. Suddenly there was confusion in the room he had left. The rules against conversation were defied by a bedlam of voices, and soon some sisters came bearing the seemingly lifeless form of Hildah to the dormitory. They told him she had been so reduced by the imposed penance that she had fainted. It was an occurrence too common to create more than a passing interest. The Sister Hildah might live or die—life was not valuable to the nuns, who saw release and heaven in death. Soon a novice came and told him that the sister was sick unto death, and wished to see him. It was his duty to visit the dying and receive confessions and prepare them for the next life. He repaired to the couch where the sister was lying. Her voice was scarcely audible, and he bent low that he might catch every sound. Then she told him that she was famishing; that she loathed the bread and could not drink the water in which the superior bathed her feet. Oh! for a glass of water," she cried.

"You shall have it, all you want," replied Frantz. He gave her a brimming cup, which she drank eagerly and was revived. Then she related how she had betrayed Zeld, because her sense of duty compelled her to do so, and all the dreadful events of that day of punishment. Frantz during the recital was silent, but his strong form writhed with suppressed emotion, and there was a dangerous gleam in his eyes. He must be calm. If he rescued Eudocia his thoughts and designs must be concealed.

"Where is Eudocia now?" he inquired.

"She and Zeld are in the cells in the cellar. You cannot see them, for the doors have not been opened since they were locked on them, and there is only a small aperture where their food and drink is handed to them."

He groaned at this revelation of the suffering of one dearer than life to him.

"Have I sinned in confessing this? Did I not sin in betraying Zeld?"

"Sister, I cannot tell! The church and human nature are in conflict. I am—nay, my sister you have not sinned. Forget and be forgiven. Never do the

like again. Stand by your own sense of right."

"I am better. I thought I was surely dying."

"I will speak to the superior about your condition and have her supply you with better food."

"No! It will cause her to add new penances. I will throw away pride and plead for myself."

"May heaven preserve you," feelingly exclaimed Frantz, as he withdrew. Unexpectedly he had learned the wish for secret, and was wrought to madness by what he had heard. Never would he leave the convent until he had spoken with Eudocia. Why should he not go to the cellar? The superior was engaged; the sisters busy; the old nuns usually on watch in the passage were absent. A priest was privileged, and would pass unquestioned. He walked down the passage to the stairs, and descended into the cellar. The light was dim, and objects not readily distinguishable. He came to a series of doors, belonging to apartments partitioned off from the cellar by walls. There was a litter of straw in front. The door had a small, grated aperture. God in Heaven! Had they thrown his Eudocia into that kennel? He called low at the grate: "Eudocia!"

There came a groan in response. He called again.

"I am not Eudocia, but for God's sake let me breathe the air once more; the free, free air, only for an hour, one hour, and I will willingly die!"

"Who are you?" asked Frantz.

"I have forgotten. I think they called me Francis. I do not know. I am lost here; my name is lost. The rats gnaw my hair when I lie down; they bite my feet when I stand. Oh! if you have a spark of pity, let me be free for one hour, and then kill me!"

The noble soul of Frantz rebelled against such cruelty, but he was powerless. A word of objection would be reported, and he condemned for a heretic; that would be the result, and no change, no good to the sufferers.

With a feeling of self-reproach he passed by the cell, the inmate of which still implored. The darkness was dense, and his lamp burned dimly in the damp air. He looked cautiously around. He was in a narrow passage, which entered through an archway a large chamber. The ground was white, and he saw a large pile of this white substance beneath a barrel opening in the wall, through which it had been through. In the center of this vaulted chamber was a pit, the bottom of which was not visible by the light of the lamp. He comprehended it all. He had heard of this Gehenna, this place of dead bones, before, but its locality had been a secret unknown to him. In that convent, with its hundreds of inmates, if a member died, there was no physician called to give a certificate. No inquest was held, no public services. Unknown they lived, unknown they died. They might be buried in the convent yard, if desirable; they might be thrown into this pit if it were more desirable that identity be utterly lost. Two spades stood there, thrust into the white pile of quicklime, ready for use. There was evidence that the lime had been recently disturbed. What member of the community had died? He had heard of no death occurring. Perhaps—horror—perhaps an infant! Once he had been called to baptize a babe in those walls; baptized that its soul might be saved. It was not seen again. Thrown into that pit with lime, the body would melt, and identity be lost. Why did they not throw the nuns confined in the cells at once into this pit, instead of burying them alive? The dead suffer not, and the fiendish hate of the zealot could not satiate itself. The mortal agony is ever held in reserve, if the victim lives. There are the limitless possibilities of pain, which the tyrant holds in his hand, and death loosens his grasp. If the grave be hell, as it has sometimes been translated, this pit, bottomless in the darkness of its yearning depths, was its true type. What misery, what suffering, physical and spiritual! What agony of heart! What wreck of hope and fond illusions! What ending of religious dreams and ideal fancies had gone in common wreck into this yawning depth! All gone, melted into white dust, and not even the simple slab of stone, on which the hand of love had written a name, remained. The infant, thrust into life by infamy, and out of life by a crime against nature; the mother who, by following the example of the woman whom they worshipped as divine, became offensive to those who brought her ruin; the nun who protested against a course of life opposed to every instinct of purity and religion; the priest who entertained heretical ideas, resolved to lime, left no record, and were as effectually blotted out as the sponge wipes off the figures from the slate.

Frantz turned shudderingly away. He saw there his doom if he failed in his enterprise. If he failed, Eudocia would find there a rest from torture. Not thrown in there alive? No! for there is less trouble in the coward's weapon of poison, and there is more pain to the victim.

He retrace his steps with increasing fear, for discovery now had a new meaning. It was in the dead hour of the night, when sleep rests heaviest on the eyelids. His fear magnified the danger, and he turned his lamp down until it

scarcely showed the floor of the vault. He came to the side opposite where he entered, and saw a well door similar to the one at which he had called. Just beyond was another, and from the description he thought these must be the ones he sought. He listened attentively, to catch the least sound, but there was silence and darkness, for no one seemed to have remembered that the prisoners were there confined. He called at the aperture of the first he reached, "Eudocia!"

"Oh! Frantz, is that you?" cried the sister. "I thought you had forgotten me."

"Never shall I forget you. I have been away, and by chance learned you were here. The superior told me you had given orders that I should not interrupt your meditations."

"Oh! dear Frantz, can you liberate me? Can we escape? Did any one tell you how I suffered? Can you look in here? See! the floor is the ground, with a little straw; it is wet and cold. The door has not been opened since I was thrown in here. No one has spoken to me. Do you know how long it has been? Dear Frantz, you have not gone?"

"No! no! Yet I cannot stay, for I am in danger of being seen, and your escape depends on secrecy. Have courage a few days more, and I will rescue you from this vile den. Is Sister Stantia in the next cell?"

"I do not know. Is she punished as I am?"

"With equal cruelty."

He stepped to the next aperture and called: "Sister Stantia!"

"Who calls?" asked the sister.

"I, Frantz!"

"Why should you remember me, when every one else has forgotten me?"

"Because I did you a grievous wrong, which before God I vow to make right."

"It is horrible, Father Frantz; not so much this confinement, but at any moment, today or tomorrow I may be subjected to some unmentioned torture. I may be given over body and soul to the bishop, who, I am fully convinced, sought from the first to drag me to ruin."

"If Eudocia escapes you shall go with her! I give you my sacred vow, and it shall be as soon as possible!"

"I will hope! I will pray!" she said fervently.

"Is it Zeld?" whispered Eudocia.

"Yes."

"Tell her that the letter the superior gave her as from her father was a forgery dictated by herself, and give her this the real letter, which I preserved. The letter was transferred to Zeld, and he held his lamp at the aperture while she read. When she had finished, not daring to stay longer, with the assurance that he would return and liberate them, Frantz bade good-by. He little

comprehended the effect the letter he carelessly gave her would have on Zeld. The reader has already read that letter which she now slowly spelled. Finishing it, she sank on the damp earth of her cell with a sense of regret and loss irreparable. Her eyes were dry and burning. Her head throbbled and her heart seemed choking her. The falsehood and deception of those whom she had trusted was revealed to her. Her father and mother, how they must have suffered, and she, a helpless instrument of torture, wounding them to death. Kenneth, too, had he learned her weakness and scorned her as she deserved? He said he would wait a year; the year was nearly past! He could not come, for he knew not where she was. If he did, would he come? The tears came, like rain extinguishing a consuming fire—tears that prevent the heart from consuming itself. She wept and moaned until nature, touched by pity, gave her the anodyne of sleep.

(To be Continued.)

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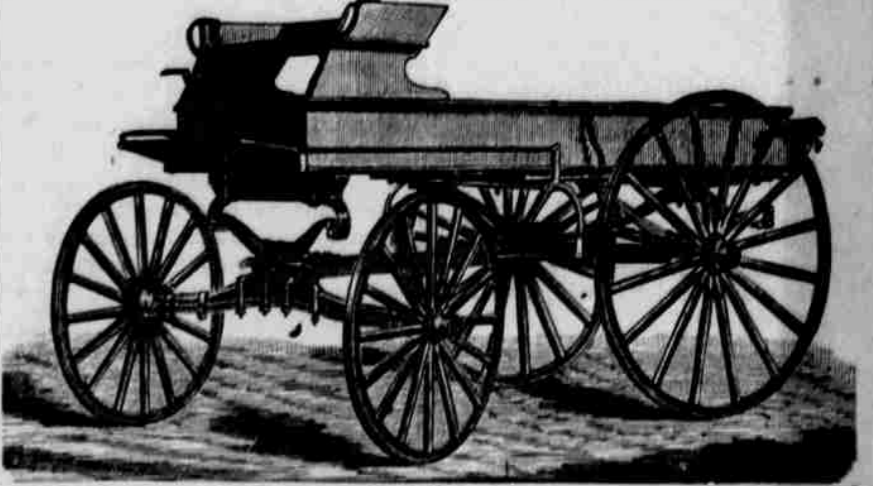


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