

An Episode of Convent Life.

Translated from the French by Rev. M. J. P. Tiney, A. M.

CHAPTER X.

THE SUFFERINGS OF CLARISSE.

"The father coughed several times while I spoke, but I would not permit him to interrupt me. I felt impelled to continue, and I made him understand all I thought of the pretensions of the apostate church. "If I would repeat here what he said to me I should pronounce the most terrible imprecations that ever fell upon my ears. Here is one of his phrases on anathema: "Cursed be those who enter into the fold in sheep's clothing, biting in secret like serpents, and trying thus to destroy the whole flock! "All this is the work of that apostate Mary Barthelmy. May her soul and body be tormented in eternal flame! May she be strangled in the smoke and fire! As to you—miserable apostate, adulteress, infidel, how dare you listen to the blasphemous by which the queen of Heaven has been abused, her glory insulted and her immortal prerogatives denied? Retract, retract this instant, or by the holy mother of God, I will deliver you without relief to the torments which will fasten upon you until you shall wish to be no more among the living, and you shall curse the father who was the author of your being! "I made no response to these maledictions; but I trembled so violently that I was scarcely able to maintain myself. "You are silent," said the father; "why do you not speak?" "I have nothing to respond, my father," I replied, "except that Mme. Barthelmy has never tried to interfere in my religious opinions, and has never said a word to me about them." "The father had recovered a little of his self possession. He had taken his seat in the confessional, and he gave attention to my words. He evidently regretted having been so violent, and his manners said that he would wish to have me forget his severity sufficiently to be led to confess the means and the causes of my changed views. "If Mary Barthelmy has not poisoned your principles, my daughter, who has done it? What means have been employed to deprive you thus of all faith and all hope?" "I have no human master, my father," I replied; "I have told you what I believe. It is because I have been divinely enlightened by the Word of God, and that the truths that I have drawn from it have not been and never will be revealed either by flesh or by blood. "Let us examine what you have said," continued the father. "If you comprehend well, your principles are founded upon certain doctrines which, if they are received, will open the door to all sorts of horrors and abominations." "I do not understand, my father," I said. "He then told me that the principles to which he made allusion were those of predestination and election, by which the doctrine of good works would be placed to one side and all sorts of evil permitted. "Or I ask you," said he, "who would be able to believe a Holy Ghost would accord His grace to men who hate His laws or make no account of those who are devoted to His service?" "I understand," said I, "that those predestined to a good life are also predestined to good works." "Truly!" he cried, "and what is your authority?" "The Bible," replied I, repeating the words of St. Paul; "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: It is the gift of God: not by any works lest any man should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath ordained that we should walk in them.—Eph. 2: 8-10." "The Bible!" repeated he. "From whence have you this knowledge of the Bible?" "My father," said I, "I have already told you that I have been taught of God." "Truly!" replied he with irony. "At least there is something singular in this kind of instruction! But are you not able to deceive yourself? I have heard tell of diabolical inspirations, as well as divine. But let us return to the question. Hear what our holy mother church says on the subject of good works: "Jesus has said that our good works are of such great value that we are able by them to merit the kingdom of Heaven." "I knew that it was a quotation from the Theological Catechism of the Jesuits, and I replied: "How then is our Savior able to say that when we have done all that is commanded us, we are only useless servants?" "His response was this: "The deduction is not good, since the sense of the words of our Lord is such, that it would seem to be true that we are obliged to do all the good possible, even if we should recompense,

but God is so good a master that He has promised to pay us for our services, if they are faithful, by an eternal recompense." [Theological Catechism of the Jesuits.] "But," I replied, "according to your own arguments, my father, the recompense is due to the goodness of God, and not to our own merits, so the opinions of all humble minds are agreed upon the same point—that salvation is a gift, and that divine favor must be accorded to man before that any good work is possible for him." "Truly," replied the father, "the devil has inspired you with as much of his infernal wisdom as ever a heretic possessed." "And again he made use of violent expressions, finishing by asking me if what I had told him should rest under the seal of confession, or if I wished Madame to know it as well. "For you know, my daughter, that the confessor is not permitted to repeat what he hears in the confessional." "You are free, my father," said I, "to repeat what has passed between us. My principles must be known, sooner or later, in the whole house; and I know that I must prepare myself for all the consequences of my change." "I do not recall the remainder of the conversation; I only remember that the father left me after having tried to restore me by his threats. Immediately after I was called into the presence of the superior. She was seated upon a large gold embroidered chair, in the grand hall, having Mother Ursula upon her right and Sister Annunciata upon the left. It would be tiresome to repeat all that passed between Madame and myself during this interview. In fact, that would not now be possible; but I shall never forget the horror and astonishment which those ladies manifested when I declared to them my firm persuasion was that faith is able to have no other objects than those revealed in the Holy Scriptures. They became so irritated that each time I attempted to speak Mother Ursula and the superior stopped me—ordering me to keep to myself those frightful blasphemies. Finally they spoke of punishments, and the fasts and penitences were the gentlest of all the things with which they threatened me. "During all this time Sister Annunciata had not breathed a word; she remained mute and solemn by the side of the Madame. At length, profiting by a moment of silence, she suggested that it would be well perhaps to inquire by what means I had acquired the knowledge of those heretical principles that I had drawn from the Holy Scriptures in distorting and falsifying them from their proper sense. "It is impossible that she could procure a Bible in this house," said Mother Ursula. "But by Mme. Barthelmy," again suggested Annunciata. "Let that be taken care of later!" cried the superior. "We will search her cell and her person; we cannot trust her word. But we can ask her." "And then, looking me full in the face, she said: "Clarisse, I command you, in the name of all that you hold most sacred, to tell me if you possess a Bible." "I remember that at this question I shot a glance at Annunciata which made her change color; but I responded to Madame's questions: "My word will not suffice you any longer, my mother. Let it be done as Annunciata has proposed, that there be a search everywhere. If the Holy Volume is found in my possession, they will learn from whence I have drawn the principles that have made me what I am." "Annunciata bit her lips and her beautiful black eyes shot out lightning glances. I was at the same time warned by the inward monitor that is more penetrating than a two edged sword, that in my response to Madame I had departed from that gentleness that ought to distinguish a child of God. "I felt constrained to throw myself upon my knees before her to whom I had been lacking in respect, ask her pardon, and promise to be more obedient to her in all things which were not forbidden by an authority higher than her own. I told her further that I would serve the sisters as a domestic; that I would support, with God's help, all the penitence she might inflict, provided that she would permit me to refrain from following the form of worship that my conscience prevented me approving. "The poor woman was moved while I remained kneeling before her. I saw a tear glitter in her eye; but it vanished soon, and since then I have never seen, for a single moment, in the expression of her face, a mark of tenderness for her whom she had formerly loved so tenderly and dearly. "Do you try to place conditions upon me, miserable heretic?" cried she. "Arise! go! Nothing will deliver you except a total retraction of all your cursed principles." "Saying these words she lifted me to my feet, and commanded those who were present to carefully search my cell and person to find the interdicted volume. "Ah, but I was happy since I had hidden my dear little Bible! The joy that I experienced in it diminished greatly my grief and fright, and after

I had been minutely searched, Mother Ursula looked me in my cell and carried away the key, and then went to play with the abbess upon the measures to be taken in respect to me. "All these events took place during the novitiate of Sister Madeline, and some days before Sister Honorine took the black veil; that was doubtless the reason they used so much of gentleness towards me, hoping that there would be no need of speaking of my heresy to the bishop. To my great astonishment I was given my liberty, after having passed some hours shut up in my cell, but they forbade me strictly to have any communication with the sisters, and I received the order to submit to different penitences in the private chapel of the abbess during the services of the choir. "I was not a little surprised at this gentleness so unexpected; but they warned me at the same time that I would be carefully watched, and subjected to severe punishments, if I tried to have the least relations with the sisters. "I received with gratitude this mark of the goodness of the Lord. I was soon aware that they had me under careful surveillance, and the penitences that they inflicted upon me were such as I then called severe, for they often commanded me to watch nearly all night before the statue of the virgin in the chapel of the abbess. But in the disposition of mind in which I was, I regarded it as an immense favor to be delivered from the services of the choir, and to be left to my reflection and to that communion with God which became each day more sweet by the inward teaching and consolation of the Holy Spirit. And what pleasure would have been mine if I had dared to pass my solitary hours in reading the Holy Word! but I felt that it would be too great a risk to draw my treasure from its hiding place at such a moment. "Such was my situation when Honorine took the black veil; but the day after this event Mother Ursula came and commanded me on the part of the abbess to descend to the chapel and to follow the services of the choir as formerly; holding for certain, said she, that I was now a good Catholic, as the penitences that had been inflicted upon me had accomplished their work and attained the proposed object. This order threw me into great anguish, for I had never yet examined as to what point I ought to obey the rules of the house. With what joy I would have then escaped from the convent! But I was shut in behind barriers of iron and strictly watched. "When she gave me the command message, I responded: "You know, venerable mother, that my principles forbid my conforming to the obedience that the church exacts. But all bonds are the same to me. God is everywhere, and His ear is always open to me; so when I am kneeling in the choir I am able to address my prayers as sincerely to Him as when I am under the arch of heaven. I do not refuse then to obey the abbess in descending to the chapel; but I will not open my mouth in any of the services which the church commands. Understand well, my mother," I continued, as she wished to speak, "I have been divinely led to consider that whatever be the change which has been produced in my religious opinions, as long as Madame is the superior of this house, I feel that I ought to obey her in everything which accords with my most sacred duties and my inestimable privileges; and as I hold as insignificant all the forms which do not form a part of idolatrous worship, I am ready to do as many things as Madame shall think best." "Mother Ursula was a little deaf; she made me repeat all that I had said catching only the word idolatrous, and asking me what I meant by it. "What I wish to say is this, the Scriptures declare that there is only one name under heaven by which man can be saved. I am then forced to regard as idolatrous all worship that does not have God alone for its object; so, with the help of God, I will suffer death sooner than to adore a created being, or any symbol whatever that may be. I adore only the Savior." "At this declaration Mother Ursula seemed to lose all command of herself. Raising her voice, she poured out against me a torrent of insults and the expressions, "accursed," "daughter of Satan," that she pronounced in a loud voice, brought Sister Annunciata. "Mother," said she, "the ears of the holy sisters ought never to be soiled by a controversy such as that you have had with this— She hesitated, not knowing by what term to designate me; but closing the door behind her, she demanded what had passed. Mother Ursula answered that I had declared as idolatrous all worship given to any name save that of the Son of God. "The superior asks for you, my mother," replied Annunciata; "leave me with this apostate. I know how it is necessary to deal with her; and remember, this is never to be known to the other sisters, who are as yet obedient to our holy mother." "Mother Ursula left my cell, murmuring some word between her teeth, and I found myself alone with her who had been formerly my dearest and most precious friend. "She was standing before me, cold

and pale as a marble Madonna; and if any expression could be seen upon her face it was that of hate and aversion. But in spite of that, as I recalled our former friendship, I felt moved, and I said to her: "Dear sister, you will not excite against me, I am sure of it, a severity that should be avoided. Plead for me before you hear me condemned, and let me hope, at least, that I shall always possess your sympathy. "Unconsciously, while speaking to her, I had approached her, but she recoiled, and with an inexpressible air of hatred which curled her upper lip, she made me remove myself from her, and demanded coldly what had been the subject of my conversation with Mother Ursula. "You can easily divine it, Annunciata," said I. "I am able to understand that the penitences inflicted by the church have not produced the effect we hoped." "If you hope," said I, "that solitude and long fasts— "And many prayers," said she. "And many prayers," said I, "for I thank God that He has made me capable of praying—would restore my mind to the state where it was when I took the veil, I must confess to you freely that there is no possibility of it; on the contrary, reflection has always proved to me that the Scriptures are the only source of living water, and that human traditions only darken and finally put out the light of truth." "You think yourself, then, wiser than all the saints, the martyrs, the apostles and pious men who have lived before us?" "Let us reason," said I. "First, I remark that I do not give any weight to my own judgment, when I remember that the revelation of God is the only rule of our life, and that which does not come from it ought never to be received as an article of faith. "This people approach me with their lips," says the eternal; "but their hearts are far from me. But they honor me in vain, teaching the commandments of men." It is the prophet Esaias who says this." "I see that you know the Scriptures. Let me ask you how you acquired that knowledge?" "I repeat what I have already said. It is God that has taught me." "By a miracle? By some divine light poured out upon what you have read? But to the point—I pray you, what do you mean in saying that it is God?" "To pretend that I had been enlightened by celestial light without some sensible means would have been untrue. I was filled with embarrassment. To elude the question, I observed that all hearts were in the hands of God, who was able, without human aid, to place there what He would." "You talk then, of a miracle," replied Annunciata. "I believe," said I, "that the work by which a heart that was dead in sins becomes living before God is always a miracle accomplished by a celestial power." "Nobody doubts that," said she; "but I believe you refuse to the church the power of doing miracles." "I think," said I, "that in the actual state of things, God does not manifest Himself in the church by any supernatural manner." "And yet you pretend to have received, by some divine influence, not only the knowledge of spiritual things, but that even of terrestrial things. I will not deny that the hermit in his desert cell is able to receive divine communication, but as to the letter of the Scriptures, it is a natural thing and something to be acquired by human means. If, then, Clarisse, you have obtained the knowledge without human aid, it is a miracle more wonderful than any by which the church is glorified." "Permit me, my sister, to answer you by a question: What has made you think that I have denied reading the Bible? Do you not believe that the Scriptures alone have taught me the arguments that I have employed?" "Then, carried away by an excuse of tenderness, I cried: "O Annunciata! friend of my first years, would that I were able to open to you my heart and plead before you the cause of eternal truth, that truth which has enlightened my soul, and scattered all its superstitions and fears which frightened me in respect to the future, and sustains me in the present evils! Oh how happy I am in possessing in me the true peace and eternal life!" "You use equivocation as to the question that I have often asked. Tell me, is it, yes or no, the reading of the Holy Scriptures that has produced this change in your principles?" "If my principles accord with the Scriptures, I am not a heretic; and if they are contrary to the words of truth, how could the reading of them have produced the change?" "One can err more easily in giving a false sense to the Scriptures, than those who do not read them? Hence the directors of our holy church deny the Bible to the people, and they do well. They explain them from the altar; they teach them in the catechism; they are meditated upon each day in passages selected by the abbess; what more could you wish? Your pretention to think and judge for yourself, is it anything else than to deny the

authority of the church and to declare yourself heretical?" "What do you call the church, I pray you?" "It is the congregation of those who believe in Jesus Christ and who recognize the sovereign pontiff as His vicar." "Who has established it?" "Jesus Christ Himself. The invisible head of this mystical body is Jesus Christ; the visible head is the pope; its members are the faithful." [Theological Catechism of the Jesuits.] (To be Continued.)

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