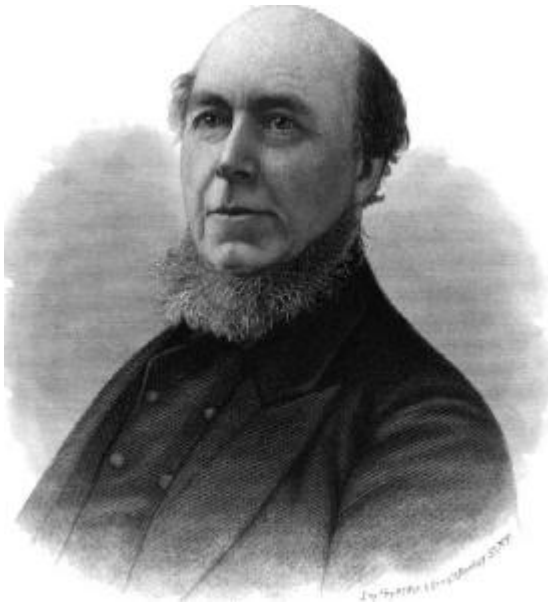


The Priest, Purgatory, and the Poor Widow's Cow



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This was taken from the first part of chapter 5 of Fifty Years in the Church of Rome

By Charles Chiniquy.

The day following that of the meeting at which Mr. Tache had given his reasons for boasting that he had whipped the priest, I wrote to my mother: "For God's sake, come for me; I can stay here no longer. If you knew what my eyes have seen and my ears have heard for some time past, you would not delay your coming a single day."

Indeed, such was the impression left upon me by that flagellation, and by the speeches which I had heard, that had it not been for the crossing of the St. Lawrence, I would have started for Murray Bay on the day after the secret meeting at which I had heard things that so terribly frightened me. How I regretted the happy and peaceful days spent with my mother in reading the beautiful chapters of the Bible, so well chosen by her to instruct and interest me! What a difference there was between our conversations after these readings, and the conversations I heard at St. Thomas!

Happily my parents' desire to see me again was as great as mine to go back to them. So that a few weeks later my mother came for me. She pressed me to her heart, and brought me back to the arms of my father.

I arrived at home on the 17th of July, 1821, and spent the afternoon and evening till late by my father's side. With what pleasure did he see me working difficult problems in algebra, and even in geometry! for under my teacher, Mr. Jones, I had really made rapid progress in those branches. More than once I noticed tears of joy in my father's eyes when, taking my slate,

he saw that my calculations were correct. He also examined me in grammar. "What an admirable teacher this Mr. Jones must be," he would say, "to have advanced a child so much in the short space of fourteen months!"

How sweet to me, but how short, were those hours of happiness passed between my good mother and my father! We had family worship. I read the fifteenth chapter of Luke, the return of the prodigal son. My mother then sang a hymn of joy and gratitude, and I went to bed with my heart full of happiness to take the sweetest sleep of my life. But, O God! what an awful awakening Thou hadst prepared for me!

About four o'clock in the morning heartrending screams fell upon my ear. I recognized my mother's voice.

"What is the matter, dear mother?"

"Oh, my dear child, you have no more a father! He is dead!"

In saying these words she lost consciousness and fell on the floor!

While a friend who had passed the night with us gave her proper care, I hastened to my father's bed. I pressed him to my heart, I kissed him, I covered him with my tears, I moved his head, I pressed his hands, I tried to lift him up on his pillow: I could not believe that he was dead! It seemed to me that even if dead he would come back to life that God could not thus take my father away from me at the very moment when I had come back to him after so long an absence! I knelt to pray to God for the life of my father. But my tears and cries were useless. He was dead! He was already cold as ice!

Two days after he was buried. My mother was so overwhelmed with grief that she could not follow the funeral procession. I remained with her as her only earthly support. Poor mother! How many tears thou hast shed! What sobs came from thine afflicted heart in those days of supreme grief!

Though I was very young, I could understand the greatness of our loss, and I mingled my tears with those of my mother.

What pen can portray what takes place in the heart of a woman when God takes suddenly her husband away in the prime of his life, and leaves her alone, plunged in misery, with three small children, two of whom are even too young to know their loss! How long are the hours of the day for the poor widow who is left alone, and without means, among strangers! How painful the sleepless night to the heart which has lost everything! How empty a house is left by the eternal absence of him who was its master, support, and father! Every object in the house and every step she takes remind her of her loss and sinks the sword deeper which pierces her heart. Oh, how bitter are the tears which flow from her eyes when her youngest child, who as yet does not understand the mystery of death, throws himself into her arms and says: "Mamma, where is papa? Why does he not come back? I am lonely!"

My poor mother passed through those heartrending trials. I heard her sobs during the long hours of the day, and also during the longer hours of the night. Many times I have seen her fall upon her knees to implore God to be

merciful to her and to her three unhappy orphans. I could do nothing then to comfort her, but love her, pray and weep with her!

Only a few days had elapsed after the burial of my father when I saw Mr. Courtois, the parish priest, coming to our house (he who had tried to take away our Bible from us). He had the reputation of being rich, and as we were poor and unhappy since my father's death, my first thought was that he had come to comfort and to help us. I could see that my mother had the same hopes. She welcomed him as an angel from heaven. The least gleam of hope is so sweet to one who is unhappy!

From his very first words, however, I could see that our hopes were not to be realized. He tried to be sympathetic, and even said something about the confidence that we should have in God, especially in times of trial; but his words were cold and dry.

Turning to me, he said:

"Do you continue to read the Bible, my little boy?"

"Yes, sir," answered I, with a voice trembling with anxiety, for I feared that he would make another effort to take away that treasure, and I had no longer a father to defend it.

Then, addressing my mother, he said:

"Madam, I told you that it was not right for you or your child to read that book."

My mother cast down her eyes, and answered only by the tears which ran down her cheeks.

That question was followed by a long silence, and the priest then continued:

"Madam, there is something due for the prayers which have been sung, and the services which you requested to be offered for the repose of your husband's soul. I will be very much obliged to you if you pay me that little debt."

"Mr. Courtis," answered my mother, "my husband left me nothing but debts. I have only the work of my own hands to procure a living for my three children, the eldest of whom is before you. For these little orphans' sake, if not for mine, do not take from us the little that is left."

"But, madam, you do not reflect. Your husband died suddenly and without any preparation; he is therefore in the flames of purgatory. If you want him to be delivered, you must necessarily unite your personal sacrifices to the prayers of the Church and the masses which we offer."

"As I said, my husband has left me absolutely without means, and it is impossible for me to give you any money," replied my mother.

"But, madam, your husband was for a long time the only notary of Mal Bay. He surely must have made much money. I can scarcely think that he has left you

without any means to help him now that his desolation and sufferings are far greater than yours.”

“My husband did indeed coin much money, but he spent still more. Thanks to God, we have not been in want while he lived. But lately he got this house built, and what is still due on it makes me fear that I will lose it. He also bought a piece of land not long ago, only half of which is paid and I will, therefore, probably not be able to keep it. Hence I may soon, with my poor orphans, be deprived of everything that is left us. In the meantime I hope, sir, that you are not a man to take away from us our last piece of bread.”

“But, madam, the masses offered for the rest of your husband’s soul must be paid for,” answered the priest.

My mother covered her face with her handkerchief and wept.

As for me, I did not mingle my tears with hers this time. My feelings were not those of grief, but of anger and unspeakable horror. My eyes were fixed on the face of that man who tortured my mother’s heart. I looked with tearless eyes upon the man who added to my mother’s anguish, and made her weep more bitterly than ever. My hands were clenched, as if ready to strike. All my muscles trembled; my teeth chattered as if from intense cold. My greatest sorrow was my weakness in the presence of that big man, and my not being able to send him away from our house, and driving him far away from my mother.

I felt inclined to say to him: “Are you not ashamed, you who are so rich, to come to take away the last piece of bread from our mouths?” But my physical and moral strength were not sufficient to accomplish the task before me, and I was filled with regret and disappointment.

After a long silence, my mother raised her eyes, reddened with tears, towards the priest and said:

“Sir, you see that cow in the meadow, not far from our house? Her milk and the butter made from it form the principal part of my children’s food. I hope you will not take her away from us. If, however, such a sacrifice must be made to deliver my poor husband’s soul from purgatory, take her as payment of the masses to be offered to extinguish those devouring flames.”

The priest instantly arose, saying, “Very well, madam,” and went out.

Our eyes anxiously followed him; but instead of walking towards the little gate which was in front of the house, he directed his steps towards the meadow, and drove the cow before him in the direction of his home.

At that sight I screamed with despair: “Oh, my mother! he is taking our cow away! What will become of us?”

Lord Nairn had given us that splendid cow when it was three months old. Her mother had been brought from Scotland, and belonged to one of the best breeds of that country. I fed her with my own hands, and had often shared my bread with her. I loved her as a child always loves an animal which he has brought

up himself. She seemed to understand and love me also. From whatever distance she could see me, she would run to me to receive my caresses, and whatever else I might have to give her. My mother herself milked her; and her rich milk was such delicious and substantial food for us.

My mother also cried out with grief as she saw the priest taking away the only means heaven had left her to feed her children.

Throwing myself into her arms, I asked her: "Why have you given away our cow? What will become of us? We shall surely die of hunger?"

"Dear child," she answered. "I did not think the priest would be so cruel as to take away the last resource which God had left us. Ah! if I had believed him to be so unmerciful I would never have spoken to him as I did. As you say, my dear child, what will become of us? But have you not often read to me in your Bible that God is the Father of the widow and the orphan? We shall pray to that God who is willing to be your father and mine: He will listen to us, and see our tears. Let us kneel down and ask Him to be merciful to us, and to give us back the support which the priest deprived us."

We both knelt down. She took my right hand with her left, and, lifting the other hand towards heaven, she offered a prayer to the God of mercies for her poor children such as I have never since heard. Her words were often choked by her sobs. But when she could not speak with her voice, she spoke with her burning eyes raised to heaven, and with her hand uplifted. I also prayed to God with her, and repeated her words, which were broken by my sobs.

When her prayer was ended she remained for a long time pale and trembling. Cold sweat was flowing on her face, and she fell on the floor. I thought she was going to die. I ran for cold water, which I gave her, saying: "Dear mother! Oh, do not leave me alone upon earth!" After drinking a few drops she felt better, and taking my hand, she put it to her trembling lips; then drawing me near her, and pressing me to her bosom, she said: "Dear child, if ever you become a priest, I ask of you never to be so hard-hearted towards poor widows as are the priests of today." When she said these words, I felt her burning tears falling upon my cheek.

The memory of these tears has never left me. I felt them constantly during the twenty-five years I spent in preaching the inconceivable superstitions of Rome.