

SISTER CAMILLUS GOES TO JAIL

By ALOYSIUS ROCHE.

Nuns, after all, are but mortals like the rest of us, warmed and cooled by the same summer and winter. And thanks be to God for it, say I.

Sister Camillus was no exception; and so it did not surprise me when, during the annual Retreat, she knocked at the door of my room and shuffled in, as she said, just to have a bit of a chat. Old? Oh, yes, she was old, but with the sort of age that neither withers or makes stale; one of those antiques, in fact, that remain works of art no matter how long ago they were fashioned. There was nothing "dated" about her beyond the knack she had of repeating herself and a certain mild contempt for the ways and manners of today. Her face was a regular mosaic of good-humoured wrinkles, revolving round a nose the skin of which had the deceptive transparency of alabaster.

Of this and that we talked; and in between our exchanges, I fell to contrasting the lot of these religious women with that of their kith and kin in the passion-tossed world outside. The words of some poet or other echoed in my brain:

One crowded hour of glorious life

Is worth an age without a name.

But, thought I, as for Sister Camillus, no ripple has ever disturbed the tranquillity of that placid lake.

"Sixty years professed! Is it possible?"

"Yes, I entered when I was sixteen."

And so she went on, all about this nun and that, and Father X, and the time the Bishop turned up when he was not expected and the fine way Reverend Mother was in for days later. It was a trifle monotonous, after the fashion of a landscape devoid of features; and, growing restive, I broke in at last,

"And has nothing *exciting* ever happened to you?"

At the question, a change came over the furrowed features of Sister Camillus. She seemed to shake off the drowsiness of her near eighty years and to become assertive and lively. The very tones of her voice were altered.

"Has anything ever happened to me? Anything exciting? Yes, Father. Yes, indeed."

And then she braced herself like one accepting a challenge.

"Would you call knocking a policeman down exciting?"

"You did that?"

"Every bit of it; and with a feather, you might almost say."

"And you a nun at the time?"

"To be sure," she replied, as though that was what nuns were for.

"Anything else?"

"Oh, yes. Plenty. The policeman was only a tit-bit. I stole a couple of loaves of bread, round about the same time."

"Great Scott! You'll be telling me next that you've been in prison."

"So I have; habit and veil and all."

"Right in?"

"As far in as ever the worst criminal can go.

"You're joking."

"I'm doing nothing of the kind." And she laughed but sobered abruptly while the tears came into her eyes. "There were more trifles of that kind, all part of the one story. Maybe you would like me to tell you about it."

"I would indeed."

And so, indeed, she did.

I

“I had a turn for nursing,” she began, “from the time I was quite a child; and it was that, after the grace of God, that brought me into the convent. Our Order hadn’t been long started; in fact, the Foundress was still hale and hearty. As you know, her great ambition was to get together a body of women who would consecrate their nursing talents to the service of the very poor, for whom, at that date, little or nothing was ever done. That appealed to me and I entered, did my training and was professed. Fine, too, it all was, I must admit, although the work was heart-breaking. You see, there was no public opinion in the matter, or none to speak of. The gentry seemed to think that death was the best thing that could happen to the people in the slums, and that the sooner it happened the better. But, as you know, Father, Death has a rival in that same quarter, a rival in the shape of Birth, an obstinate and powerful one; so that all the epidemics and diseases made hardly any difference at all. I was attached to a small convent in Nottingham at first; and, few though we were, we managed to do quite a lot of good. Through the clergy we got in touch with such of our poor Catholics as were laid low, and we played the part of district nurses, visiting their miserable dwellings. We got them on to their feet sometimes; but, mostly, it was little more we could do than surround their last hours with some sort of decency, and help them to resign themselves to the holy will of God.

“As I hope to be saved, I can remember the beginning of it all as though it were the week before last. I was in our little chapel at the time, when the Superior looked in the door and brought me out with a beck of one of her fingers. She was a great one for flicking that same finger of hers, and sometimes the flick meant trouble for one or other of us. I was lucky this day, however, for, as soon as she had me in her room, she rattled out her orders.

“‘Sister.’ says she, ‘there’s a bad case of fever down in Moulsham Street, at number 74—74 remember. It’s a small box and it’s a Protestant family, or rather I should say a non-Catholic family. The mother is ailing herself, and the father is God knows where and has been for years. You’ll have to live in and it will be a matter of six weeks. You know what that means?’”

“As it happened I knew only too well what it meant was that for a month and a half I should have never a taste of Mass, Church or Meeting. I was to be cut off, isolated in a house no better than a pig-sty and in a neighbourhood that the very police kept out of as much as they dared. It was a fine prospect, and my first sensation was to wonder what I had been doing at all that the Lord should want to drive me out of His presence, like He whipped the auctioneers, or whatever they were, out of the Temple. Still, thinks I to myself, God’s grace is everywhere and it’s not for me to complain to One Who, at times, hadn’t a roof over His own head except the stark, chill stars. Besides, I knew—none better—that the Superior never would ask one of us to do anything that she herself was not prepared to do, and gladly, and had in fact done more than once before. Yes, they were hard times, those we lived in, I tell you; but then we that lived in them were harder still. Sure, nowadays, if you were to ask a young nun of twenty to post a letter at the end of the street, she would up and say, ‘And may I have a penny for the tram, please, Mother?’”

“In less than an hour, I was on my way with my bag in my hand which the Superior packed for me—medicines, books, linen, all complete. And, do you know, as I left the chapel after saying my *au revoir*, and was trudging down the street, I had a feeling in all my bones that I was wading out or going out into deep water.”

“Were you worried?”

“Worried is it! Not I. Believe me, in those days the novitiate *was* a novitiate; and when you came through it, if you ever did, you were fit to stand up to Beelzebub, the Prince of Devils.

“Well, to make a short pair of shoes out of a long, I found Number 74 all right and the poor boy that was sick in it. Far gone he was, too, and for days I had small hopes of him. His mother was soon up and about, but she was delicate and, instead of helping, she had to be helped herself, the creature. There was only one bedroom between the three of us, and the mother and I took turn about at having a few hours’ sleep. The neighbours below were ready to do anything short of putting their noses up the flight of stairs. When this or that was wanted, I passed the word over the banisters and one or other of them would be off to the convent to fetch it along. A strange life! But whether it was the devil tempting me or the Almighty making it up to me, believe me or not, after the first few days I began to enjoy it. Whatever else it might be, it

was the tide of life and no mistake, and, brought up by the sea as I had been, I could well remember how glorious it was once you got used to the twinges of the cold water. And, of course, my name was a great support. I felt that I hadn't been called Camillus for nothing..... there was a nurse for you, a life-long martyr himself, yet crawling from his bed to visit the hovels of the sick. And our Order, although not actually vowed to tend the plague-stricken, is half pledged to do it; and sure, that's the same thing."

I was on the point of intervening here, in order to correct this item, and, incidentally, allow my theological learning to take the air, but Sister Camillus once started was not to be stopped.

"As I was saying, it was a grand experience while it lasted. It was my first trial of this sort of thing, for, up to then, my patients, if they were mostly working folk, at any rate were living in fairly good surroundings. This, however, was a proper initiation and made me realize how imperfect were my sympathy and compassion for Christ's suffering members.

"For the first few days and nights I could hardly put up with it. I could endure being shut in and confined to one place, for I was used to that; but what I found most trying were the bad air and the noise—especially the noise. I have heard tell of people drowning their troubles in drink, but I think the poor drown theirs in uproar and commotion. In that street, from early morning till long after midnight, something was going on—the screaming of children, the brawling of housewives, the barking of dogs. Even the ordinary good-natured talk that passed from door to door across the narrow street was like the rattle of machine guns. Many a time, I imagined that there must be murder going on, only to find that it was just Mr. Somebody-or-Other inquiring how Mrs. So-and-So's sick husband was getting on. I do believe that the drums of my ears have never been the same since. And, above it all, a round score—or so it seemed to me—were selling this or that at the top of their voices, and another score singing songs and playing cornets for a living. But, praise be to God, I remained sane and got the better of my nerves. The next thing I noticed was that I was being shaken out of one or two of my favourite notions."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Father, that the likes of you and me are apt to fancy that all the virtues are safely locked up in our sacristies and cloisters. But, do you know, I soon found out that one or two of these same virtues manage to break out and get into places like Moulsham Street, virtues that take us all our time to practise—humility and tolerance and detachment, aye, and temperance as well. In my younger days, when I had just my few ounces for breakfast, I was fit to be tied until dinnertime came. 'Don't talk to me when you know I'm fasting'—that's the kind of thing I mean. But I soon got to know that nearly all the breakfasts at Number 74 were fasting breakfasts. And it was all accepted as a matter of course—the hunger, the cold, the noise, the bad air, everything. No doubt it's all on the natural level, more's the pity. If God could be brought into it, the likes of them would be fit for canonization. And their patiences! It is easy enough to be brave for a few hours, or for a day or a week; but here was a life-long courage that endured in the face of hindrance and handicaps without number."

"Did the boy recover?"

"Yes, I managed to pull him through, with a bit of help from the Almighty, of course. Before long I had him up and sitting at the window."

"What about the policeman you knocked down? You said that he was part of the story, I believe."

"Oh, he was. It happened one Saturday night late. There was a terrible fight down in the street below, and Johnny and I—Johnny was my little boy, you must know—Johnny and I were standing at the window looking at it by the light of the street lamp that was fixed to the wall just above the door of the house we were in. A great brute of a man was thrashing his wife. Aye! and she was thrashing him too, it is only fair to say. When I could stand it no longer I decided to take the risk and go down and give them a piece of my mind. Down I went, then, and opened the door. In the meantime, our friend the policeman must have arrived on the scene Unknown to me, for as soon as I stepped out into the strong light, there he was not more than a couple of yards away. He must have been a nervous man, for at sight of me in my blue habit and white veil, he staggered back and tripped up and toppled over into the roadway with his legs in the air. By the time he was on his feet again, the street was as clean as if it had been swept with a hard brush. I was not too far wrong, you see, when I said that I knocked him down with a feather."

“And the loaves you stole?” was my next question.

“Ah, that was nothing at all. We ran out of bread one morning with nobody to fetch it for us, and when I spied the baker’s basket set down on the kerb, with no baker to be seen, I helped myself and poor Johnny. I was not supposed to hand out money or anything else for fear of the contagion. But we settled with the baker later on. . . . Have you had enough of an old woman’s croaking?”

When I answered, somewhat untruthfully, that I was prepared to listen until midnight, she blinked at me through her watering eyes, and settled down to chapter two.

II

“Yes, I pulled him through. It was touch and go, and before I left I told him so in hopes that he might remember to thank God. I kept clear of Catholic matters, for that’s our rule; but I showed his mother a miraculous medal I had, and asked if she would like me to leave it with Johnny as a keepsake. She made no objection to that, I need hardly say; and so I put it about Johnny’s neck and told him not to forget his prayers if it happened that he was in trouble. The night before I left there was a tea-party in the street with all the neighbours bringing something, and the tables and chairs set out on the pavement in front of the door. From what I hear a change has come over the people within the last few years. They have been got at in this way and that, and are poorer than ever, with some of their best treasures taken from them. No doubt, it’s just the way the world goes round. If you get one thing you lose another. But I’m sorry for it all the same.

“It was with a sad heart that I came away from Number 74, I can tell you. I left Nottingham soon after and went first here and then there, with plenty of work to do and plenty of strange faces to see. I’m not going to pretend that I remembered Johnny every morning after, for that would be a lie. He went clean out of my head. ‘The woman remembers, the man forgets.’ So they say. You’ll learn how much truth there is in that before I’m done with you. They say, too, that forty is the dangerous age, but I don’t believe that either, for I was well past forty when I had to fight the biggest temptation that ever came to me in my whole life.”

“You wanted to go back to the world, I suppose?”

“No, just the opposite. I wanted to sit tight in my snug little cell, when there was God’s hand beckoning to me to come out into the same wicked world and do something for Him. And during the hours of one sleepless night I fought against His will with my two fists tightly clenched.

“I was stationed down south when the call came, at our lead house I may say, and you will never guess where I was asked to go this time. Well, it was to the ——— Prison, and it was the Governor, no less, that wanted to see me and on most urgent business besides. You may be sure our Superior hummed and hawed over this; but she got in touch with Archbishops House, and word was sent that I was to go. And I went that very day, with another Sister to keep an eye on me and see that I came back. It was a fine place entirely, and if we had been royalty itself we couldn’t have been better treated. From first to last it was, ‘Will you please step this way, Sister?’ ‘Take a chair, Sister,’ and all the rest of it. Presently in comes the Governor and, by way of breaking it gently, I suppose, he beat about the bush for quite a while. But he made the pair of us sit up straight enough when he asked if I had been doing work amongst the poor in Nottingham twenty-five years ago. My first thought was: Dear God! this is the policeman I knocked down and he’s been promoted since.

“And was it?”

“Not at all. He next wanted to know if I could remember nursing a small boy of the name of Cheetham who was laid up with fever.

“‘I do indeed,’ says I, ‘Johnny was his name, Johnny Cheetham, sure enough.’ ‘Well,’ says the Governor, ‘we have Johnny in here at the moment and he has asked to see you, to see Sister Camillus, the nun who saved his life when he was a lad.’ And do you know, Father, what with all the hub-hub there had been, at that I broke down altogether. I couldn’t help it. There’s not much gratitude about anyway, and I was touched to the quick to think that this heathen had never forgotten the little bit of kindness I was able to do for him. Still, I covered it all up as well as I could, and when I had dried my eyes,

says I, 'Johnny has been getting into trouble then, I suppose.' 'He has, indeed,' says the Governor, into great trouble.' And then, it turned out that my poor boy was what they call a bad prisoner, which meant that he would let nobody next or near him to give him a bit of religious consolation. Things had gone on like this from day to day until the Governor, who was a good, conscientious man himself, made one last despairing effort to bring the lad to his senses. He told him that it was a shocking thing for anyone to harbour such bad dispositions, or something to that effect. And he ended up by asking if there was anyone, anywhere, any relation, any friend, whom he would be willing to see. 'For if there is,' says the Governor, 'you've only to tell me and I'll move heaven and earth to bring such a person to you.' Or words to that effect. And then, it seems, Johnny showed signs of being shaken out of the dreadful hardness of heart that was upon him. He considered for a long time and ended by blurting out something about a nun who had saved his life when he was a boy in Nottingham, a nursing Sister of some sort who lived in a convent up there and had given him a medal when she went away. 'If you can find that Sister,' says he, 'I'll see her but I'll see nobody else.' After that, of course, the Governor questioned him closely, found out the Sister's name and a few other details, and then off he went to set the telephone bells ringing. The Nottingham police went to our convent there and traced me to my new address, and that brought upon my two shoulders the heaviest cross that the Lord ever laid upon them."

"Did you see the prisoner?"

"Not that day; for if there was one thing I felt sure of at the time it was that His Holiness himself would never bring me to do it. My one thought was to get out of the place and get home, and like lightning wouldn't be too quick for me."

"And you refused?"

"No, I was too sly for that. What I said was that such a thing could not be done without the Superior's permission, and she would have to ask the Provincial, and she would have to ask the Archbishop. I forgot the Pope, for the time being, or I might have brought him into the permissions as well. With that we came away. Outside I felt safe; and I thought I was safe for good and all, only I wasn't.

"You see, I knew that the Order couldn't force me to do a thing like that; it's not in the contract. That's where I had them and that's why I felt safe. But I forgot the kind of Master that we had to deal with. When all was told, the Superior said, what I knew she would say, that the thing was in my own hands and that even if I wanted to go she had no power to let me. There was never a wink of sleep for me that night, and it wasn't until nearly morning that I found out what was the matter with me. I was paying the penalty of those who refuse to take up their cross. Or rather, I had exchanged one cross for another—a cross of wood for a cross of lead. The other cross was my own cowardice. It was that that was tormenting me and, at last, I had to give in."

"You went after all?"

"I went after all and of my own accord with all permissions given and taken. I went with an easy mind. My little battle had been fought and won; and, as before in Nottingham, I had the wild feeling that I was wading into the tide of life. I went, and I went again and again. I was forced to it by the great pity that was in my heart. Aye, and there was more than 'pity for,' believe me. Father, I felt as though Johnny was my own flesh and blood. We women, you see, are made that way to our sorrow as well as to our joy. But I was well rewarded, thanks be to God."

III.

At this point the Sister's tears began to flow in earnest, and I was at a loss to understand why so much emotion had been expended on the hum-drum business of visiting a convict—and "as being expended now, even, some forty years after the event. I was at a loss and yet not quite at a loss either, for surely—so I mused—agitations are none the less agitations for all that they entwine themselves around insignificant things. The heartrending is whatsoever rends the heart, and the size of the instrument has nothing to do with it. To that extent, a child agonizing over a broken doll is as much a figure of tragedy as was Hamlet or King Lear. Still, none of this glib philosophy of mine could quite keep down my impatience. With a faint touch of sarcasm, I observed that it was a small matter to make a fuss of, since the members of the Prisoners' Aid Society did this sort of thing regularly and thought nothing about it.

“Yes, of course. That’s what I kept telling myself at the time. And if Johnny had been an ordinary case of thieving or the like, sure I’d have gone to him without any trouble at all.”

“What *was* he in for, by the way?”

“He was in for murder.”

“For murder?”

“Yes, for murder. He had been tried and found guilty and was to be executed in three days’ time. And he wanted to see me. When the Governor told me that, I felt a sudden chill at my heart as though it had been stabbed with an icicle. Every drop of blood in my veins seemed to run cold. It was the usual story, I need hardly say. It has often puzzled me greatly to know how men and women can manage to love and hate one another at the same time. They do manage, somehow. Human nature’s a strange, weird thing, with dark corners in it that take a deal of exploring. But, of course, I was ignorant of the why and the wherefore of the crime until later. At the time I speak of, I knew only this, that somewhere in that very building my poor boy was alone with his sentence and his sorrow, waiting for the fatal day and meanwhile the sun was shining away outside as though there was no sin at all in the wide, wide world. But I went to him in the end, as I say. One bad night and trouble was over. After my Mass and Communion, a kind of calm brightness seemed to shine upon me such as falls from the sky at dawn. I went the same forenoon, for, as I say, he had only three short days left.”

“He made a good end?”

“I hope I may make as good. I never knew the strength of God’s mercy until I saw it pick Johnny up as you might a crumb from the table. I used to wonder what peace of mind there ever could be for those who killed a fellow-creature. But that problem was solved for Johnny. He was made to feel that the divine forgiveness includes the human. I began by teaching him, but it ended with his teaching me. I tell you, I could almost feel the presence of God in his soul. And the chaplain as good as said the same.”

“He had the Catholic chaplain, then?”

“To be sure. When I was done with him I turned him over to Canon ——. He baptized him and had him confirmed and all the rest. And, of course, he was beside him at the last.”

“You were spared that much at any rate.

“I don’t know about spared. I was so worked up in the finish that I felt equal to standing on the drop beside him. You wouldn’t believe the miracles the Lord performed during those few days. And while they lasted, I lived through a long life-time of suspense which made me realize what Johnny’s must be. His, I believe, was sweetened for him by the resignation which faith had planted in his heart. But mine was like the aching of a tooth which gave me hardly any peace by day or by night. There were times when I could have cried out against the slowness of the passing hours, for my one anxiety was that the fatal morning might come and find Johnny’s resolution unshaken. What kept me up was a conviction I had that we were linked together in some mysterious way, and that his perseverance depended on my own. Something came to life in me that was only half alive before; the realization of the current circulating here below that makes us all branches of the same tree. And along with this, there grew in me the feeling that never again could I be indifferent to the misfortune of anyone, that wherever the cross was I must be there too.”

While Sister Camillus paused to compose herself there floated before my mind a vivid picture of these two, the nun and the malefactor, whom providence had brought together, awaiting with passionate eagerness, though under different aspects, the same tragic event; she in the peace of a convent dedicated to expiation, and he in that gaunt penitentiary also dedicated to expiation. And it appeared to me that, at that moment, I had a clearer understanding than ever of the literal meaning of such words as sympathy, compassion and the Communion of Saints. For here, surely, was a veritable partnership in distress, a heroism of charity that made the anguish of the unfortunate prisoner bone of her bone and sinew of her sinew, after the pattern of Christ, Who truly bore our infirmities and carried our griefs. Outside the swallows flitted to and fro, their wings and tails gleaming in the sun that was shining away, as Sister said, as though there was no sin or sorrow in the whole wide world.

IV.

My reverie was broken by the old nun's voice, calm and subdued by now almost to a whisper.

"Have you ever been in a prison chapel?"

"No, Sister."

"Well, I had the privilege of hearing Mass there on the last morning, a regular church it was, and painted all over with images of Saints known to have been prisoners at one time or another—St. Paul, of course, St. Peter and many more. The Catholic convicts themselves had done the painting. It was a happy thought and, no doubt, helped these poor fellows to understand that however guilty they might be, at any rate the penance they were doing could be sanctified.

"During the celebration, Johnny was out of sight in the little hutch at the side of the sanctuary reserved for the condemned, and the Canon gave him Holy Communion there, with every eye in the chapel turned towards the place, and we all as quiet as the grave. I noted the other convicts as they filed out, and there was sorrow in each face and the light of Christian charity. I wouldn't deny either, that when I climbed the stairs to have my last word with Johnny. I was nervous. One look at him, however, and I was nervous no longer."

"You mean to say you saw him again."

"Why, yes, of course. It was his wish and, by that time, I would have as soon denied my Master as deny poor Johnny."

"Was *he* afraid?"

"Oh, no! He gave me to understand that all the fright in him was used up while he was expecting his reprieve. I'm told that that's the way it is, as a rule. As long as they are hopeful they are terrified, and when the hope goes, the fear goes with it."

"I never knew that before," I said, and as I said it, there took shape in my mind a picture of the condemned man living for two weeks and more like one in a dream, stupified by the terror that was on him and yet buoyed up, too, by the merciful illusion of hope; and, then, when that was taken from him, snatched from despair by the timely comfort and affection of a fellow-creature.

"He was not afraid. His face was bloodless and his eyes shone with a feverish brightness. He was restless, as well, and inclined to be on the move, with an eager defiance about him that, I fancy, a soldier must feel when waiting the signal to go over the top. I don't believe I paid any heed to these things at the time. In fact, when the Superior used to ask me after my visits what Johnny was like, I was never able to tell her."

"And what was he like?"

"He was about as unlike a man that would commit a murder as you are, Father. More unlike, in fact, saving your presence. It was that added to my torment every time I sat beside him and looked into his great, staring, innocent-looking eyes. The first time ever I saw him in the cell, I understood just exactly why the Governor and all concerned were so upset over this case. It's no great matter shooting a mad dog or some wild creature of a cat that's terrifying the neighbourhood; but, if you've ever tried your hand at drowning a weeny bit of a kitten three or four months old, I think you'll know what I've got in mind. If ever the hanging of a man went against natural grain, that man's hanging did. That much I'm sure of. It's my belief, into the bargain, that one fine day we shall get to know a lot more of the ins and outs of these matters than we do now, and we shall act accordingly. And if that's rank heresy, then may God forgive me for it.

"However, as I say, it was not until long after it was all over that the impressions of those days came to the fore one by one. I never saw Johnny other than excited. It was that that kept him up and kept him going. I was just as excited myself, and it was that that kept *me* going, I believe. There are some troubles we can't go through in cold blood, and I don't believe we are meant to, either.

"When it came to the end of all, he was down on his two knees asking for my blessing; and, without a by-your-leave of the theologians, I gave it for what it was worth. I remember he put the cigarette he was smoking on the tray while he went to the floor, and he rose up again just as the Governor came into the room. It was finished in a few minutes, seconds almost. 'Just drink this, now,' says the Governor, as he held a small glass to Johnny's mouth, and with that, away they went out through a door in the far corner, the chaplain leading and saying the prayers, in a loud voice. That's another way

they have with them, it seems. Everything in a loud voice, at the end, to keep the nerves down. The last I heard of them, as the heavy door closed, was Johnny's 'Amens' as strong as faith and as clear as a bell.

"And, then, I had a feeling that my nerves were about to snap like cords that have been stretched too far, and the next thing was the matron had her arms about me and I was going out by the other door. By that time, my boy was in the presence of God, and there on the tray was his cigarette still burning. The morning sun threw its beams upon the sad walls and, do you know? the little thread of smoke from the cigarette expanded, all of a sudden, into a ring that looked to me for all the world like the halo one sees over the heads of God's saints."

Nihil obstat:
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Imprimatur:
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Archiepiscopus Melbournensis.
