

SOME ADVENTURES UNDER THE MAY LAWS.

[From the 'Month.']

A young priest, one of the many German confessors of our day, has written a simple account of the persecution which he has undergone. As he modestly says, it is no greater than that which thousands of his brethren have suffered, less, indeed, than that which has been the lot of many. But still, for that very reason, it is a fair specimen of the treatment received from the men of "culture" by numbers of his countrymen, simply for doing their duty. He tells his story to all true-hearted Catholics, in the hope that their faith may be strengthened, their courage animated, and their love to the Church and their brethren deepened by the "over true tale" of injustice and oppression, of patience and fidelity. As the sympathy he claims is not for himself, but for his cause, he does not tell his name, but writes as "Renitentus"—a very German way of expressing his resistance to unlawful authority.

In the October of 1873, the year of the too celebrated May Laws, our author was appointed by his bishop to the parish of N—. He found the presbytery locked, the key being in the pocket of the mayor, and so with his goods and chattels he made his entrance at the back. Next morning, the mayor appeared, and gave him notice to quit. Renitentus declined, and after some blustering, the mayor went into the village and summoned the people to turn out the furniture. Not one of them would stir, and the *déménagement* had to be effected by the *gendarmes*. The pastor and his belongings were housed by one of his parishioners, and the next step was the serving of a formal notice by the mayor, setting forth that the bishop's nomination was null and void, having been made without previous notification to the "Ober-präsident," and that the performance of any of his functions as parish priest would expose him to the full severity of the new laws. A similar document was addressed to the Ecclesiastical Council, and to the parishioners, while the schoolmaster was charged to refuse his pastor admission to the school, and to give information in case of his presuming to instruct the children of his flock in their religion. This schoolmaster, a young man of advanced opinions, was directed to undertake all the religious teaching himself. Our poor Renitentus, thus regularly outlawed, began to ask himself in much bewilderment what duties the Government conceived were left to a priest to whom Church and school were forbidden ground. It had been hinted pretty broadly, that by adding the magical prefix "old," to his title of "Catholic priest," all difficulties would be over, and insult and persecutions exchanged for respectful deference and a fat benefice. But then, as he says—he had a conscience.

Next came a summons to appear before the mayor, to answer to divers charges. He had baptized children, nurses and sponsors could swear it; said Mass—a *gendarme* had heard him; preached—the "Liberal" schoolmaster had even taken notes of the sermon; buried the dead—the gravedigger's evidence was read. No notice being taken of this summons, another followed to appear before the magistrates of Trèves, and as the culprit neither appeared nor paid the fine incurred by his contumacy, his furniture was put up to auction in the street. The poor priest sold everything to his friendly host, to save from the hammer the things his mother had pinched herself to buy, and then, there being nothing but himself to seize, he was sentenced to the payment of a heavier fine or to a month's imprisonment. Accordingly, in the spring of 1874, he was arrested, just as he was leaving the altar after saying Mass. The scene was one which has been often acted in Germany, and which will never be forgotten by many a faithful pastor and flock. The news spread quickly through the village, and the church was thronged with men, women, and children, weeping aloud and eager for a last blessing.

Then followed comfort, counsel, and the words,
That make a man feel strong in speaking truth,

as he bade them, in a broken voice, cling closely and faithfully, come what might, to the one holy, Catholic, Roman Church, be true to the Pope, to their bishops, and to the priests appointed by them, and to pray for him who was forced from them. He could hardly tear himself from the poor people who accompanied him to the station, cheering him as he went, till in obedience to him, they kept silence.

"This sort of thing makes one's duty hard work," said the *gendarme*; "I would rather arrest a hundred murderers than one priest."

"Why so? Don't we follow quietly?"

"Quietly enough; but you see it makes *me* feel the culprit. I would rather break stones than have much more of this work."

"You are only doing what you are obliged to do: the responsibility lies with your superiors."

"That's all very well, but it is not a pleasant business, and my family are the worse for it. Why, my wife can't get so much as a drop of milk in the village, because she is my wife."

"That is not fair: and when I come out of prison I shall see to it."

The prison was the old Dominican convent at Trèves, and the venerable Bishop of the diocese and several priests were confined there. The thought gave encouragement as well as pain: "Dörlinger was wrong when he talked of a thousand priests who think like him; but I can say that a thousand priests not only think, but act and suffer like me! The unbelieving enemy who persecutes, scorns, and insults us, must bow to the fact that, in spite of prison, banishment, and hunger, the whole Catholic priesthood stands firm as one man in fidelity to the Church, and will not trample on their convictions and their conscience for the sake of worldly goods. This is the strength, the unity of the Church, which is rooted in nothing human, and which, therefore, does not stand and fall with human weakness. Here is her divine character shown. If the Catholic Church were the work of man, if we priests had not the living consciousness of her divinity, how easily would hundreds of the clergy who have been victims of the May Laws have yielded

to the weakness of nature! On the one side sharp suffering, on the other temptation! But it was not so, and therefore, because the results of the 'war of culture' are nothing, indeed, for the Government, but great moral victories for the Church, the continuation of the war cannot bring about the issue desired by the State. On the one side there is physical force, on the other men's consciences; and they are not to be crushed by legal proceedings, *gendarmes*, arrests, imprisonment, or banishment."

The prison discipline and diet were hard enough. The latter consisted entirely of soup, more or less watery, known as "slime soup," so that, "a potato would have been hailed as a delicacy," and there was real suffering, from hunger through lack of all solid food. The bed "might be called a rack; it was an iron frame supporting a narrow sack tightly stuffed with straw, which reminded one more of the trunk of a tree than of anything, much too short into the bargain. . . . The pillows were two bits of rag filled with straw, very like the unleavened cakes of the Jews, both as to breadth and thickness." Books and writing materials were, at first, forbidden. Later on, this severity was relaxed, and poor Renitentus made his first acquaintance with Silvio Pellico in a very suitable place for appreciating his book, which he thinks ought to be in every prison library. His pockets had been cleared, and the solitary prisoner vainly longed for the solace of looking at his watch or smoking a cigar. Well may he say that it is easy for the Liberal Press to make light of the imprisoned priests and bishops. Theirs is not indeed a martyrdom like that of the early Christians, yet surely such a solitary confinement as he describes is full of suffering, which, he truly says, is all the more keenly felt by men of education and refinement. A man who was condemned to a fortnight of it for some offence against the laws of the Press wrote: "I am certainly no Ultramontane, but I marvel at the steadfastness, the courage, and the fidelity to their convictions of the Catholic priests."

The only recreation permitted to the priests was a "walk," as it was called, in the inner court of the prison, in the centre of which was a pump round and round which they went, "like horses in a circus trotting round the groom who stands in the middle." One can imagine what these meetings must have been to the prisoners. Here our friend made acquaintance with Franz Schneiders, of St. Laurence's Church, who had not then appeared in the columns of the 'Times.' He was a young man of twenty-six, full of kindness, "an excellent priest, and a first-rate companion." At this time he was strong and healthy-looking; but "seventeen months of confinement and prison diet have changed him now." Then we hear of an old priest, whose health is very frail, but who is a pattern of fortitude and cheerful trust: "he never complained, was always in good spirits, and put all his confidence in God, who never forsakes His own."

Another was the life of his companions; full of a spirit of fun which no amount of "slime soup" and "straw-sacking could repress, and which prompted him to play off a trick on the overseer, a conceited fellow, who gave himself airs of superiority and imagined himself born for higher things. One day, when the prisoners were discussing some historical question, the overseer informed them that history was among his numerous accomplishments. This inspired the mischievous prisoner with the idea of dictating to him a sketch of the battle of Cannæ in the hope that he would boast of the performance as his own. Renitentus had not been long back in his cell, when the overseer appeared with a paper—"a historical study," which he offered for his perusal. It ran as follows:

THE BATTLE OF CANNÆ.

Cæsar had crossed the Rubicon. On the one bank stood Leonidas with ten elephants and six four-pounders; on the other Caius Julius Cæsar, by Pompey's Pillar. The battle raged long amid the smoke of batteries. At last Leonidas sprang upon the foremost elephant, rushed into the ranks of the enemy, and telegraphed to Rome: "I came, saw, and conquered."

After awhile, Renitentus was placed in another part of the prison with six companions, a relief for which he was intensely thankful. In spite of all their hardships they were cheerful and contented: the one great loss remained, for which nothing could make up—they could not offer the Holy Sacrifice.

Twice a week Mass was said for the prisoners in the prison-chapel, and there, kneeling among criminals of all grades and ages, from young boys to grey-haired men, was the Bishop of the diocese, his calm face and bearing telling plainly that he bore his troubles cheerfully for the good of the Church and in defence of his convictions. Such, indeed, was the feeling of all. Once, when the author expressed his sorrow at seeing the sick priest who has been mentioned before growing paler and thinner day by day, he answered, smiling: "If hundreds and thousands go to battle full of enthusiasm, and endure all sorts of labours and privations for the sake of an idea—for the love of their country—why should not I sacrifice everything for the sake of so great and glorious an idea as that which is being fought for in *this* battle?"

On the whole, the warders and overseers behaved well to the imprisoned priests. "We can hardly bear it," said one of them, "and we are ashamed to set this *trough* before you; but we can and dare do nothing for you."

Renitentus was kept in prison five months and a half, at the end of which time, as he says, the Government appeared to have become convinced that he was an incorrigible subject, entirely impenetrable to the ideas of "culture," in spite of the opportunity which had been afforded him of meditating thereupon at his leisure. His return to his people was a gala; thousands met him on the road; the whole place was gay with flags and garlands, and his room was dressed with bouquets of flowers. But much as he was touched by the affectionate welcome, he felt obliged to repress all these outward demonstrations, for which the good people were likely enough to pay dearly. He had seen more than one in the prison he had just left whose worst crime was a "hurrah!" to greet the return of his pastor.