

common weal, and, besides, was perfectly suited to the cure's absolute indifference with regard to the petty details of life, especially in all that related to himself personally. His negligence in this respect, indeed, reached a degree of forgetfulness of his interests which afforded Margaret an inexhaustible text for sundry unorthodox sermons whenever her master's unthinking liberality gave her a fair opportunity for the display of her eloquence.

Notwithstanding his exceeding readiness to sacrifice the interests of his external dignity in time of need to the wants of others, it must not be understood from this that the cure was quite insensible to the claims of what may be called respect for his proper person. He was none of those rigorists who make a crime of everything that bears the resemblance of a concession to the prejudices or the opinions of the world, and still less one of those hypocritical pretenders who glory in a tattered suit and neglected person. He felt his poverty and endured it courageously, always ready when necessary to renounce his most legitimate desires. And thus it happened that during ten years of continual privation he had not succeeded in amassing the trifling sum essential to the fulfilment of his most anxious wish—the acquisition of a new soutane. That was his highest worldly ambition. From constant recurrence to it, and thanks besides to the incessant oratory of Margaret on the point, the wish had gradually assumed in his mind the tenacity of a fixed idea. In this truly there was nothing unreasonable, to judge from the deplorable appearance of the good Father's principal piece of clothing; and in beholding it one could not but execrate the evil genius which, every time he seemed on the point of grasping it, made the desired garment vanish before him, as if by magic. Years glided by, each one with its train of disappointments, and still the poor cure repeated with unwearied perseverance, 'it will be got next year, at Easter, before Pentecost, for the Assumption, against Christmas.' In vain had he already traversed this fatal circle ten times; the seasons revolved, the festivals returned with inflexible regularity, leaving at each visit a yet more sensible trace of their passage on the unfortunate soutane.

The particular day on which we have introduced the worthy pastor to our readers happened to be one of those irritable days, when the gathered discontent of the housekeeper threw a gloom on her countenance like the dark clouds that were floating above the hills. The abruptness of her motions and her redoubled activity betrayed a secret agitation, which only awaited a suitable occasion to break forth in words, while the face of the cure, on the contrary, exhibited even more than its usual degree of tranquil placidity, though an observer might have remarked that this was mingled with an expression of concealed triumph seldom to be seen upon his meek and humble brow. From time to time he turned his eyes from the extensive horizon before him to steal a glance unobserved at Margaret's proceedings, which apparently afforded him some amusement, as he seemed now and then to suppress a sudden smile of humor not unmingled with malicious expectation. The night, meanwhile, had come on; the sky was dark and gloomy, and the moon appeared but at intervals through the masses of clouds that were gathering over it. The wind was beginning to agitate the summits of two tall chestnut trees planted before the door of the presbytery.

'After your journey and fatigues of the day,' said Margaret suddenly, in a tone of maternal authority, 'sleep would be better for you at this hour than the open air. The breeze from the plain is not wholesome, and there is a storm coming on. At least you ought to close the window.'

'I do not feel fatigued, Margaret. As to the air, you are in the right and I will obey you, though,' added he in an undertone as he shut the window, 'the storm the most to be dreaded just now is not that which threatened from without.' Margaret either did not or would not hear. The cure sat down. 'Why should you be displeased with me to-day?' he continued, looking at her with an affection of doubt. 'This time at least you would be in the wrong, Margaret.' These words brought on the explosion foreseen by the cure at once.

'Ah, truly, I would be in the wrong!' cried she, with a sort of comic indignation. 'And I ought to be very well pleased with you, to be sure! A whole day passed from home without eating or drinking, at your age! That is good and praiseworthy, without doubt. But it will end badly with you, mark my words.'

'Peace, Margaret, peace,' resumed the cure in a gentle voice. 'Our ministry has painful duties.'

'Oh, this is always the way with your pretended duties! The Church, you say yourself every day, does

not require that one should kill the body in saving the soul; and even so, if you got anything by it except blessings—but see to what it has brought you! Look about you! There is all you possess in the world! There are the fruits of thirty years' toil! You never have fifty francs in your purse together!'

'Who knows yet?' murmured the cure. 'We must never mistrust the goodness of Providence.'

'You are very right to say so, for if it did not provide I know not how we should have a morsel of bread for the latter end of our days, since you cannot even keep what it sends for your own use. Look at yourself, I beg. Is there in the entire parish a poorer man than you? What has become of all the fine promises you made me at Easter? Here is the Assumption close at hand, and what are we to do? What have you gained to-day, for instance, after your long journey? Nothing!'

'Nothing,' said the cure, smiling with a mysterious air.

'Or at most a few paltry francs—good means, indeed, to buy a soutane!' Here she was interrupted by a flash of lightning that filled the room for an instant with a vivid glare, and left a long train of fire on the side of the mountain, followed by a peal of thunder so long and loud that it seemed to have fallen on the very house itself. The cure and the housekeeper crossed themselves. Margaret lighted a little lamp that hung over the chimney board, and, dipping a branch of box into the small font, she sprinkled the holy water all around her, while the priest recited a short prayer. During this time the thunder had died away, and the rain began to fall in torrents.

The cure resumed quietly: 'Margaret, you must inquire if there is in the country a tailor able to make well and speedily a new soutane for your cure.'

'What is that?' cried the housekeeper hastily, fancying she had mistaken him. 'What did you say, if you please?'

'I say that you have forgotten it will soon be the 25th of July.'

'Well?'

'Well, to-day I was sent for to her chateau by the Dowager Baroness Dubrief, who pressed me to accept as a donation the sum of two hundred francs, which are here.'

So saying, the good priest, smiling unrestrainedly at his triumph, drew from beneath his soutane a leather purse very agreeably filled. Margaret stretched out her hand as if to assure herself that the vision was real, when the cure started up with a loud cry. A bright light tinged everything from the slope of the mountain to the windows. The cure ran to open the door of the presbytery. A column of mingled smoke and flame was rushing from the roof of a house in the centre of the village. 'Fire! fire!' cried the cure. 'Margaret, hasten; go and ring the church bell to call help.'

Margaret went out by an interior door which led to the sacristy. The Father took his hat and his cane and proceeded through the gloom towards the scene of the disaster.

The next morning the fire was quite extinct; only one dwelling, the meanest in the village, had perished; but the poor cure had, in the flames, lost a portion of his soutane. 'Happily,' said Margaret, as she finished repairing this mishap with a piece of cloth but indifferently matched as to color, 'happily, thanks to the generosity of her ladyship the baroness, the evil this time is not without remedy.'

'Alas! my good Margaret,' replied the cure in a deprecatory tone and with a hesitation of manner, like a schoolboy caught in a fault, 'that is more than can be said of the misfortune which has befallen these poor people.'

'Well, you will preach next Sunday and make a collection for them. No doubt they will be relieved.'

'It is to be hoped so, at least. But should it not be our part, Margaret, to set the example?'

'Now, you are beginning already with your false notions. Every one is bound to help the poor according to his means—the rich with money, the priest with the word. Remember that you have for yourself scarcely the necessities of life.'

'Remember that they have nothing.'

'But you want another soutane.'

'And they have neither clothing nor food.'

'Good heaven!' exclaimed the housekeeper, struck by a sudden suspicion. 'What have you done with the money you showed me yesterday?'

'Margaret,' answered the cure, covered with confusion, 'you need not go to order the new soutane we were speaking of—I—I—have not the money—it is lost.' And so it was indeed to him, but willingly lost. He had given it to the poor cottagers whose hut was