

mother whose heart he had broken rose before him and called him back to God and virtue. The memory of the first fatal step came back to him now, and it was bitter as wormwood. He recalled the stormy scenes with his father, the tears and the prayers of his mother, and the lure of sin that closed his heart to all but sensual pleasure.

Then came the last effort, the final struggle, but alas! how brief, how fruitless! He had torn himself from his sinful associations and companions, and had gone to a distant university, there to recover the lost ground. In little more than a week he was peremptorily dismissed as being a source of scandal to his fellow students.

That was the end. In a spirit of shame and desperation he had sailed for America, and given himself up to a life of vice. But there was still one tie that bound him to the past. He had kept his First Communion promise. In his deepest degradation he had ever been faithful to that. Yes, and would ever be; and then some day, some day he would make it all right, he would 'straighten up,' but not yet, not yet.

A sudden gust of wind sweeping through the pines roused him from his reverie. Great black clouds were running up swiftly from the south-west, and ominous and sullen came the rumbling of the deep-voiced thunder, like the boom of distant cannon. The freshness of the coming rain was in the wind.

'Come, Ned, old boy,' said Staunton, pushing his horse into a gallop, 'or we shall get a ducking, and water, you know, is not on the evening's programme. Did it but rain whisky for a change, I shouldn't so much mind a bath.'

Still the storm drew on apace.

The roar of the thunder was now almost incessant. Like a fiery serpent the lightning leaped hissing from its lair. The tall trees tossed their arms wildly as if in fright. And then with a sudden clap of thunder, the floodgates of heaven were thrown wide, and the sheeted rain swept down in torrents.

The trooper's face grew white with fear; to him the roaring of the storm was as the voice of an angry God. With a quick resolve he checked his horse and sprang from the saddle, and there in the pouring rain he knelt with uncovered head, and said the three Hail Marys of his First Communion promise. Did he but realise it, it was a terrible mockery of the Omnipotent, this prayer from a heart intent on sin! But it gave him fresh courage, and leaping once more in the saddle, he put spurs to his horse and galloped on through the raging storm.

Of a sudden there was a sharp hiss in the air, a blinding flash of light; a crash that seemed to split the hill to its very base, and a giant pine, riven by the bolt, was hurled across the road almost at the horse's feet. The animal reared back upon his haunches, and with a wild neigh dashed off through the trees. The suddenness of the movement flung the trooper, blinded and dazed, from the saddle. In falling, his right foot remained caught in the stirrup. In vain he tried to extricate it.

'Ned, Ned,' he cried, 'whoa! For God's sake, whoa!'

His voice was drowned in the howling of the storm, and on, on through the trees went the terrified, plunging horse, dragging his prostrate rider at his heels. A sickening fear seized upon the heart of Will Staunton, as he was dashed against the trees and stones and dead branches that strewed the path of the flying horse. This, then, was the end of it all. 'It is appointed for man once to die, and after death the judgment.' With a cry that burst from his very soul, the unhappy man prayed aloud in anguish:

'Mary, Mother of God, help me this once, and, before God, I promise to amend!'

His head struck hard upon a stone, there was a noise in his ears as of many rushing waters, and then all was darkness.

It was night. The last angry muttering of the storm had died away in the distance. Faint and low rose the lullaby of the soft-voiced breeze hushing the

affrighted trees to sleep. A shaft of moonlight piercing through a clump of trees, rested on the pale and bleeding face of Will Staunton who was stretched senseless on the ground. He was lying in a little pool of blood that oozed from a deep and ugly gash in his head. The face was as the face of the dead. His hat was gone, his uniform torn to shreds.

Suddenly he started up and looked around in a dazed, bewildered way. He tried to rise, but fell back helpless to the ground. His body ached in every limb. The blood trickled down into his eyes and blinded him. Slowly the recollection of what had happened was coming back. He called to his horse. There was no sound save the sighing of the night wind through the pines. Painfully he rose to his knees and dragged himself along in search of a clearing. He had crawled, but a few feet when he started back in fear, for just at the edge of the knot of trees where he had been lying, the hill abruptly fell away into a sheer wall of rock that reached down to the valley below. Cautiously he peered over the brink. The valley was flooded with moonlight, and there far below he could see the dead body of his horse shattered on the rocks. With a quick impulse he turned and looked at his right foot. The stirrup was still there, jammed tight on the shoe, but the strap above it was cut through, clean and straight as with a knife. For an instant his heart almost ceased beating, as he realised how narrowly he had escaped being dashed to death over the precipice.

'Great God!' he murmured, 'and my soul would now be in hell!' And then in a very ecstasy of gratitude and love, he clasped his hands and cried:

'Oh, Mary, my sweetest Mother, thou hast heard my prayer; thou hast helped me in my hour of need; and I will be true to my promise. Now, at last, I will turn back to God and thee! Mother, help me!'

The first streaks of dawn were creeping over the sky, when Staunton heard the tramp of an approaching horse, and a well-known voice calling his name. He had been missed at the fort, and his friend had come to seek him. He sent back an answer to the loud hallo.

'Coming, old man,' was the reply, and in a few moments a trooper rode in under the trees and sprang from his horse.

'For God's sake, man,' said Jack Farrell, 'what's up?'

'Just this, Jack,' said Staunton, with great solemnity, 'I was as near the "great divide" and eternal hell-fire last night as I ever care to be. I'm going to cut this sort of life and live clean.'

Jack was on his knees beside him, binding up the wound in his head, as Staunton related the night's events. Jack Farrell was a good Catholic, and he was profoundly moved by his friend's recital. Many a time he had spoken earnestly to Will Staunton, and tried to induce him to go to church and the sacraments, and to keep away from the haunts of vice.

'It's no go, Jack,' was the invariable reply, 'I haven't the strength to do it.'

But Jack knew of Staunton's fidelity to his First Communion promise, and he felt sure that the good Queen was watching over the erring one. Now at last the great change that he had hoped and prayed for was come, and Jack was glad. Without a word he took his friend's hand and pressed it warmly. Neither spoke for some time, Jack helped Staunton on his horse and took the bridle.

'Jack.'

'Yes, Bill.'

'Take me down to the village; I'm going to confession.'

Before the Lady altar in the little village chapel, a man with blood-stained face and tattered garments knelt with bowed head. Sweet and clear on the morning rang out the Angelus bell.

'And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us. Hail Mary,' prayed the kneeling figure.

And there was joy before the angels of God, for the lost sheep was found, the prodigal had come home—by the Queen's mercy.—*Liquarian*.