

THE SLACKER

The rain beat heavily down, the wind howled, the lightning flashed, the clouds moved in huge companies across the sky.

Inside the rectory Father Dwight picked up the evening paper, lit his pipe, and prepared for a pleasant evening indoors. Presently, the sharp piercing sound of the door-bell sounded in his ears. He rose, placed his paper and pipe on the table, and with a sigh at the thought of the weather, proceeded to answer the door. As he reached the study door the bell rang again, this time more sharply and violently. Hastening his steps, and wondering who could want admittance on such a night, he placed his hand on the knob, and turned it. At his touch the door shot open, and the huddled form of an unconscious man lurched forward and fell at his feet. His clothing was in tatters, his hair unkept, yet his unshaven face bore the unmistakable signs of a life once spent in ease and comfort.

After attempting to drag the form out of the rain, Father Dwight called his servant and together they half-carried, half-dragged the unconscious man and laid him on the sofa in the priest's study.

The priest hastily applied restoratives to the lips of the wayfarer without any apparent effect. Gradually, however, the color came into the pale features, the form stirred, the eyes blinked, then opened, and the man, wide-eyed, looked about him. He met the anxious gaze of the priest with concern, but at the sight of the Roman collar, the man recoiled, and setting his teeth, scowled and exclaimed:

"Who are you?"

The priest, quite abashed at such a salutation from the recipient of his charity, replied quietly:

"I am a Catholic priest."

"How did I get here,?" this in the same tone, but the scowl disappearing before the gentle face of the priest.

"You rang my bell, and when I opened the door you fell at my feet. I had you placed where you are now. But who are you? Where did you come from, and what is your mission?"

"I am hungry; give me something to eat."

The priest ordered supper and the traveller ate ravenously, seizing—almost snatching the food from the priest's hands.

Meanwhile his host observed with interest the face of his famished guest. The eyes were brown and blood-shot, the nose red and swollen, the face scarred and bloated, all evidence of a life spent at least recently, in dissipation and debauchery.

With a contented grunt the man lay back on the sofa, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, brushed off his clothing, then turned and gazed—rather stared at the priest, who, as if he had recognized the stranger, pretended to be busy removing dishes. The tramp broke the silence.

“You have asked who I am, why I am here, and whence I come. Well, Sir, my name is Joseph McGivney. I am searching for my home; I left Auriesville, ten miles north on a freight. Four miles out of the station I fell off the train, and rolled down the bank; I was forced to continue my journey on foot. When I reached this house, I was weak, I did not know that it was a priest's residence or I would not have asked admission, even though I were to die from cold and exposure. For I—I,”

His face grew purple, his features contracted, he sat up on the sofa, and raising his voice shouted—nay screamed;

“I hate priests, I despise the Mass, I abhor religion, I defy God”.

He continued; lowering his voice,

“I should have been a priest myself; I was a fool, I evaded the call of God, and I have not known a moment's peace since.”

The priest endeavored to pacify the half-crazed man, and with a slight motion of his arm bade him rest.

Father Dwight reflected. Hatred of priests, of religion, of God, of His church, was nothing new to one so long a laborer in the Master's vineyard; but here was a new type. Others hated God because they did not know Him, because they were ignorant of His power—of his Goodness; this one hated Him and His ministers because he had known Him, because, having known Him, he had evaded his Divine call, and, refusing the gift, had censured the Donor.

His reflections were rudely interrupted by his visitor.

“Some thirty years ago in the chapel of St. Bartholomew's College, Lock Haven, I vividly recall the retreat-master speaking these prophetic words; ‘And I tell you once more, my dear Students, in the Clerical life, both secular and religious, one lives more purely, falls more rarely, rises more promptly, proceeds more cautiously, reaps

more graces, more joys more peace, and possesses the pledge of a happy death, of a shorter Purgatory, and of a richer reward in Heaven. These lines were written many centuries ago, but they are as fresh and as apt in our day as they were on the day St. Bernard penned them.'

"I was one of the graduates of St. Bartholomew's. We were making our retreat. For sometime I had thought seriously of entering the Seminary. I knew that God wished me to serve Him in the priestly life. I heard him say: 'Come, take up your cross and follow me.' But, I evaded, I struggled, I sought to cast aside all such reflections for I was carried away with a thought of good times—good fellowship. Ambition, worldly honors stirred me; the future lay before me as a Utopian dream. I was a brilliant student, the leader of my class, the foremost athlete, and the social lion. All was golden, my star had risen and was soaring, yet—its brilliancy was eclipsed by that one dark cloud—the call of God:

"Take up your cross and follow me.'

"Of that class my chum, Jim Dwight, was, without doubt, the dullest and the most unassuming. He had entered the class two years before me, yet we graduated together. It was in my room immediately after the Convocation that Jim took my hand and said:

"Joe, I feel sorry for you,—you cannot decide—I understand. I can do nothing save pray, and pray I will. I hope you will join me soon.'

"Then he left. His words sank into my heart. They burned my brain.

"Sorry—can't decide—pray, pray.' I laughed.

"That fall I entered a University for medicine, and while there I learned that Jim had entered the seminary at Niagara.

"Five years later I graduated with honors and began to practise in the city of Chicago. My practice increased, my friends with it; I grew powerful, influential, became sought after. Climbing by degrees the social ladder, I found myself at the end of seven years of practise in my profession, the leader of the foremost social set of Chicago.

"Here it was that I met Nydia Sedley, the daughter of the President of the University. I was infatuated with her and we became engaged. Later we married. My cherished ambition, my fondest hopes were realized and yet—

I was not only not happy, but I was miserable, haunted night and day by that voice of conscience.

"O give this over, for it is empty, vain—fruitless."

"Again I laughed. I assured myself that it was but the qualms of a scrupulous conscience, and so I continued.

"Good fortune, however, did not forever smile on me. Two years after my marriage my wife became indifferent—careless of me; I discovered that she was receiving the attentions of Doctor Lapp, a professional friend and a former college chum of the University.

"Returning home one night, unexpectedly, I found my wife in his arms. Crazy by jealousy, I drew my gun, shot, and killed them both, then fled from my home and the city of Chicago—a fugitive from justice.

"That was twenty years ago. Since then I have been an outlaw—an outcast from society, my companions—desperadoes, gangsters, dope-fiends, gunmen, the scum of the underworld, the arch-enemies of civilized society.

"Since the day of my wedding I have not been inside a church. I despise and hate priests.

"I, too am despised; I am shunned, hunted, tracked, without a moment's peace, rest, or satisfaction. And all—all because I said 'I will not serve.'

"There were moments in my last years in which I thought,—yes, hoped, that God would be merciful, but no, I have gone too far, my sin is too great. I am lost. My soul is damned."

The speaker stopped suddenly and a shudder passed over his frame. Then Father Dwight began:

"No man yet, has sinned so greatly, has erred so much that God in his mercy will not forgive him. Did He not say 'Trust in the Lord, Who shall efface all your iniquities?' No one is lost; everyone may save himself if he wills it."

"Make your confession, my friend, make your peace with God, See—I am your friend and college chum, Jim Dwight."

But the prostrate form did not seem to hear the last. He only said: "All is lost; all is over; it is Hell and not Heaven, it is the devil not God that shall be my master for all eternity."

The priest renewed his pleadings, begged his friend to repent, and falling on his knees he cried frantically:

“Oh, Joe, my friend, my chum, for God’s sake, for your soul’s sake, make your confession; only say ‘I am sorry, I repent of it all, and you shall be saved.’”

“But the tramp, who was now dying fast said:

“No use, no use, Jim, All’s over.”

Father Dwight prayed, prayed, as was his daily practice for his friend, but to no avail. With a cry that pierced the priest’s heart, Joseph McGivney, brilliant scholar, renowned physician, leading society man, but evader of the Divine call, fell back upon the cushions—dead.

A. M. '25

