

[The Stonecutter and the Priest]

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Miss Mary Tomasi

63 Barre St.

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THE STONECUTTER AND THE PRIEST

(A Sequel to Richmond's A Swiss Stonecutter - Dying)

There was a boyish wistfulness and eagerness in the young curate's face, an eagerness the more conspicuous against the quiet dignity of a clerical collar and the somber black of his suit. He was not many years ordained, and comparatively new to the parish.

Father McCullen grinned. "I'm a Vermonter. Yes, I'm a Vermonter. But I'd been in contact with very few granite workers until I was assigned to this parish by the Bishop. That was the late Bishop Rice. But for the granite industry Montpelier and Barre would be such like dozens of other Vermont towns. Perhaps that is why this group of workers easily became a primary interest with me. Especially the Spanish and the Italian element,- with emphasis on the latter... Oh, I don't mean an interest only in their work, or in their picturesque colony with its own club rooms. No, I was amazed that so small a percentage of them were active Catholics, and that so small a number of Italian names appeared an our graded and high school register. I felt, as others no doubt had before me and as my pastor still does, that here was a problem for a priest, a field for study, a duty for the Church to reclaim her children who had been born in the Faith.

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“Our pastor is well acquainted with the situation. C.3 [??] 2 He has done remarkable work in the little time he can spare from his many other duties. I learned that majority of the Italian stonecutters came from northern Italy, a section of the country long disposed to resist papal authority and often engaged in religious controversies. But their ancestors had been Catholics, the Faith was in their blood; most of them were baptized, but with that the external manifestations of their faith ended. On the other hand I found as many who came to this country good church-going Catholics, but immediately their church-going stopped. That wasn't difficult to understand, or to appreciate. A strange language, the difficulties presented in the confessional, - these and other problems kept them from church.

“In Barre where the Italian population is larger, we have an Italian speaking priest. This spring he started a series of broadcasts in Italian. They were popular. His work and that of his fellow priests have borne fruit. Many Italians are returning to the church.

“I have found it easy to make friends with the Italians in Montpelier. They are an intelligent, likable people For the most part they are law-abiding and just. A few of the older ones have said to me very frankly, 'Go to church now after all these years? Why, my neighbors, they would laugh at me! They are Italian like me. They do not go. And my children, what would they say to see their father and mother doing what they were not taught to do? Us, we are good people, we are honest, we believe in God, but to 3 go back to church now ——.'

“I remind them that some day they will want burial from the church-

“‘Sure,’ majority will cry, 'sure, burial from the Church, we want that. Are we not entitled to it? Are we not born in the faith? Sure, our fathers and their fathers before them had the requiescat in pace sung over their bodies. Us, we want that, too. Some day before we die we will go back, we will make arrangements——'”

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"I will tell you about an Italian-Swiss stonecutter who was buried from St. Augustine's church just yesterday. We will call him Castoli. He was born in Besazio, Switzerland, where he learned the stonecutting trade. He come to this country in 1900. He was an artist, a fine cutter, and he went into the granite business, co-proprietor of a shed with an Irishman. When his health began to fail he sold his interest in the shed, and operated a shoe store. It has been six or seven years now since he has retired from active business. The nuns at St. Michael's Convent tell me that he has always responded generously with his talent. When statues either in the church or in the convent chapel needed repairs, repairs that had to be done cleverly and artistically, he was always willing to work, and for no pay. Perhaps the obituary in the local paper will best describe him - 'Mr. Castoli was a man of great influence, not only among the Italian people but in the entire city of Montpelier. He was well-known for his honesty in 4 business and had a great many friends.'

"It is true that he was an influential man, but his one sorrow was that he could not influence his own sons. Three of them. Good boys, popular and well liked, but gamblers and drinkers. The youngest boy broke his ankle in a drunken brawl a few days ago. He was sent for at the hospital when his father was taken bad.

"Yes, Mr. Castoli was one of those whose church-going stopped when he reached America. His three sons were baptized soon after their births, but they've never been church-goers. When the nuns heard that Castoli was sick they paid him a visit. Yes, it's one of the duties of the Sisters of Mercy to visit the sick. It was more than duty in this case. They liked him. They were grateful for his kindnesses. They made weekly visits. At first the visits disturbed Mr. Castoli. He said the neighbors would laugh at him, being visited by nuns. They were pleasant, encouraging. He and his wife began to look forward to their visits. It was about this time that I started going to see him. His oldest son, a musician, is married and has three children. Just two weeks ago these children were baptized. I could see that Mr. Castoli's days were numbered. On my next to the last visit to him, he said

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he was going to die soon, that he would like to go to confession and receive the Host. I remember it was a hot day, I had been sitting with him for an hour, I was nervous and worried, I was beginning to think my visits were in vain—" 5 Father McCullen continued his story. You saw the picture: A hot, breathless June afternoon. Sun flooding the small sleeping porch that overlooked the tracks and the sheds where Castoli had worked. Sun beating relentlessly on the few furnishings. Two straight backed chairs. A metal bedstand that held a book, a glass of water, an envelope of pills, three black stogies resembling bits of twisted rope, a sterile sputum cup. Sun beating, too, upon the narrow bed, and upon its wasted occupant, the Italian-Swiss stonecutter. Mr. Castoli lying back on his pillows. His blue eyes, too bright. His sunken cheeks, red with fever. He raises his hand feebly to ward off the sun. As if grateful for the moment's distraction the young curate springs eagerly to his feet, and draws down the shade that will leave Castoli in cooling shadow. He is a young priest, but little experienced in comforting a dying man's agonized breathing. Pain and suffering in another wring his heart. Beneath the Roman collar his throat swells with sympathy. His round face is beaded with perspiration. He can leave. Yes, he can leave this death chamber, go to the peace of his study, to the vigorous fun of the tennis courts. He clenches his hands. Then Castoli's words, "Well, Father, I have decided- I will go to Confession—"

Castoli was buried. His funeral was held from the church Sunday afternoon. Monday morning a requiem mass was sung for the repose of his soul. At 8:30 the three sons were gathered with two friends in the living-room where for three days Castoli had lain against a massed wall of flowers. Mrs. Castoli was upstairs resting. She had taken the sleeping powder that her nurse-niece, Lola, had pressed upon her.

There was silence in the living-room. The heavy, embarrassing silence that sometimes hangs between good friends. Friends suffering a mutual sorrow. The oldest son, the

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musician, spoke. "That church music was good. It would have been better with a violin accompaniment. Especially with the singing. But it was good—"

"The flowers filled two open cars-" Lou, the youngest, said tonelessly. His face was white and strained. Added to his sorrow was the physical pain from his injured ankle. He lay on the davenport, his bandaged foot resting on a pile of pillows. He had insisted upon walking in the funeral procession. Now his foot throbbed.

Silence again.

One of the friends asked, "The bearers, Lou, who were they? There were some I didn't know."

"Some of them I don't know well myself," Lou admitted. "Bating represented the Stonecutters' Union; Sasci, the Italian Pleasure Club; Morgan, the Order of Foresters (my father was Secretary-Treasurer until he resigned last fall); Beglierini was a friend of my father's, he worked for him when my father owned the shed with Ryle; the other two were neighbors. Buchanan was there. He walked in back of the 7 coffin. He's President of the Montpelier branch of the Union. My cousin Lola's husband wanted to be a bearer. My mother wouldn't hear of it. He's had a touch of T. B. himself. He's barely thirty. He got a touch of it after he'd worked in the sheds only a few years.

"No, he seems to be in good health now. He was up to Bill Bartlett's Health Camp for a year. When he came back he gave up granite work. He's running a radio and paint shop in Barre. Poor Lola. She's certainly seen a lot of it in her family. Her father died of it less than a year ago. Yes, he was a stonecutter, too. Then there was my father's brother—"

The musician-brother inclined his head towards the spot where his father had lain. "He foresaw this, - he'd seen it grabbing off stonecutters for more than forty years. That's why he didn't want us to go in the sheds. It was good enough for him, but he didn't want us to be a part of it—"

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The gambler-brother jerked his short, heavy body up-right in the chair. He spoke for the first time. "What's the difference, one job or another?" His voice came deep, rasped. "it's just a chance you take—"

Lou jammed a fist hard into a pillow. "God, to think of it! When my father was my age he'd already learned a trade in Switzerland, he'd already crossed the ocean—" He hesitated. Shame crept into his words, "Well, I've crossed to Switzerland and Italy myself, but it wasn't on 8 my money, and it wasn't to find a job. It was a pleasure trip... When he was my age he was in business for himself, he was married and making payments on this house. Just my age he was. And what have I to show? Nothing, I guess." His lips were bitter, scornful. "Nothing but a hell of a good time, empty pockets, and a broken ankle." His fingers ran nervously through his black hair. There was a baffled, confused look in his eyes. "God, I don't know. I don't know that it makes any difference. One way or the other, it just doesn't add up—"