

Father Meuron's Tale

Robert Hugh Benson

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Father Meuron was very voluble at supper on the Saturday. He exclaimed; he threw out his hands; his bright black eyes shone above his rosy cheeks, and his hair appeared to stand more on end than I had ever known it.

He sat at the further side of the horse-shoe table from myself, and I was able to remark on his gaiety to the English priest who sat beside me without fear of being overheard.

Father Brent smiled.

"He is drunk with la gloire," he said. "He is to tell the story to-night."

This explained everything.

I did not look forward, however, to his recital. I was confident that it would be full of tinsel and swooning maidens who ended their days in convents under Father Meuron's spiritual direction; and when we came upstairs I found a shadowy corner, a little back from the semicircle, where I could fall asleep if I wished without provoking remark.

In fact, I was totally unprepared for the character of his narrative. When we had all taken our places, and Monsignor's pipe was properly alight, and himself at full length in his deck chair, the Frenchman began. He told his story in his own language; but I am venturing to render it in English as nearly as I am able.

"My contribution to the histories," he began, seated in his upright arm-chair in the centre of the circle, a little turned away from me—"my contribution to the histories which these good priests are to recite is an affair of exorcism. That is a matter with which we who live in Europe are not familiar in these days. It would seem, I suppose, that grace has a certain power, accumulating through the centuries, of saturating even physical objects with its force. However men may rebel, yet the sacrifices offered and the prayers poured out have a faculty of holding Satan in check and preventing his more formidable manifestations. Even in my own poor country at this hour, in spite of widespread apostasy, in spite even of the deliberate worship of Satan, yet grace is in the air; and it is seldom indeed that a priest has to deal with a case of possession. In your respectable England, too, it is the same; the simple piety of Protestants has kept alive to some extent the force of the Gospel. Here in this country of Italy it is somewhat different. The old powers have survived the Christian assault, and while they cannot live in Holy Rome, there are corners where they do so."

From my place I saw Padre Bianchi turn a furtive eye upon the speaker, and I thought I read in it an unwilling assent.

"However," went on the Frenchman with a superb dismissory gesture, "my recital does not concern this continent, but the little island of La Souffrière. These circumstances are other than here. It was a stronghold of darkness when I was there in 1891. Grace, while laying hold of men's hearts, had not yet penetrated the lower creation. Do you understand me? There were many holy persons whom I knew, who frequented the Sacraments and lived devoutly, but there were many of another manner. The ancient rites survived secretly among the negroes, and darkness—how shall I say it?—dimness made itself visible.

"However, to our history."

The priest resettled himself in his chair and laid his fingers together like precious instruments.

He was enjoying himself vastly, and I could see that he was preparing himself for a revelation.

"It was in 1891," he repeated, "that I went there with another of our Fathers to the mission-house.

I will not trouble you, gentlemen, with recounting the tale of our arrival, nor of the months that followed it, except perhaps to tell you that I was astonished by much that I saw.

Never until that time had I seen the power of the Sacraments so evident. In civilized lands, as I have suggested to you, the air is charged with grace. Each is no more than a wave in the deep sea. He who is without God's favor

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is not without His grace at each breath he draws. There are churches, religions, pious persons about him; there are centuries of prayers behind him. The very buildings he enters, as M. Huysmans has explained to us, are browned by prayer. Though a wicked child, he is yet in his father's house: and the return from death to life is not such a crossing of the abyss, after all. But there in La Souffrière all is either divine or Satanic, black or white, Christian or devilish. One stands, as it were, on the seashore to watch the breakers of grace, and each is a miracle. I tell you I have seen holy Catechumens foam at the mouth and roll their eyes in pain, as the saving water fell on them, and that which was within went out. As the Gospel relates, 'Spiritus conturbavit illum: et elisus in terrain, volutabatur spumans.'"

Father Meuron paused again.

I was interested to hear this corroboration of evidence that had come before me on other occasions. More than one missionary had told me the same thing; and I had found in their tales a parallel to those related by the first preachers of the Christian religion in the early days of the Church.

"I was incredulous at first," continued the priest, "until I saw these things for myself. An old father of our mission rebuked me for it. 'You are an ignorant fellow,' he said; 'your airs are still of the seminary.' And what he said was just, my friends.

"On one Monday morning as we met for our council I could see that this old priest had somewhat to say. M. Lasserre was his name. He kept very silent until the little businesses had been accomplished, and then he turned to the Father Rector.

"'Monseigneur has written,' he said, 'and given me the necessary permission for the matter you know, my father. And he bids me take another priest with me. I ask that Father Meuron may accompany me. He needs a lesson, this zealous young missionary.'

"The Father Rector smiled at me as I sat astonished, and nodded at Father Lasserre to give permission.

"'Father Lasserre will explain all to you,' he said as he stood up for the prayer.

"The good priest explained all to me as the Father Rector had directed."

It appeared that there was a matter of exorcism on hand. A woman who lived with her mother and husband had been affected by the devil, Father Lasserre said. She was a Catechumen, and had been devout for several months, and all seemed well until this—this assault had been made on her soul. Father Lasserre had visited the woman and examined her, and had made his report to the Bishop, asking permission to exorcise the creature, and it was this permission that had been sent on that morning.

"I did not venture to tell the priest that he was mistaken and that the affair was one of epilepsy.

I had studied a little in books for my medical training, and all that I heard now seemed to confirm me in the diagnosis. There were the symptoms, easy to read. What would you have?"—the priest again made his little gesture—"I knew more in my youth than all the Fathers of the Church.

Their affairs of devils were nothing but an affection of the brain—dreams and fancies! And if the exorcisms had appeared to be of direct service, it was from the effect of the solemnity upon the mind. It was no more."

He laughed with a fierce irony.

"You know it all, gentlemen!"

I had lost all desire to sleep now. The French priest was more interesting than I had thought.

His elaborateness seemed dissipated; his voice trembled a little as he arraigned his own conceit, and I began to wonder how his change of mind had been wrought.

"We set out that afternoon," he continued. "The woman lived on the further side of the island, perhaps a couple of hours' travel, for it was rough going; and as we went up over the path Father Lasserre told me more.

"It seemed that the woman blasphemed. (The subconscious self, said I to myself, as M.

Charcot has explained. It is her old habit reasserting itself.)

"She foamed and rolled her eyes. (An affection of the brain, said I.) "She feared holy water; they dared not throw it on her, her struggles were so fierce. (Because she has been taught to fear it, said I.)

"And so the good father talked, eyeing me now and again, and I smiled in my heart, knowing that he was a simple old fellow who had not studied the new books.

"She was quieter after sunset, he told me, and would take a little food then. Her fits came on her for the most part at midday. And I smiled again at that. Why it should be so I knew. The heat affected her. She would be quieter, science would tell us, when evening fell. If it were the power of Satan that held her she would surely rage

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more in the darkness than in the light. The Scriptures tell us so.

"I said something of this to Father Lasserre, as if it were a question, and he looked at me.

"'Perhaps, brother,' he said, 'she is more at ease in the darkness and fears the light, and that she is quieter therefore when the sun sets.'

"Again I smiled to myself. What piety, said I, and what foolishness!

"The house where the three lived stood apart from any others. It was an old shed into which they had moved a week before, for the neighbors could no longer bear the woman's screaming.

And we came to it towards a sunset.

"It was a heavy evening, dull and thick, and as we pushed down the path I saw the smoking mountain high on the left hand between the tangled trees. There was a great silence round us, and no wind, and every leaf against the rosy sky was as if cut of steel.

"We saw the roof below us presently, and a little smoke escaped from a hole, for there was no chimney.

"'We will sit here a little, brother,' said my friend. 'We will not enter till sunset.'

"And he took out his office book and began to say his Matins and Lauds, sitting on a fallen tree-trunk by the side of the path.

"All was very silent about us. I suffered terrible distractions, for I was a young man and excited; and though I knew it was no more than epilepsy that I was to see, yet epilepsy is not a good sight to regard. But I was finishing the first Nocturn when I saw that Father Lasserre was looking off his book.

"We were sitting thirty yards from the roof of the hut, which was built in a scoop of the ground, so that the roof was level with the ground on which we sat. Below it was a little open space, flat, perhaps twenty yards across, and below that yet further was the wood again, and far over that was the smoke of the village against the sea. There was the mouth of a well with a bucket beside it; and by this was standing a man, a negro, very upright, with a vessel in his hand.

"This fellow turned as I looked, and saw us there, and he dropped the vessel, and I could see his white teeth. Father Lasserre stood up and laid his finger on his lips, nodded once or twice, pointed to the west, where the sun was just above the horizon, and the fellow nodded to us again and stooped for his vessel.

"He filled it from the bucket and went back into the house.

"I looked at Father Lasserre and he looked at me.

"'In five minutes,' he said; 'that is the husband. Did you not see his wounds?'

"I had seen no more than his teeth, I said, and my friend nodded again and proceeded to finish his Nocturn."

Again Father Meuron paused dramatically. His ruddy face seemed a little pale in the candle-light, and yet he had told us nothing yet that could account for his apparent horror. Plainly, something was coming soon.

The Rector leaned back to me and whispered behind his hand in reference to what the Frenchman had related a few minutes before, that no priest was allowed to use exorcism without the special leave of the Bishop. I nodded and thanked him.

Father Meuron flashed his eyes dreadfully round the circle, clasped his hands and continued:

"When the sun showed only a red rim above the sea we went down to the house. The path ran on high ground to the roof and then dipped down the edge of the cutting past the window to the front of the shed.

"I looked through this window sideways as I went after Father Lasserre, who was carrying his bag with the book and the holy water, but I could see nothing but the light of the fire. And there was no sound. That was terrible to me!

"The door was closed as we came to it, and as Father Lasserre lifted his hand to knock there was a howl of a beast from within.

"He knocked and looked at me.

"'It is but epilepsy!' he said, and his lips wrinkled as he said it."

The priest stopped again, and smiled ironically at us all. Then he clasped his hands beneath his chin like a man in terror.

"I will not tell you all that I saw," he went on, "when the candle was lighted and set on the table, but only a little. You would not dream well, my friends—as I did not that night.

"But the woman sat in a corner by the fireplace, bound with cords by her arms to the back of the chair and her feet to the legs of it.

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"Gentlemen, she was like no woman at all. . . . The howl of a wolf came from her lips, but there were words in the howl. At first I could not understand till she began in French, and then I understood. My God!

"The foam dripped from her mouth like water, and her eyes—but there! I began to shake when I saw them until the holy water was spilled on the floor, and I set it down on the table by the candle. There was a plate of meat on the table, roasted mutton, I think, and a loaf of bread beside it. Remember that, gentlemen—that mutton and bread! And as I stood there I told myself, like making acts of faith, that it was but epilepsy, or at the most madness.

"My friends, it is probable that few of you know the form of exorcism. It is neither in the Ritual or the Pontifical, and I cannot remember it all myself. But it began thus:"

The Frenchman sprang up and stood with his back to the fire, with his face in the shadow.

"Father Lasserre was here where I stand, in his cotta and stole, and I beside him. There where my chair stands was the square table, as near as that, with the bread and meat and the holy water and the candle. Beyond the table was the woman; her husband stood beside her on the left hand, and the old mother was there"—he flung out a hand to the right, "on the floor telling her beads and weeping—but weeping.

"When the Father was ready and had said a word to the others, he signed to me to lift the holy water again—she was quiet at the moment—and then he sprinkled her.

"As he lifted his hand she raised her eyes, and there was a look in them of terror, as if at a blow, and as the drops fell she leaped forward in the chair, and the chair leaped with her. Her husband was at her and dragged the chair back. But my God! it was terrible to see him; his teeth shone as if he smiled, but the tears ran down his face.

"Then she moaned like a child in pain. It was as if the holy water burned her; she lifted her face to her man as if she begged him to wipe off the drops.

"And all the while I still told myself that it was the terror of her mind only at the holy water—that it could not be that she was possessed by Satan—it was but madness—madness and epilepsy!

"Father Lasserre went on with the prayers, and I said Amen, and there was a psalm—Deus in nomine tuo saluum me fac—and then came the first bidding to the unclean spirit to go out, in the name of the Mysteries of the Incarnation and Passion.

"Gentlemen, I swear to you that something happened then, but I do not know what. A confusion fell on me and a kind of darkness. I saw nothing—it was as if I were dead."

The priest lifted a shaking hand to wipe off the sweat from his forehead. There was a profound silence in the room. I looked once at Monsignor, and he was holding his pipe an inch off his mouth, and his lips were slack and open as he stared.

"Then when I knew where I was, Father Lasserre was reading out of the Gospels; how Our Lord gave authority to his Church to cast out unclean spirits, and all this while his voice never trembled."

"And the woman?" said a voice hoarsely from Father Brent's chair. "Ah! the woman! My God! I do not know. I did not look at her. I stared at the plate on the table; but at least she was not crying out now.

"When the Scripture was finished Father Lasserre gave me the book.

"Bah, Father!" he said; 'it is but epilepsy, is it not?'

"Then he beckoned me, and I went with him, holding the book till we were within a yard of the woman. But I could not hold the book still, it shook, it shook—"

Father Meuron thrust out his hand. "It shook like that, gentlemen.

"He took the book from me, sharply and angrily. 'Go back, sir,' he said, and he thrust the book into the husband's hand.

"There,' he said.

"I went back behind the table and leaned on it.

"Then Father Lasserre—my God! the courage of this man!—he set his hands on the woman's head. She writhed up her teeth to bite, but he was too strong for her, and then he cried out from the book the second bidding to the unclean spirit.

"Ecce crucem Domini! Behold the Cross of the Lord! flee ye adverse hosts! The lion of the tribe of Judah hath prevailed!"

"Gentlemen"—the Frenchman flung out his hands—"I who stand here tell you that something happened. God knows what. I only know this, that as the woman cried out and scrambled with her feet on the floor, the flame of

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the candle became smoke-coloured for one instant. I told myself it was the dust of her struggling and her foul breath . . . Yes, gentlemen, as you tell yourselves now. . . . Bah! it is but epilepsy, is it not so, sir?"

The old Rector leaned forward with a deprecating hand, but the Frenchman glared and gesticulated; there was a murmur from the room, and the old priest leaned back again and propped his head on his hand.

"Then there was a prayer. I heard Oremus, but I did not dare to look at the woman. I fixed my eyes so on the bread and meat; it was the one clean thing in that terrible room. I whispered to myself, 'Bread and mutton, bread and mutton.' I thought of the refectory at home— anything.

You understand me, gentlemen—anything familiar to quiet myself.

"Then there was the third exorcism . . ."

I saw the Frenchman's hands rise and fall, clenched, and his teeth close on his lip to stay its trembling. He swallowed in his throat once or twice. Then he went on in a very low, hissing voice.

"Gentlemen, I swear to you by God Almighty that this was what I saw. I kept my eyes on the bread and meat. It lay there beneath my eyes, and yet I saw, too, the good Father Lasserre lean forward to the woman again, and heard him begin, 'Exorcizo te . . .'

"And then this happened—this happened . . ."

"The bread and the meat corrupted themselves to worms before my eyes . . ."

Father Meuron dashed forward, turned round and dropped into his chair as the two English priests on either side sprang to their feet.

In a few minutes he was able to tell us that all had ended well; that the woman had been presently found in her right mind, after an incident or two that I will take leave to omit; and that the apparent paroxysm of nature that had accompanied the words of the third exorcism had passed away as suddenly as it had come.

Then we went to night—prayers and fortified ourselves against the dark.