

THE MIRACLE OF
THE GREAT
ST. NICOLAS

BY
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The Miracle Of The Great St. Nicolas

CHAPTER I

NICOLAS, a scion of an illustrious family of Vervignole, showed marks of sanctity from his earliest childhood, and at the age of fourteen vowed to consecrate himself to the Lord. Having embraced the ecclesiastical profession, he was raised, while still young, by popular acclamation and the wish of the Chapter, to the see of St. Cromadaire, the apostle of Vervignole, and first Bishop of Trinquéballe. He exercised his pastoral ministry with piety, governed his clergy with wisdom, taught the people, and feared not to remind the great of Justice and Moderation. He was liberal, profuse in almsgiving, and set aside for the poor the greater part of his wealth.

His castle proudly lifted its crenelated walls and pepper-pot roofs from the summit of a hill overlooking the town. He made of it a refuge where all who were pursued by the secular arm might find a place of refuge. In the lower hall, the largest to be seen in all Vervignole, the table laid for meals was so long that those who sat at one end saw it lose itself in the distance in an indistinct point, and when the torches upon it were lighted it recalled the tail of the comet which appeared in Vervignole to announce the death of King Comus. The holy St. Nicolas sat at the upper end. There he entertained the principal folk of the town and of the kingdom, and a multitude of clergy and laymen. But on his right there was always reserved a seat for the poor man who might come begging for his bread at the door.

Children, particularly, aroused the solicitude of the good St. Nicolas. He delighted in their innocence, and he felt for them with the heart of a father and the bowels of a mother. He had the virtues and the morals of an apostle. Yearly, in the dress of a simple monk, with a white staff in his hand, he would visit his flock, desirous of seeing everything with his own eyes; and in order that no adversity or disorder should escape his notice he would traverse, accompanied by a single priest, the wildest parts of his diocese, crossing, in winter, the flooded rivers, climbing mountains, and plunging into the thick forests. One day, having ridden since dawn upon his mule, in company with the Deacon Modernus, thorny thickets through which his mount with difficulty forced a winding path. The Deacon Modernus followed him with much difficulty on his mule, which carried the baggage.

Overcome with hunger and fatigue, the man of God said to Modernus:

"Let us halt here, my son, and if you still have a little bread and wine we will sup here, for I feel that I hardly have the strength to proceed further, and you, although the younger, must be nearly as tired as I."

"Monseigneur," answered Modernus, "there remains neither a drop of wine nor a crumb of bread; for, by your orders, I gave all to some people on the road, who had less need of it than ourselves."

"Without a doubt," replied the Bishop, "had there been a few scraps left in your wallet we should have eaten them with pleasure, for it is fitting that those who govern the Church should be nourished on the leavings of the poor. But since you have nothing left it is because God has desired it so, and He has surely desired it for our good and profit. It is possible that He will for ever hide from us the reason of this favour: perhaps, on the other hand, He will quickly make it manifest. Meanwhile, I think the only thing left for us is to push on until we find some arbutus berries and blackberries for our own nourishment, and some grass for our mules, and, being thus refreshed, to lie down upon a bed of leaves."

"As you please, Monseigneur," answered Modernus, pricking his mount.

They travelled all night, and a part of the following morning; then, having climbed a fairly steep ascent, they suddenly found themselves at the border of the wood, and beheld at their feet a plain covered by a yellowish sky, and crossed by four white roads, which lost themselves in the mist. They took that to the left, an old Roman road, formerly frequented by merchants and pilgrims, but deserted since the war had laid waste this part of Vervignole. Dense clouds were gathering in the sky, across which birds were flying; a stifling atmosphere weighed down upon the dumb, livid earth. Lightning flashed on the horizon. They urged on their wearied mules. Suddenly a mighty wind bent the tops of the trees, making the boughs crack and the battered foliage moan. The thunder muttered, and heavy drops of rain began to fall.

As they made their way through the storm, the lightning flashing about them, along a road which had become a torrent, they perceived, by the light of a flash, a house outside which there hung a branch of holly, the sign of hospitality.

The inn appeared deserted; nevertheless, the host advanced towards them, a man fierce yet humble, with a great knife at his belt, and asked what they wished for.

"A lodging, and a scrap of bread, with a drop of wine," answered the Bishop, "for we are weary and benumbed with cold."

While the host was fetching wine from the cellar, and Modernus was taking the mules to the stable, St. Nicolas, sitting at the hearth beside a dying fire, cast a glance round the smoky room. Dust and dirt covered the benches and casks; spiders spun their webs between the worm-eaten joists, whence hung

scanty bunches of onions. In a dark corner the salting-tub displayed its iron-hooped belly.

In those days the demons used to take a hand in domestic life in a far more intimate fashion than they do to-day. They haunted houses, concealed in the salt-box, the butter-tub, or some other hiding-place; they spied upon the people of the house, and watched for the opportunity to tempt them and lead them into evil. Then, too, the angels made more frequent appearances among Christian folk.

Now a devil, as big as a hazel-nut, who was hidden among the burning logs, spoke up and said to the holy Bishop:

"Look at that salting-tub, Father; it is well worth a look. It is the best salting-tub in the whole of Vervignole. It is, indeed, the model and paragon of salting-tubs. When the master here, Seigneur Garum, received it from the hands of a skilful cooper he perfumed it with juniper, thyme, and rosemary. Seigneur Garum has not his equal in bleeding the meat, boning it, and cutting it up, carefully, thoughtfully, and lovingly, and steeping it in salted liquors by which it is preserved and embalmed. He is without a rival for seasoning, concentrating, boiling down, skimming, straining, and decanting the pickle. Taste his mild-cured pork, father, and you will lick your fingers: taste his mild-cured pork, Nicolas, and you will have something to say about it."

But in these words, and above all in the voice that uttered them (it grated like a saw), the holy Bishop recognized an evil spirit. He made the sign of the Cross, whereupon the little devil exploded with a horrible noise and a very bad smell, just like a chestnut thrown into the fire without having had its skin split.

And an angel from Heaven appeared, resplendent in light and said to Nicolas:

"Nicolas, beloved of the Lord, you must know that three little children have been in that salting-tub for seven years; Garum, the innkeeper, cut up these tender infants, and put them in salt and pickle. Arise, Nicolas, and pray that they may come to life again. For, if you intercede for them, O Pontiff, the Lord, who loves you, will restore them to life."

During this speech Modernus entered the room, but he did not see the angel, nor did he hear him, for he was not sufficiently holy to be able to communicate with the heavenly spirits.

The angel further said:

"Nicolas, son of God, lay your hands on the salting-tub, and the three children will be resuscitated."

The blessed Nicolas, filled with horror, pity, zeal, and hope, gave thanks to God, and when the innkeeper reappeared with a jug in either hand, the Saint said to him in a terrible voice:

"Garum, open the salting-tub!"

Whereupon, Garum, overcome by fear, dropped both his jugs.

And the saintly Bishop Nicolas stretched out his hands, and said:

"Children, arise!"

At these words, the lid of the salting-tub was lifted up, and three young boys emerged.

"Children," said the Bishop, "give thanks to God, who through me, has raised you from out the salting-tub."

And turning towards the innkeeper, who was trembling in every limb, he said:

"Cruel man, recognize the three children whom you shamefully put to death. May you loathe your crime, and repent, that God may pardon you!"

The innkeeper, filled with terror, fled into the storm, amidst the thunder and lightning.

CHAPTER II

ST. NICOLAS embraced the three children and gently questioned them about the miserable death which they had suffered. They related that Garum, having approached them while they were gleaning in the fields, had lured them into his inn, had made them drink wine, and had cut their throats while they slept.

They still wore the rags in which they had been clothed on the day of their death, and they retained, after their resurrection, a wild and timid air. The sturdiest of the three, Maxime, was the son of a half-witted woman, who followed the soldiers to war, mounted on an ass. One night he fell from the pannier in which she carried him, and was left abandoned by the roadside. From that time forward he had lived solely by theft. The feeblest, Robin, could hardly recall his parents, peasants in the highlands, who being too poor or too avaricious to support him had deserted him in the forest. The third, Sulpice, knew nothing of his birth, but a priest had taught him his alphabet. The storm had ceased; in the buoyant, limpid air the birds were calling loudly to one another. The smiling earth was green. Modernus having fetched the mules, Bishop Nicolas mounted his, and carried Maxime wrapped in his cloak: the deacon took Sulpice and Robin upon his crupper, and they set off toward the city of Trinqueballe.

The road unfolded itself between fields of corn, vineyards, and meadows. As they went along the great Saint Nicolas who already loved the children with all his heart, examined them on subjects suitable to their age, and asked them easy questions such as: "How much is five times five?" or "What is God?" He obtained no satisfactory answers. But, far from shaming them for their ignorance, he thought only of gradually dissipating it by the application of the best pedagogic methods.

"Modernus," he said, "we will teach them firstly the truths necessary for salvation, and secondly the liberal arts, especially music, so that they may sing the praises of the Lord. It will also be expedient to teach them rhetoric, philosophy, and the history of men, plants, and animals. I desire that they shall study, in their habits and their structure, the animals, all of whose organs, in their wonderful perfection, attest the glory of the Creator."

Scarcely had the venerable Pontiff concluded this speech when a peasant woman passed along the road, dragging by the halter an old mare so heavily laden with branches cut with their leaves on that her knees were trembling, and she stumbled at every step.

"Alas," sighed the great St. Nicolas, "here is a poor horse carrying more than its burden. He has unfortunately fallen into the hands of unjust and hard-

hearted masters. One should not overload any creature, not even beasts of burden."

At these words the three boys burst out laughing. The Bishop having asked why they laughed so loudly:

"Because——" said Robin.

"That is——" said Sulpice.

"We laughed," said Maxime, "because you mistook a mare for a horse. Can't you see the difference? It is very plain to me. Don't you know anything about animals?"

"I think," said Modernus, "the first thing is to teach these children manners."

At every town, borough, village, hamlet or castle by which he passed, St. Nicolas showed the people the children rescued from the salting-tub, and related the great miracle performed by God, on his intercession; whereupon they were all very joyful, and blessed him. Informed by messengers and travellers of so prodigious an occurrence, the entire population of Trinquiballe came out to meet their pastor, unrolling precious carpets and scattering flowers in his path. The citizens, their eyes wet with tears, gazed at the three victims who had escaped from the salting-tub, and cried: "The Lord be praised!" But the poor children knew no better than to laugh and stick out their tongues; this caused further wonder and compassion, as being a palpable proof of their innocence and misfortune.

The saintly Bishop Nicolas had an orphan niece, Mirande by name, who had just reached her seventh year, and was dearer to him than the light of his eyes. A worthy widow by name Basine was rearing her in piety, good manners, and ignorance of evil. The three miraculously saved children were confided to the care of this lady. She was not lacking in judgment. She quickly saw that Maxime had courage, Robin prudence, and Sulpice the power of reflection. She devoted herself to confirming these good qualities, which, by the corruption common to the whole human race, tended unceasingly to become perverted and distorted; for Robin's cautiousness turned easily into hypocrisy, and mostly hid a greedy covetousness; Maxime was subject to fits of rage, and Sulpice frequently and obstinately expressed false ideas in very important matters. However, they were but mere children who went bird's-nesting, stole the garden fruit, tied cooking-pots to dogs' tails, put ink the holy water font, and cow-itch in Modernus' bed.

At night, wrapped in white sheets and walking on stilts, they would go into the gardens, and frighten into a swoon the serving-maids belated in their lovers' arms. They would cover the seat which Madame Basine was wont to use with bristling spikes, and when she sat down they would delight in her

sufferings, observing the confusion with which she openly applied a heedful and comforting hand to the damaged spot, for she would not for all the world have been lacking in modesty.

In spite of her age and virtues, this lady inspired them with neither love nor fear. Robin called her an old goat, Maxime an old she-ass, and Sulpice, the ass of Balaam. They teased little Mirande in all sorts of ways; they would dirty her pretty clothes by making her fall face downward on the stones. Once they pushed her head right up to the neck into a barrel of treacle. They taught her to sit astride railings, and to climb trees, contrary to the decorum of her sex; they taught her words and manners that smacked of the inn and the salting-tub. Following their example, she called Madame Bassne "an old goat," and even, taking the part for the whole, "old goat's rump." But she remained completely innocent. The purity of her soul was unchangeable.

"I am fortunate," said the holy Bishop Nicolas, "in that I rescued these children from the salting-tub, to make them good Christians. They will become faithful servants of God, and their merits will be accounted to me."

Now, by the third year after their resurrection, when they were already tall and well-made, on a day of spring, as they were all playing in the field beside the river, Maxime in a moment of facetiousness and natural high spirits, threw the Deacon Modernus into the water. Hanging on to the branch of a willow-tree, Modernus called for help. Robin ran up, made as though to draw him out by the hand, took off his ring, and fled.

Meanwhile, Sulpice, sitting motionless on the bank with his arms crossed, said:

"Modernus is making a bad end. I can see six devils, in the form of flittermice, ready to seize his soul as it comes out of his mouth."

When this serious affair was reported to him by Madame Basine and Modernus, the holy Bishop was much afflicted and fell a-sighing.

"These children," he said, "were reared in suffering, by unworthy parents. The excess of their misfortunes has caused the deformity of their characters. We must redress their wrongs by enduring patience, and persevering kindness."

"Monseigneur," answered Modernus, who was chattering with fever in his dressing-gown, and sneezing under his nightcap, for his bath had given him a cold, "it is possible that their wickedness is derived from the wickedness of their parents. But how do you explain, father, the fact that neglect has produced in each of them different and, so to speak, contrary vices, and that the desertion and destitution into which they were thrown before they were put in the salting-tub has made one avaricious, a second violent, and the

third a visionary? And in your place, my Lord, I should feel most uneasy about the last."

"Each of these children," answered the Bishop, "has yielded in his weak spot. Ill-treatment has deformed their souls in those portions that offered the least resistance. Let us straighten them out with a thousand precautions, for fear of increasing the evil instead of diminishing it. Mildness, clemency, and forbearance are the only means which should ever be employed for the improvement of men, heretics of course excepted."

"No doubt, Monseigneur, no doubt," said Modernus, sneezing three times. "But you cannot have a good education without chastisement, nor discipline without discipline. I know what I am about. If you do not punish these three little ragamuffins, they will grow up worse than Herod. I assure you I am right."

"Modernus could not be mistaken," said Madame Basine.

The Bishop did not answer. With the widow and the Deacon, he paced the length of a hawthorn hedge, which breathed forth an agreeable fragrance of honey and bitter almonds. In a slight hollow, where the soil received the water from a neighbouring spring, he stopped before a bush, whose twisted, close-packed branches were covered with gleaming, clean-cut leaves and white clusters of flowers.

"Look," he said, "at this leafy, fragrant shrub, this lovely may, this noble thorn-bush, so strong and vigorous. Observe that it is in more abundant leaf, and more glorious with bloom, than all the other thorns in the hedge. But notice also that the pale bark of its branches bears only a few thorns, which are weak and soft and blunt. What is the reason of this? It is because, growing in a rich, moist soil, quiet and secure in the wealth which sustains its life, it has utilized all the juices of the earth to augment its power and its glory, and being too strong to dream of arming against its feeble enemies, it has devoted itself entirely to the joys of its magnificent and delicious fertility. Now come a few steps up this rising path, and look at this other hawthorn, which having with difficulty issued from a dry, stony soil, languishes, deficient in both wood and leaves, and has had no other thought during its hard life than to defend itself against the innumerable enemies that threaten the weal. It is nothing but a bundle of thorns. It has employed the little sap which it received in fashioning innumerable spears, broad at the base, hard and sharp, which but ill restore confidence to its apprehensive weakness. It has nothing left over for fruitful and fragrant blossom. My friends, we are like the hawthorns. The care given to our childhood makes us better. Too harsh an up bringing hardens us."

CHAPTER III

WHEN Maxime was approaching his seventeenth year he filled the holy Bishop Nicolas with grief and the diocese with scandal by forming and training a company of rogues of his own age, with a view to kidnapping the girls of a village called Grosses-Nates, situated at a distance of four leagues from Trinqueballe. The expedition was marvellously successful. The ravishers entered the village by night, clasping to their bosoms the dishevelled virgins, who vainly uplifted to heaven their burning eyes and imploring hands. But when the fathers, brothers, and betrothed of these ravished maidens sought them out, they refused to return to the place of their birth, alleging that they felt too deeply shamed, and preferred to hide their dishonour in the arms that had caused it. Maxime, who, for his share, had taken the three most beautiful, was living in their company in a little manor dependent upon the episcopal See. In the absence of their ravisher, the Deacon Modernus arrived, by order of the Bishop, to knock at their door, answering that he came to set them free. They refused to open; and when he represented to them the abomination of their lives they dropped upon his head a crockful of dishwater, with the crock, by which his skull was fractured.

Armed with a gentle severity, the holy Bishop reproached Maxime for this violence and disorder:

"Alas," he said, "did I draw you from out of the salting-box to the ruin of the virgins of Vervignole?"

And he reproached him with the magnitude of his offence. But Maxime shrugged his shoulders, and turned his back, without making any reply.

At that moment King Berlu, in the fourteenth year of his reign, was assembling a powerful army to fight the Mambournians, the determined enemies of his kingdom, who, having entered Vervignole, were ravaging and depopulating the richest provinces of that great country.

Maxime left Trinqueballe without saying goodbye to a soul. When he was some leagues distant from the town, seeing in a field a mare of moderate quality, except that she was blind in one eye and lame, he jumped on her back and galloped off. On the following morning, accidentally meeting a farm lad who was taking a great plough horse to water, he immediately dismounted, bestrode the great horse, and ordered the lad to mount the blind mare, and to follow him, saying that he would take him for his squire should he prove satisfactory. Thus equipped Maxime presented himself to King Berlu, who accepted his services. He became in a very short time one of Vervignole's greatest captains.

Meanwhile, Sulpice was giving the holy Bishop cause for perhaps more cruel, and certainly more momentous, uneasiness; for if Maxime sinned grievously, he sinned without malice, and offending God without thought, and, so to speak, unknowingly. But Sulpice set himself to do evil with a greater and more unusual malignity. Being destined from early youth for the Church he assiduously studied letters, both sacred and profane; but his soul was a corrupted vessel, wherein Truth was turned into Error. He sinned in spirit; he erred in matters of faith with surprising precocity. At an age when people have as yet no ideas at all, he overflowed with wrong ones. A thought occurred to him which was doubtless suggested by the devil. In a field belonging to the Bishop he gathered a multitude of boys and girls of his own age and, climbing into a tree, he exhorted them to leave their fathers and mothers to follow Jesus Christ, and to go in, parties through the country-side, burning priories and presbyteries in order to lead the Church back into evangelical poverty. This youthful mob, led away by emotion, followed the sinner along the roads of Vervignole, singing canticles, burning barns, pillaging chapels, and devastating the ecclesiastical lands. Many of these crazy creatures perished of fatigue, hunger, and cold, or were killed by villagers. The episcopal palace re-echoed with the complaints of the priesthood and the lamentations of mothers.

The pious Bishop Nicolas sent for the originator of these disorders. With extreme mildness, and infinite sadness, he reproached him for having misused the Word for the misleading of souls, and reminded him that God had not picked him out of the salting-tub in order that he should attack the property of our Holy Mother, the Church.

"Consider, my son," he said, "the greatness of your offence. You appear before your pastor charged with turmoil, sedition, and murder."

But young Sulpice, maintaining a horrid calm, answered with a voice full of assurance, that he had not sinned, neither had he offended God; but, on the contrary, he had acted in accordance with the bidding of Heaven, for the good of the Church. And he professed before the dismayed Bishop the false doctrines of the Manicheans, the Arians, the Nestorians, the Sabellians, the Vaudois, the Albigenses, and the Bégards. So eager was he to embrace these monstrous errors that he did not see how they contradicted one another, and were mutually devoured in the bosom that cherished and revived them.

The pious Bishop endeavoured to lead Sulpice back into the right path, but he failed to overcome the unhappy lad's obstinacy.

Having dismissed him, he knelt and prayed.

"I thank thee, O Lord, for having sent me this young man, as a whetstone on which to sharpen my patience and my charity."

While two of the children he had rescued from the salting-tub were causing him so much pain, St. Nicolas was obtaining some consolation from the third. Robin showed himself neither violent in his actions nor arrogant in his thoughts. He had not the sturdy, ruddy appearance of Maxime; nor the grave, audacious manner of Sulpice. Small, thin, yellow, lined, and shrunken, of humble, obsequious and reverential bearing, he devoted himself to assisting the Bishop and clergy, helping the clerks to keep the accounts of the episcopal revenues, and making complicated calculations with the assistance of balls threaded on rods; he even multiplied and divided numbers in his head, without the use of slate or pencil, with a rapidity and accuracy that would have been admired even in a past master of money and finance. For him it was a pleasure to keep the books of the Deacon Modernus, who, growing old, used to muddle the figures and fall asleep at his desk. To oblige the Bishop, and obtain money for him, he spared neither trouble nor fatigue. From the Lombards, he learnt how to calculate both the simple and compound interest on a sum of money for a day, week, month, or year; he feared not to visit the filthy Jews in the black lanes of the Ghetto, in order to learn, by mingling with them, the standard of metals, the price of precious stones, and the art of clipping coin. Ultimately, with a little store which he had accumulated by marvellous industry in Vervignole, in Mondousiana, and even in Mambournia, he attended the fairs, tournaments, pardons, and jubilees, to which people of all conditions flocked from all parts of Christendom: peasants, burghers, clerics, and seigneurs; there he changed their money, and every time he returned a little richer than he had departed. Robin did not spend the money he had made, but brought it to the Bishop.

St. Nicolas was extremely hospitable, and very liberal in almsgiving. He spent all his property and that of the Church in making gifts to pilgrims and assisting the unfortunate. Thus he continually found himself short of money; and he was much obliged to Robin for the skill and energy with which the young treasurer obtained the sums which he required. The condition of penury in which the holy Bishop had placed himself owing to his magnificence and liberality was greatly aggravated by the condition of the times. The war which was ravaging Vervignole also ruined the Church in Trinqueballe. The soldiery who were fighting in the country-side about the town pillaged the farms, levied contributions on the peasantry, drove out the religious orders, and burned the castles and abbeys.

The clergy and the faithful could no longer contribute to the expenses of their creed, and thousands of peasants, fleeing from the free-booters came daily to beg their bread at the door of the episcopal palace. For their sakes, the good St. Nicolas felt the poverty which he had never felt for his own.

Fortunately, Robin was always ready to lend him money, which the holy pontiff naturally agreed to return in more prosperous times.

Alas, the war was now raging throughout the kingdom, from north to south, from east to west, attended by its two inseparable companions, famine and pestilence. The peasantry turned robbers, and the monks followed the armies. The inhabitants of Trinquetalle, having neither wood for firing, nor bread to eat, died like flies at the approach of winter. Wolves entered the outlying parts of the town, devouring little children. At this sad juncture, Robin came to inform the Bishop that not only was he unable to provide any further sum of money, however small, but that being unable to obtain anything from his debtors, and being pressed by his creditors, he had been compelled to hand over all his assets to the Jews.

He brought this distressing news to his benefactor with the obsequious politeness which was usual to him; but he appeared a great deal less afflicted than he might have been in this grievous extremity. As a matter of fact, he was hard put to it to conceal, under a long face, his joyous feelings and his lively satisfaction. The parchment of his dry, humble, yellow eyelids ill concealed the light of joy which shone from his sharp eyes.

Sadly stricken, St. Nicolas remained quiet and serene under the blow.

"God will soon re-establish our declining affairs," he said. "He will not permit the house which He has built to be overthrown."

"That is true," said Modernus, "but you may be sure that Robin, whom you drew out of the salting-tub, has made an arrangement with the Lombards of Pont-Vieux and the Jews of the Ghetto to despoil you, and that he is retaining the lion's share of the plunder."

Modernus spoke the truth. Robin had lost no money. He was richer than ever, and had just been appointed treasurer to the King.

CHAPTER IV

AT this time Mirande was nearing the close of her seventeenth year. She was beautiful, and well grown. An air of purity, innocence, and artlessness hung round her like a veil. The length of her eyelashes, which barred her blue eyes, and the childlike smallness of her mouth, gave the impression that evil could never find means to enter into her. Her ears were so tiny, so fine, so finished and so delicate, that the least modest of men could never have dared to breathe into them any but the most innocent of speeches. In the whole of Ver-vigbole no virgin inspired so much respect, and none had greater need to do so, for she was marvellously simple, credulous, and defenceless.

The pious Bishop Nicolas, her uncle, cherished her more dearly every day, and was more deeply attached to her than one should be to any of God's creatures. He loved her, undoubtedly, in God; but he also loved her for herself; he took great delight in her, and he loved to love her; it was his only weakness. The Saints themselves are not always able to cut through all the ties of the flesh.

St. Nicolas loved his niece, with a pure love, but not without gratification of the senses. On the day following that on which he had learned of Robin's bankruptcy, he went to see Mirande in order to hold pious converse with her, as was his duty, for he stood in the place of a father to her, and had taken charge of her education.

She lived in the upper town, near the Cathedral in a house called "The House of the Musicians," because there were to be seen on its front men and animals playing on divers instruments. There were, notably, an ass playing a flute, and a philosopher, recognizable by his long beard and ink-horn, clashing cymbals. Every one explained these figures according to his fancy. It was the finest dwelling-house in the town.

The Bishop found his niece crouching on the floor, with dishevelled hair, her eyes glittering with tears, by the side of an empty, open coffer, in a room full of confusion.

He inquired of her the reason of this affliction, and of the disorder that prevailed around her. Turning upon him her despairing gaze, she told him with a thousand sighs that Robin, the Robin who had escaped from the salting-tub, the darling Robin, having many a time told her that if she ever wanted a dress, an ornament or a jewel, he would gladly lend her the money wherewith to buy it, she had frequently had recourse to his kindness, which appeared inexhaustible; but that very morning a Jew called Seligmann had come to her with four sheriff's officers, had presented the notes, signed by herself, which she had given Robin, and as she had not the money to pay

them he had taken away all the clothes, head-dresses and jewels which she possessed.

"He has taken," she sobbed, "my bodices and petticoats of velvet, brocade and lace; my diamonds, my emeralds, my sapphires, my jacinths, my amethysts, my rubies, my garnets, and my turquoises; he has taken my great diamond cross, with angels' heads in enamel, my large necklace, consisting of two table diamonds, three cabochons, and six knots each of four pearls; he has taken my great collar of thirteen table diamonds, and twenty hanging pearls!"

And without saying more she wept bitterly into her handkerchief.

"My daughter," answered the saintly Bishop, "a Christian virgin is sufficiently adorned when she wears modesty for a necklace, and chastity for a girdle. None the less, as the scion of a most noble and most illustrious family it was right that you should wear diamonds and pearls. Your jewels were the treasury of the poor, and I deplore the fact that they should have been snatched from you."

He assured her that she would certainly recover them, either in this world or the next; he said everything possible to assuage her regret, and soothe her sorrow, and he comforted her. For she had a tender soul, which longed for consolation. But he himself left her full of affliction.

On the following day, as he was about to celebrate Mass in the cathedral, the holy Bishop saw coming towards him, in the sacristy, the three Jews, Seligmann, Issachar, and Meyer, who, wearing green hats and fillets upon their shoulders, very humbly presented him the notes which Robin had made over to them. As the venerable pontiff could not pay diem, they called up twenty porters, with baskets, sacks, picklocks, carts, cords, and ladders, and commenced to pick the locks of the wardrobes, coffers, and tabernacles. The holy man cast on them a look which would have destroyed three Christians. He threatened them with the penalties of sacrilege, both in this world and the next, he pointed out that their mere presence in the house of the God, whom they had crucified, called down the fire of heaven upon their heads. They listened with the calm of people for whom anathema, reprobation, malediction, and execration were their daily bread. He then prayed to them, besought them, and promised to pay as soon as he could, twofold, threefold, tenfold, a hundredfold, the debt which they had acquired. They excused themselves politely for being unable to postpone the little transaction. The Bishop threatened to sound the tocsin, to rouse against them the people who would kill them like dogs for profaning, violating, and stealing the miraculous images and holy relics. They smilingly pointed to the sheriff's officers, who were guarding them. They were protected by King Berlín, for they lent him money. At this sight the holy Bishop, recognizing

that resistance would be rebellion, and remembering Him who replaced the ear of Malchus, remained inert and speechless, and bitter tears dropped from his eyes. Seligmann, Issachar, and Meyer took away the golden shrines enriched with precious stones, enamels and cabochons, the reliquaries in the form of chalices, lanterns, naves, and towers, the portable altars of alabaster encased in gold and silver, the coffer enameled by the skilful craftsmen of Limoges and the Rhine, the altar-crosses, the Gospels bound in carved ivory and antique cameos, the desks ornamented with festoons of trailing vines, the consular registers, the pyxes, the candelabra and candlesticks, the lamp, of which they blew out the sacred flame, and spilt the blessed oil on the tiles, the chandeliers like enormous crowns, the duplets with beads of pearl and amber, the eucharistic doves, the ciboria, the chalices, the patens, the kisses of peace, incense boxes and flagons, the innumerable ex-votos—hands, arms, legs, eyes, mouths, and hearts, all of silver—the nose of King Sidoc, the breast of Queen Blandine, and the head in solid gold of Saint Cromadaire, the first apostle of Vervignole, and the blessed patron of Trinqueballe. They even carried off the miraculous image of St. Gibbosine, whom the people of Vervignole had never invoked in vain in time of pestilence, famine, or war. This very ancient and venerable image was made of leaves of beaten gold nailed upon a core of cedar-wood, and was covered with precious stones of the bigness of ducks' eggs, which emitted fiery rays of red, blue, yellow and violet and white. For the past three hundred years her enameled eyes, wide open in her golden face, had compelled such respect from the inhabitants of Trinqueballe that they saw her in their dreams, splendid and terrible, threatening them with the direst penalties if they failed to supply her with sufficient quantities of virgin-wax and crown-pieces. St. Gibbosine groaned, trembled, and tottered on her pedestal, and allowed herself to be carried away without resistance, out of the basilica to which, from time immemorial, she had drawn innumerable pilgrims.

After the departure of these sacrilegious thieves the holy Bishop Nicolas ascended the steps of the despoiled altar, and consecrated the blood of our Lord in an old silver chalice, of German origin, thin and deeply dented. He prayed for the afflicted, and in particular for Robin, whom, by the will of God, he had rescued from the salting-box.

CHAPTER V

SHORTLY after this, King Berlu defeated the Mambournians in a great battle. He was, at first, unaware of the fact, for armed conflicts always present a great confusion, and during the last two hundred years the Vervignolians had lost the habit of victory. But the precipitate and disordered flight of the Mambournians informed him of his advantage. Instead of fighting a rear-guard action he pursued the enemy, and regained half his kingdom. The victorious army entered the city of Trinqueballe, all beflagged and beflowered in its honour, and in that illustrious capital of Vervignole it committed a great number of rapes, thefts, murders, and other cruelties, burnt several houses, sacked the churches, and took from the cathedral all that the Jews had left there, which, truth to tell, was not much.

Maxime, who having become a knight and commander of eighty lances, had largely contributed to the victory, was one of the first to enter the city, and repaired straightway to the House of the Musicians, where dwelt the beautiful Mirande, whom he had not seen since his departure for the war. He found her in her bower, plying her distaff, and fell upon her with such impetuosity that the young lady lost her innocence without, so to speak, realizing that she had done so. And when, having recovered from her surprise, she exclaimed: "Is it you, Seigneur Maxime? What are you doing here?" and was preparing as in duty bound to resist her aggressor, he was quietly walking down the street, readjusting his armour and ogling the girls.

Possibly she would have entirely overlooked this offence, had it not been that some time later she found that she was about to become a mother. Captain Maxime was then fighting in Mambournia. All the town knew her shame: she confided it to the great St. Nicolas, who, on learning this astonishing news, lifted his eyes to heaven, and said:

"Lord, did you rescue this man from the salting-tub only as a ravening wolf to devour my sheep? Your wisdom is adorable; but your ways are dark, and your designs mysterious."

And in that same year, on the Sunday of Mid-Lent, Sulpice threw himself at the feet of the holy Bishop, saying:

"From my earliest youth, my keenest wish has been to consecrate myself to the Lord. Allow me, father, to embrace the monastic state, and to make my profession in the monastery of the mendicant friars of Trinqueballe."

"My son," answered the good St. Nikolas, "there is no worthier condition than that of the monk. Happy is he who in the shade of the cloister takes shelter from the tempests of the age. But of what avail to flee the storm if the storm is within oneself? Of what avail to affect an outward show of humility, if one's bosom contains a heart full of pride? What shall you profit

by donning the livery of obedience if your soul be in revolt? I have seen you, my son, fall into more errors than Sabellius, Alius, Nestorius, Eutyches, Manes, Pelagius, and Pachosius combined, and revive, before your twentieth year, twelve centuries of peculiar opinions. It is true that you have not been very obstinate in any of them, but your successive recantations appear to betray less submission to our Holy Mother the Church than eagerness to rush from one error to another, to leap from Manicheeism to Sabellianism, and from the crime of the Albigenses to the ignominies of the Vaudois."

Sulpice listened to this discourse with a contrite heart, a simplicity of mind and submissiveness, that drew tears from the great St. Nicolas.

"I deplore, repudiate, condemn, reprove, detest, execrate, and abominate my errors, past, present, and future," he said. "I submit myself to the Church fully and entirely, totally and generally, purely and simply; and I have no belief but her belief, no faith but her faith, no knowledge but her knowledge: I neither see, hear, nor feel, save only through her. She might tell me that the fly which has but now settled on the nose of the Deacon Modernus was a camel, and I should incontinently, without dispute, contest, murmur, resistance, hesitation or doubt, believe, declare, proclaim, and confess, under torture and unto death, that it was a camel that settled on the nose of the Deacon Modernus. For the Church is the Fountain of Truth, and I am nought by myself but a vile receptacle of Error."

"Take care, my father," said Modernus. "Sulpice is capable of overdoing submission to the Church even to the point of Heresy. Do you not see that he submits with frenzy, in transports and swooning? Is wallowing in submission a good way of submitting? He is annihilating himself; he is committing suicide."

But the Bishop reprimanded his deacon for holding such ideas, which were contrary to charity, and sent the postulant to the noviciate of the mendicant friars of Trinquetalle.

Alas, at the end of a year those priests, till then so quiet and humble, were torn by frightful schisms, plunged into a thousand errors against the Catholic truth, their days filled with disorder, and their souls with sedition! Sulpice inspired the brothers with this poison. He sustained against his superiors that there was no longer any true Pope, since miracles no longer accompanied the elections of the Sovereign Pontiffs; nor, rightly speaking, any Church, since Christians had ceased to live the life of the apostles and the first of the faithful; that there was no purgatory; that it was not necessary to confess to a priest if one confessed to God; that men do wrong in making use of moneys of gold and silver, for they should share in common the fruits of the earth. These abominable maxims, which he forcibly sustained, were combated by some, and adopted by others, causing

horrible scandals. A little later Sulpice taught the doctrine of perfect purity, which nothing can soil, and the good brothers' monastery became like a cage of monkeys. This pestilence did not remain confined within the walls of a monastery. Sulpice went preaching through the city; his eloquence, the internal fire by which he was consumed, the simplicity of his life, and his unshakable courage touched all hearts.

On hearing the voice of the reformer, the ancient city, evangelized by St. Cromadaire, and enlightened by St. Gibbosine, fell into disorder and dissolution; every sort of extravagance and impiety was committed there, by day and by night. In vain did the great St. Nicolas warn his flock by exhortations, threats, and fulminations. The evil increased unchecked, and it was sad to see the contagion spreading itself among the well-to-do townsfolk, the lords, and the clergy, as much as and more than among the poor artisans and the small tradesfolk.

One day when the man of God was lamenting the deplorable state of the church of Vervignole in the cloister of the cathedral, his meditations were disturbed by strange shrieks, and he saw a woman, stark naked, walking on all fours, with a peacock's feather for a tail. As she came nearer, she barked, sniffed, and licked the ground. Her fair head was covered with mud, and her whole body was a mass of filth. In this unhappy creature the holy Bishop Nicolas recognized his niece Mirande.

"What do you there, my daughter?" he cried. "Why are you naked, and wherefore do you walk on your hands and knees? Have you no shame?"

"No, uncle, I am not ashamed," sweetly replied Mirande. "I should, on the contrary, be ashamed of any other gesture, or method of progression. If one wishes to please God, it is thus that one should behave. The holy Brother Sulpice taught me to conduct myself thus, in order to resemble the beasts, who are nearer to God than is Man, in that they have not sinned. So long as I am in the state in which you see me, there will be no danger of my sinning. I have come, uncle, to beg you in all love and charity to do likewise; for unless you do you cannot be saved. Remove, I beg, your clothes, and adopt the posture of the animals, in whom God joyfully sees His image which has not been distorted by sin. I give you this advice by order of the holy brother Sulpice, and consequently by order of God Himself, for the holy brother is in the Lord's secrets. Strip yourself naked, uncle, and come with me, so that we may show ourselves to the people for their edification."

"Can I believe my eyes and ears?" gasped the holy Bishop, whose voice was stifled by sobs. "I had a niece blooming in beauty, virtue, and piety; the three children whom I rescued from the salting-tub have reduced her to the miserable condition in which I now see her. The first has despoiled her of all her property, an abundant source of alms, and the patrimony of the poor;

the second has robbed her of her honour, and the third has turned her into a heretic."

He threw himself on the flagstones, embracing his niece, begging her to renounce so evil a way of life, and adjuring her to reclothe herself, and walk on her feet like a human being, ransomed by the blood of Jesus Christ.

But she replied only by sharp yelps and lamentable shrieks.

Before long the town of Trinqueballe was filled with naked men and women, walking on all fours and barking; they called themselves the Edenites, and their ambition was to lead back the world to the times of perfect innocence, before the unfortunate creation of Adam and Eve.

The Reverend Father Gilles Caquerole, a Dominican, inquisitor of the faith in the city, university, and ecclesiastical province of Trinqueballe, became uneasy concerning this novelty, and proceeded to look into it minutely. In the most urgent fashion, by letters under his seal, he invited the Bishop Nicolas, in co-operation with himself, to arrest, imprison, interrogate, and sentence these enemies of God, and especially their principal leaders, the Franciscan monk, Sulpice, and a dissolute woman named Mirande. The great St. Nicolas burned with an ardent zeal for the unity of the Church and the destruction of heresy, but he dearly loved his niece. He hid her in the episcopal palace, and refused to hand her over to the inquisitor Caquerole, who denounced him to the Pope as an abettor of disorder and the propagator of a new and very detestable heresy. The Pope enjoined Nicolas to no longer withhold the guilty one from her legitimate judges. Nicolas eluded the injunction, protested his obedience, and did not obey. The Pope fulminated against him in the Bull *Maleficus pastor*, in which the venerable pontiff was accused of being a disobedient member of the Church, a heretic, or one smelling of heresy, a keeper of concubines, a committer of incest, a corrupter of the people, an old woman and a meddling old fool, and was passionately admonished.

In this way the Bishop did himself a great deal of harm without any benefit to his beloved niece. King Berlu, having been threatened with excommunication if he did not lend his secular arm to the Church in pursuit of the Edenites, sent some men-at-arms to the episcopal palace of Trinqueballe.

They tore Mirande from her asylum: she was brought before the inquisitor Caquerole, thrown into a deep dungeon, and fed upon bread which the jailers' dogs had refused; but what afflicted her most was that she was forcibly compelled to don an old frock and a hood, and that she could no longer be certain of not sinning.

The monk Sulpice escaped the investigations of the Holy Office and succeeded in reaching Mambournia, and found an asylum in a monastery of that kingdom, where he established new sects even more pernicious than the previous one.

Nevertheless, heresy, fortified by persecution, and exulting in danger, now spread its ravages over the whole of Vervignole. All over the kingdom there were seen in the fields thousands of naked men and women, nibbling the grass, bleating, lowing, roaring, neighing, and contending at night with sheep, cattle, and horses for the use of stable and manger. The inquisitor informed the Holy Father of these horrible scandals, and warned him that so long as the Protector of the Edenites, the odious Nicolas, remained seated on the throne of St. Cromadaire, the evil could only continue to increase. Conformably with this advice the Pope hurled against the Bishop, like a thunderbolt, the Bull *Deterrima quondam*, by which he deprived him of all his ecclesiastical functions, and cut him off from the communion of the faithful.

CHAPTER VI

CRUSHED by the Vicar of Jesus Christ, steeped in bitterness, overwhelmed by affliction, the holy Nicolas stepped down without regret from his illustrious seat, and departed, no more to return thither, from the city of Trinquéballe, which for thirty years had witnessed his pontifical virtues and apostolic labours. There is in western Vervignole a lofty mountain, whose peals are covered with perpetual snow; from its flanks there descend, in spring, the foaming sonorous cascades that fill the valley torrents with a water as blue as the sky. There, in a region where grow the larch, the arbutus, and the hazel, some hermits supported themselves on berries and milk. This mountain is called that of the Saviour. It was here that St. Nicolas resolved to take refuge, and, far from the world, to weep for his sins and those of man.

As he was climbing the mountain in search of some wild spot where he might establish his habitation, having emerged above the clouds which are almost always gathered about the flanks of the peak, he saw upon the threshold of a hut an old man sharing his bread with a tame hind. His hair fell over his forehead, and nothing could be perceived of his face but the tip of his nose and a long white beard.

The holy Nicolas greeted him with these words:

"Peace be with you, brother."

"It delights to dwell upon this mountain," answered the recluse.

"I also," replied the holy Nicolas, "have come hither to end, in calm, days which have been disturbed by the tumult of the times and the malignity of men."

As he was speaking in this wise, the hermit gazed at him attentively.

"Are you not," he said at length, "the Bishop of Trinquéballe, that Nicolas whose work and virtues are extolled by men?"

When, by a sign, the holy pontiff admitted that he was that man, the hermit threw himself at his feet.

"Monseigneur, to you I owe the saving of my soul, if, as I hope, my soul is saved."

Nicolas raised him with kindness, and asked him:

"My brother, how have I had the happiness to work for your salvation?"

"Twenty years ago," replied the recluse, "when I was an innkeeper at the edge of a wood, on a deserted road, I saw one day, in a field, three little children gleaning. I lured them to my house, gave them wine to drink, cut their throats in their sleep, cut them up into small pieces, and salted them.

On seeing them emerge from the salting-tub I was frozen with terror; owing to your exhortations my heart melted; I experienced a salutary repentance, and, fleeing from men, I came to this mountain, where I consecrated my days to God. He bestowed His peace upon me."

"What," cried the holy Bishop, "you are that cruel Garum, guilty of so heinous a crime! I praise God that he has accorded you a peaceful heart, after the horrible murder of three children, whom you put in the salting-tub like pigs; but as for me, alas! for having drawn them out of it my life has been filled with tribulation, my soul steeped in bitterness, and my Bishopric laid wholly desolate. I have been deposed, excommunicated by the common Father of the Faithful. Why have I been so cruelly punished for what I did?"

"Let us worship God," said Garum, "and let us not ask His motives."

The great St. Nicolas, with his own hands, built a hut near that of Garum, and there, in prayer and penitence, he ended his days.