

The Father Confessor

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

"I had thought for a glad moment you loved me. A week ago I hoped for a different answer. Will you tell me why this is?"

"A week ago; that is a long time."

"I see; you had not then met him."

"No, I had not met him; and yet I seem always to have known him."

"You do not know him, you idealize. Your vivid imagination, your love of romance and beauty, blind you. He is cruel and unscrupulous."

"How dare you speak to me so?"

"I dare because I love. Oh, it is not jealousy. Only give him up, and I will go away where you will see me no more. Can you not read his eyes? They are so cruel. He would kill a person if he hated him."

"His eyes, they are not cruel; they are full of—love, and he does not hate me."

"He would kill a woman if he grew tired of her."

"Oh, you must not speak so. I love him, and—he has asked me to be his wife,"

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

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The priest stood at the bedside of the dying woman, he looked down upon her and wondered at her face. Her hair had turned pure white, and she so young. Her eyes were the eyes of a hare, full of watching, always seeming to be expecting some sudden fright. Her nervous hands, for ever twitching, kept pulling at the blankets and moving unceasingly.

"I sent for you," she said, with a weak smile, "to tell you how wrong you were. He has been good to me, and loves me so. I pray God for his sake not to let me die."

The door was flung open and a man staggered in. The woman stretched out her thin arms to him, and then saw his face. She gave a shrill death cry, and rising from her bed, fell towards him. The priest made a step to raise her, but drew back, giving the man his place. Laying the dead woman back on the bed, the man broke into loud sobs.

"What has happened," said the stern priest, "that you burst into a sick-room with your face like that?"

"They said she was worse, and I rushed down afraid."

"You have frightened her to death."

The man grew as white as she was.

"Frightened her to death?" he repeated. "Look at your face," said the priest. The man stood before the glass. Up the left side of his throat and face there seemed to be a great red gash. The blood from it was on his collar and shirt.

"Oh," he said, "I must have cut myself. I was shaving when the maid rushed up to say my wife was worse, and had sent for a priest."

He drew a wet cloth across his face, and the crimson was gone; only a little scratch to make all that blood!

The priest closed the door, and went out into the night.

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For the second time that year the priest stood in the same house, and this time, too, by the bedside of a dying person. Now it was the man who lay there broken, where the wheels of a heavy van had crossed him. The tortured creature cried to the priest, "Confession! confession!"

"I am here," the priest answered. He bent his head nearer the pillow.

"You see that book—that book?" whispered the man.

"I see no book."

"There, upon the table—De Quincey's *Essay*."

"Yes, *Murder as One of the Fine Arts*; what of it?"

"I read it—and I thought of murder as a fine art. No poisons, or knives, or stifling for me. I planned a murder that no one could hang me for, or prove against me. A fine art! Oh, I had found the art! Hear me! hear me!"

"I hear you.

"Shall I ever be forgiven? Nobody ever suspected me—*she* did not suspect."

"She?"

"A woman; I will tell you the story. Come nearer. Why do you look at me like that? I do not know you. Do you hate me? Are you not a priest?"

"Yes, a priest; God forgive me! Continue in peace, I am listening."

"Yes, yes. O heavens! what torture! My murder had no suffering like this, like the death You give me, oh God!"

"Hush, hush; be patient. It is your punishment. Pray for forgiveness."

"I will pray, yes, yes; but I must tell you first of my sin. I must confess."

"I am listening."

"I will tell you a story; mind, it is a story. Oh! it could not have been a murder. No one could say it was a murder. No jury could hang me, even if they knew all. My excuse, youth—and the indissolubility of the marriage bond. I was very young when I married."

"And she?"

"She. Oh, yes, she was very young, too; but I did not know my own mind—did not know that in a few years I should meet a woman who would be all the world to me, and whom I could not have. I would have flown to her, but she would not have me, and the dull tie that I hated bound me down."

"Why did you marry?"

"Why? Oh, I loved my wife once—in a way, with a boy's love. And there was another man after her always. The rivalry made me more eager, more blind to my true feelings. It was winning her from him I thought of more than gaining her myself."

"So lightly held, so bitterly deplored," the priest muttered.

"You bless me, Father?" the man continued; "I want it. Pray for my ease; I am in torture. My sin is great. Soon after I married my life became unbearable. At first I did not notice how dull and uninteresting my wife was, but when I saw the other woman my heart leaped out to her, and I knew I had met my fate. Then my home life became more and more dreary. The dull monotony of domesticity rose up around me, and chained me down. I grew to hate my wife's face, with its never-varying expression of sweetness and prettiness. She was always the same: she met me with a smile every day I came home, and bid me good-bye with the same smile at the gate in the

morning. I knew it so well, and hated it so. She had a mouth like a young child's, and when she smiled a dimple would come—”

“Your crime,” said the stern priest.

“Yes, yes. I hated her when I compared her with the grand woman with the changing soul of the sea—the woman I wanted and could not get because of this little foolish child I had married. And there was no way to reach her except across the dead body of my wife—no way that she would accept. So I thought and thought, until in my mind there grew up a plan. I knew my wife's heart was not strong; she had a way of putting her hand upon her breast when she got any sudden fright, and it suggested an idea to me. It was then that I read De Quincey's *Murder as a Fine Art*, and I knew I could do better than anything I read there. I brought her away to a little watering-place, not far from the city. The other woman was there. We went for long walks along the high cliffs. Once I walked by the edge as close as I dared, watching the effect on my wife. She grew white and nervous, begging me to come away. But the other woman only laughed, and that made me mad. Trying to make her fear for me also, I walked too near the edge, and the ground crumbled beneath me. When next I knew anything I saw the other woman bending over me and laughing. I rose to my feet and found I was not hurt.

“‘Come, come, you are all right,’ the woman said; ‘you only fell a little way. I knew you could not be hurt.’

“Vexed at her calmness, I looked round for my wife. She was walking up and down behind me, holding her hands across her breast.

“‘Oh,’ she said, ‘you frightened me so. My heart beats so strangely.’

“For some moments she could not calm herself, then she turned to me with her smile, holding my hands.

“‘Did I frighten you?’ she said; ‘but my heart, I thought it would not beat again. I thought you had fallen over the cliff into the sea. I did not know there was a ledge only a few feet down.

“That was my first trial, half accidental, but wholly successful. What did you say, Father? I did not hear you. Your hand is hurting mine; take it away.

“From that time I followed out my idea; it was so easy. One day for her a long run for a train, the next a climb over a steep hill. One night a lamp overturned and the bed on fire; the next, a pretended alarm of thieves. One evening when she was alone I dressed as a tramp and threatened her till she swooned. One morning I purchased a savage dog and let it run loose through the house. So things went on till the constant wear on her nerves and heart began to tell, and all through she never suspected; all through I never laid my hands upon her in violence. I travelled with her in other countries when my opportunities here were getting few, and the other woman came as her friend. All the time the clever eyes of the other woman were upon me, and I did not know if she knew or not. If I spoke of my love for her she drew herself away, saying, ‘Be silent; you are a married man.’ But I felt that if it were not for my wife she would have loved me, and the thought of it made me savage. Think of it—only one life between you and the woman you love. But you are a priest; what do you know of love? Oh, the grand woman, with eyes changing as the heavens, and she as far from me as the stars, parted by that other face which must be always with me, with its baby mouth, and the dimples that came when she smiled—”

“Your story,” said the stern priest; “proceed.”

“Pity me, Father; you cannot know the temptations of the world or the pity of love. I had so long to wait, and I never touched her in violence. She loved me always, and passed away in peace.

“One day, in a foreign country, a servant killed a poisonous snake, and drew it along the ground as he passed to burn it amongst the refuse of the garden. I saw my wife come and set her chair across the track he had left. I went out of the house, saying that it was fate; for I knew the mate of the snake would follow the scent, seeking for its companion, and would find my wife in its way. Do you pray for me, Father? I cannot hear you, you speak so low. When I returned she was sitting white and statue-like, without a movement, and round her ankle was curled the body of a snake. I would have rushed to her, causing her to rise, and thus have ended it all, for my heart was evil within me that day. But the other woman came to the door that minute, and rested her eyes upon me so that I stood transfixed, afraid to move. She bore in her hands a saucer of milk, and laid it down as near the serpent as she dared, thrusting it slowly forward with a stick, all the time whispering to my wife, ‘Don’t move, don’t speak, for your life.’ The snake uncurled and glided from her foot at the smell of the milk, and the other woman with a blow of the stick broke its back.”

“God bless her!” the priest said aloud; “God bless her!”

“Ah, yes!” said the dying man, “she was good, she would have saved me from murder if she could. Once it struck me that she only followed us to protect my wife from me. But it was only for a moment. I would have killed them both if it were so. Do you think it could have been so? You, priest, tell me it was only because she loved me.”

But the priest did not answer. He sat with his head upon his breast, his hands clenched.

“From the hot countries,” continued the man, “I went to the cold. I took her upon the glaciers of Switzerland, and I vowed in my heart she should not return from them. Once, in crossing a deep crevasse, my foot slipped, and in saving myself I threw her over. But the other woman turned and saw us; I replaced the knife I had taken from my pocket, and drew my wife by the rope back to safety. After that the other woman went behind, and with my wife between us I dared not try again, for the rope would bear the love of my heart upon it then. But this is my story, and what have I more to say? I came home, and my wife and the woman I loved came too, the chain that kept me from her still unbroken. My wife was then a shadow of her former self, shaken and frightened as a hare. But I never ceased from my plan, and at last she broke down beneath it, and illness came upon her. It was when she lay almost without hope of recovery that I drew blood from my cheek, scattering it over my face and neck, and staggered into her room, so that when she saw me in her weakness she gave a great cry, and fell back dead. And yet I swear to you I never laid my hand upon her in violence, nor did she suspect. And I have written to the other woman many times, but she comes not; nor when I wrote saying that my wife was dying did she reply. But she will come now that I am free. Say it was not murder, Father, for I never laid my hand upon my wife in violence, and death may have been from natural causes. But I shall recover now that I am free for the woman I love, free from the face of the woman I married—with her baby mouth where the dimples came. Bless me, Father, for I am weary.”

The priest arose and bent over the bed. He laid his white hands around the throat of the man, but the man smiled back on him in victory. He was already dead.

The priest fell upon his knees by the bedside; he held a crucifix in his hands. Laying his forehead upon it, he fought with his soul, and when he arose in the pale morning light, upon his white brow the figure of the crucified was seen, red in his blood.