

CHAPTER XXXVI

Abbe Fluet's Conversion, Temptation and Final Triumphs.

The 10th of July, 1881, I received the following letter:—

“Sandwich.

“Dear Mr. Chiniquy:—

“My dear father is very sick. He has not many days to live. He wants you to be by his side in these solemn days to help him to prepare himself to die, as he has lived, a true Christian.

“Please grant us that favour.

“Respectfully yours,

“(Signed) MARY WILLIAMS,

“née Fluet.”

The reader will ask me, “Who is that Fluet who wants you by his bedside when at his last hour of life?”

My regret, when answering that question is that I have only a short chapter to offer, when I could write such an interesting volume on that remarkable man, the first French Canadian Roman Catholic priest whom I have known brave enough to throw off the heavy and ignominious yoke of the Pope to follow Christ.

In the year 1831, when a professor of belles-lettres in the college of Nicolet, the director, Rev. I. Leprohon, used very often to show his friendly feelings in sitting by me during the hours of recreation, under the shadows of the giant pine-trees, which made an earthly paradise of that never-to-be-forgotten spot.

That venerable man was my benefactor. I loved him as a father and I venerated him as a saint.

Though many times he expressed his desire that I should become his successor as director of that college, I refused to

consent. The principal object of his conversations was to initiate me into the numerous little mysteries, difficulties and responsibilities of his position. He was often speaking of the difficult art of knowing the characters of the men by whom we are surrounded, in order to become a source of blessing and usefulness to them.

This caused me one day to put him the following question:

"As you have been the director of this college for more than twenty years, you have had to deal with a great number of professors; is it an indiscretion to ask you whom you consider the best among the many ecclesiastics and professors who have laboured under you while the director of the college at Nicolet?"

He answered me: "Your question is a very delicate one, and the answer you want is still more delicate and difficult. Give me twenty-four hours to think and I will answer you."

My curiosity was not a little stimulated by that promise. I was longing for the moment when I would know the name of the most worthy man who had served as professor and teacher in that college of Nicolet which was so dear to me.

I was not a little pleased, when, the next day, I saw him coming to me with such a smiling face that I could see I was not to be disappointed.

After the most mature consideration, he said: "The best professor and the most perfect ecclesiastic I have known in the college of Nicolet is Mr. Fluet. I have never seen a man so gifted with all the virtues which make a true Christian and a perfect gentleman. As you were his most intimate friend, you remember how he was constantly referring to his New Testament on almost every subject of conversation. The name of Jesus, so often on his lips, was the sure indication that he was keeping himself as perfectly united to our Saviour as a man can be. His knowledge as a theologian and a philosopher was above everything I have seen among my acquaintances. To those moral qualities, the good provi-

dence of God has given him some of the highest physical qualities of the body. He was one of the most handsome men, and he had one of the sweetest and most melodious voices I have ever heard."

"I then can answer your question of yesterday by assuring you that Mr. Fluet was the most accomplished professor the college of Nicolet ever had. I have not known any one who gained the esteem and commanded the respect of all in our college as Fluet did.

"The day he left us to be ordained a priest and go as a missionary to Sandwich, was a day of universal sorrow. But we consoled ourselves of his absence by the knowledge of the good he is doing in the vast missionary field of the west of Canada where he is working since he left us.

"The details he gives me in all his letters of his missionary labours very often draw my tears of admiration and gratitude to God. It is surely an honour and blessing for the college of Nicolet to have given such a priest to the Church."

I answered Mr. Leprohon: "You have not exaggerated the good qualities of Mr. Fluet. As I had been his most intimate friend when he was with us, the more I knew him the more I admired him."

This conversation had done me much good. I felt happy to see that my respected superior was sharing my views about my friend. My last thought when going to bed at the close of that day was to thank God for having given me such a friend.

The next day was a stormy day, which I could never forget should I live a thousand years. Two of our noblest pine trees had been shattered into fragments by the lightning and brought down by the hurricane with a terrible noise.

It seemed impossible to get any mail in such a storm, but in this we were to be happily disappointed; for our long-wished-for letters arrived, though six hours later than usual.

However, I was among the disappointed of that day. No letters for me. My business was then to look at the more

lucky ones whose eyes were running from line to line of the messages they had received. My attention was particularly riveted on our good director, Mr. Leprohon, who, convulsively raising his hands towards heaven, was crying, "My God! My God! This is not possible. This cannot be!"

Suspecting that he had received the sad news of the death of some dear friend or relative, I kept silent to show my respect for his grief.

But after a few moments of unspeakable grief, turning towards me, he said, "Dear Chiniquy, I have just received the most deplorable, the most incredible news. I do not dare to tell it to you. It is incredible. My God! This is not possible! I cannot consent to give you such a deplorable message. Try to find it out. But you cannot."

After a moment of silent anxiety and surprise I answered, "You have just received the saddest, the most incredible news which could come to you and to me, and you want me to guess at it? Well! Well! The most incredible and the saddest news that can come to me is that Mr. Fluet has become an apostate, and that he has turned to be a Protestant."

"How can you say that?" replied Mr. Leprohon, with an accent of terror and unmistakable sorrow.

"Because it comes to my mind as a flash of lightning as being the most incredible and the most desolating news I can receive," I answered.

"This is more than strange," replied Mr. Leprohon. "You are correct; Fluet is an apostate. He has just publicly abandoned our holy religion. He is a Protestant."

This news spread like a thunderbolt all over Canada. And it created unspeakable surprise and sorrow wherever it was told.

No French Canadian Roman Catholic priest had left our Church for more than sixty years. The humble people of the country, as well as the highly educated ones of the city, had almost come to the conclusion that their religion of Rome

was on such sure foundations that nothing could shake it.

Of course since my conversion, they had a good opportunity to change their minds, as hundreds of priests and monks have left the Pope to follow Christ, in America.

The following facts were also calculated to give them more correct views.

In the spring of 1851, just twenty years later, the Bishop of Chicago, my Lord Vandeveld, having asked me to go to the State of Illinois in order to direct the tide of the French speaking emigrants from France, Belgium and Canada towards the magnificent plains of that state, in order to form a new France, I went to ask the benediction of my Lord Bourget, Bishop of Montreal. After receiving it I told him: "My Lord, you know that I cannot go to Illinois without passing through Sandwich, which is on this side of the River St. Clair, the dividing line between the United States and Canada. Allow me to tell you that I cannot pass by Sandwich without saluting my old friend, the Rev. Mr. Fluet, and making an effort to help him to come back to our holy Church, of which he has been so long one of the most devoted and respected priests. I have invited the Rev. Mr. Brassard, curate of Longueuil, to accompany me, for he was one of the most devoted friends of Mr. Fluet. I hope that our united efforts, with the help of God, will determine that stray sheep to come back to the true fold."

"Oh!" cried Bishop Bourget, "yes, go and bring back that stray sheep. I will do anything to help you in this holy work. I will immediately write to all our priests and good nuns to unite in prayer, that you may succeed. Oh! what a victory over the enemy of our holy Church if you can persuade Mr. Fluet to come back to us. I have known him personally and I had such a high opinion of his piety, his zeal and his matchless capacity."

"Yes, my Lord," I answered, "this is all right, but you must not forget that Mr. Fluet is married, that he is poor and that he has at least three or four children. It would be more than

ridiculous and unbecoming to invite him to let that woman and those children starve by deserting them in that cowardly way. We cannot extend to him a helping hand out of the bottomless pit into which he has fallen without presenting to his wife and children the means of an honest living."

"You are right, Mr. Chiniquy, you are perfectly right," said the Bishop. "We cannot invite Rev. Fluet to let his wife and children starve, after his conversion. How much do you think that we must offer him for the support of his family?"

"We cannot offer him less than \$10,000," I answered.

"Though it is a pretty big sum to give, I will ask the advice of my secretary and my other counselors, and if they are of the same mind with me, you shall have the money you want. Ten thousand dollars are nothing to our holy Church compared with the loss of a priest like Mr. Fluet."

To the honour of the counselors of the Bishop, I am happy to say that in less than half an hour, the \$10,000 were safe in my little purse, and I was on my way to Lachine to the steamer which was to take us to Detroit. Three days later we were in the beautiful parlour of Mr. Baby, the judge of Sandwich, on the Canadian shore. A few years before, I had made the acquaintance of that gentleman in Quebec, and I had known from his own lips that he used to employ Mr. Fluet as his legal advisor, and had business to transact with him almost every day. He had said to me, "The only defect of Mr. Fluet is that he is a Protestant. Apart from that he is a true gentleman, and one of the most honest men I have ever known."

No words can give an idea of Judge Baby's surprise when Mr. Brassard and I told him that we were the most devoted admirers of Mr. Fluet while in the Seminary of Nicolet, and that we had come to Sandwich to make a supreme effort to bring him back to our holy religion.

"My impression is that you would easily succeed if he were alone. Though a Protestant and an apostate, he is not such an enemy of our holy Church as people think. He is the best gardener of Sandwich and you will find in his garden

the most beautiful flowers which can grow in Canada. And do you know what he does with a part of those flowers? I would not believe it had I not seen it with my own eyes. Once and often twice a week he makes one or two splendid bouquets with them which he asks his young daughters to put on the altar of our Church. The greatest difficulty you will meet is his poverty. His wife and children would surely starve if they had not the modest income derived from his daily work among us as notary."

I then showed him my cheque of \$10,000 for the support of Mrs. Fluet and her children in case they would all consent to become Roman Catholics, and let her husband make his peace with the Church he has denied.

"This \$10,000 may be a great factor in your holy mission," said Judge Baby, "but I see a more formidable obstacle in the character of Mrs. Fluet. She is a most honourable lady, but her character and her will are formed of granite of the hardest quality. She sincerely loves and respects her husband, and she is one of the most dutiful and loving mothers I have ever seen. Like a furious lioness, she will tear the hand which will take her children from her and she will demolish those who will try to deprive her of her husband."

I met the objections of Judge Baby by saying that I knew the success of our mission required a true miracle of the grace of God, but my faith was strong enough to hope that that miracle would be wrought. "The first thing we have to do," I said, "is to meet Mr. Fluet. He knows nothing of our presence here. He would at once come here if you had the kindness to address him a short note saying that you want him for an important business. You have told us that he is your notary. No doubt he is accustomed to come and see you often about his legal business."

"That is just what I will do. Remain in the parlour waiting for Mr. Fluet, who will be here in a few moments." An hour later Mr. Fluet was knocking at the door, expecting to meet Judge Baby.

Though he had not seen us for just twenty years, he recognized us at once.

With a cry mixed with joy and surprise, he exclaimed, "Merciful God! Brassard and Chiniquy here!" Half fainting with his uncontrollable emotion, he threw himself into our arms, without being able to utter any other words than "Brassard and Chiniquy here!" Torrents of tears which ran down his cheeks helped him to come to himself. Bathing our hands with his tears he was crying, "Is it possible they think of me and still love me in Canada?" "Yes, we think of you and we still love you in Canada. You see it in our presence here. It is in the name of your former friends, the priests and the Bishop of Montreal, that we come to salute you and to press you to our hearts."

After at least an hour of the most friendly conversation about his old acquaintances in Canada, I introduced the delicate and real subject of our mission, but in such a friendly manner that he could not be offended.

"I understand and respect the object of your visit," he said. "My only surprise is that you have so long delayed it. But do not forget that I am married and that I have four children. St. Paul says marriage is a great mystery. It makes only one of two human beings. We must be one, not only in body, but in mind and aspirations. I cannot tell what I can do without consulting Mrs. Fluet. I am going back home at 4 p. m. and I will give you my answer, rather her answer," he added with the most amiable smile.

The \$10,000 note I had shown him had not drawn from him the expression of gratitude I expected. He had refused to touch it, and only said when looking at it. "It is very kind and generous on the part of the Bishop and the priests of Canada."

The hours from 10 A. M. to 4 P. M. seemed to me as long as a century. My heart was throbbing between the hope of success and the fear of disappointment.

At last the clock struck four and our friend was again pressing us to his bosom.

The preliminaries of this last conversation were short, and to my anxious question, "What news do you bring us?" he answered:

"I never saw anything like the wrath and indignation of my wife, when I told her the message you had brought from Canada for us both. 'Is it possible,' she said, 'that the priests of Rome are so degraded and so blind as to believe that their money could tempt me to break the sacred and most blessed ties that unite me to you? Go and tell them that there is not gold enough in Canada, nor in the whole world, to tempt me to trample under my feet the honoured and blessed crowns of wife and mother which the great God that governs this world has given me. I love you, Mr. Fluet; you know it, but do not forget it, it is my conviction that there are not tortures enough on earth to punish you as you deserve if you were deserting me to go back and wallow in the mire in which the priests of Rome are living. To split your head with an ax with my own hands would be too mild a vengeance for the crime you would commit in deserting me to obey the precepts of a church which I know, as well as you, is the masterpiece of the devil, etc.'

"Please do not ask me to give you in detail all the compliments she paid you for your friendly message. You now hear enough to show you that it is absolutely impossible for me to break the sacred ties which have made me the happy father of children, who with me will bless the good God of heaven during all eternity for their existence. But I hope that this stern determination of Mrs. Fluet will not break the blessed ties of friendship which united us together."

With these words he shook hands with us and went back to his happy home.

"It is just as I expected," said Judge Baby. "Mr. Fluet's family is one of the most happy and respectable at Sandwich. He is not rich, but he has enough for the every-day wants. Though he is not an aggressive man, in that he does not preach against our holy religion, his example does a great injury to

our Church. Our priests have made a terrible mistake by publishing that he was a drunkard, a wicked man who was beating his wife. They know that these reports are vile calumnies, for Mr. Fluet is a perfect example of sobriety, being one of our most faithful teetotalers."

Though I failed in my efforts to persuade him to make his peace with the Church of Rome, I kept up a course of friendly letters with him when forming my French colony in Illinois.

The reader may imagine his joy when I wrote him all about my conversion. He answered me with a letter bathed with tears of joy.