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CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY OF IRELAND,

VERITAS HOUSE,

7 and 8 LOWER ABBEY STREET, DUBLIN

# UNDER SENTENCE OF DEATH

A PRISON DIARY



DUBLIN: CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY OF IRELAND .....

*Permissu Ordinarii Dioec. Dublinen.  
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## INTRODUCTION

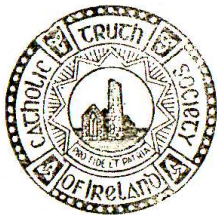
The following pages are not altogether fiction. The names and some circumstances are indeed fictitious—but it may be said that the Diary is substantially a true account of a condemned man's last days in Prison.

There is a lesson in it all for ourselves, if we care to see it. Every one is as certain of his death as the condemned man you read of in these pages,—the only difference is that he knew the date and hour of his death, and we do not. This fact should urge us all the more to prepare—as he did—to die well.

With reason does St. Alphonsus ask the question: "If you believe that you must die, that there is an eternity, that you can die only once, and that if you then err your error will be irreparable, why do you not resolve to begin at this moment to do all in your power to secure a good death?"

With this reflection of the saintly Doctor I will set before you a strange, interesting document—the diary of the last days of a man condemned to death.

D. M. Cummings, C.S.S.R.



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# UNDER SENTENCE OF DEATH

## I. THE CONDEMNED CELL.

November 3rd—Mornings darker, colder, more bleak and cheerless here. Why should I write more? Nobody wants to hear or think of me—outcast, murderer, condemned. The tension is agonising. Waiting will drive me to madness. I wish it were all finished. Must turn my mind to other things. The warders tell me that during the trial I seemed to be indifferent. The papers said I was "steel," "stubborn," "dead to feeling!" Was I? Perhaps. It was the stubbornness of a man in a lethargy, that steel of a man whose brain was paralyzed, the hardness of a heart that received no pity, —and craved for none! Let them say what they please! It cannot harm me now. When the door of the jail gate is opened at 8.10 a.m. on Monday, 30th November, and the warder puts up the usual notice, there will doubtless be an inky tribe of reporters who will write down more words about me. Let them do as they please! I don't care!

This is the 5th day since the sentence,—“be taken to the place from whence you came . . . be hanged by the neck until you are dead.” I see his face, stern, heavy-jowled, and that d—d cap of death. I barely remember the warder touching me on the shoulder. “Come along!” To come along to the dreary stone corridors, to this cell—not the ordinary cell now, not the remand cells, or the convict cells, but to a special cell—the cell for condemned men.

Here I am now, writing at the small brown table in my white-washed dungeon. A round window high up in the thick stone wall, barred with thick iron bars, lights up the place. A low bed. An aluminium basin for washing, a towel, a piece of soap, a small, round mirror—very thick glass and deeply embedded in the wall, I could not break it even if I tried. Prison authorities are kind; dangerous weapons, pieces of glass, must never be placed in the hands of the prisoner. Five tattered books on the table before me. Three chairs. I use one, the other two are for my guests. Ever since I left the Court, after my sentence, I have had the company of two warders night and day. They are locked in the cell with me. Each pair does eight hours duty at a stretch. When I awake in the morning they are there beside me. When I eat my meals they are sitting there

near me. When I go out for a walk round that forlorn prison yard, they accompany me—one on each side of me—they never leave me. The dark-blue uniform reminds me continually that I am to die—to be hanged! Well, when it comes I will meet it! They think, perhaps, that I will be a “squealer”\* like many other “scoundrels” when they stood on the trap-door. I will not . . . Scoundrel! Is that what I am called!

I have examined the second room. Bare white-washed walls, a toilet, no tables or chairs, only a big, heavy press, close against the opposite wall. I wonder what is in that press! I wonder why it is there! Warders merely shrug their shoulders when I ask them.

November 4th:—I sleep well. Warders say I am darned lucky. Others in my circumstances have not had the gift. Their nights were spent tossing, and turning, and thinking! I can guess what they were thinking about—8 a.m.! Had a dream last night. Dreamt we were again at Singapore. Evans and self went ashore, had a royal time,—went exploring back blocks—back to the ship after late sun-down. Took tram to the docks,—one of these two compartment buses, forwards whites.—niggers aft. Evans hands nigger conductor States Dollar—scarcely any change! Evans hits him,—I help him—the police! Skipper was judge, sentenced us to jail—but we got out, the Skipper helped us,—we got out.

Here I am now. In jail. I cannot escape. Judge who sentenced me would cut off his right hand rather than help me to get away. Wonder what Evans is doing now. He knew my faults, vices, and good points,—if a scoundrel has any! Am certain he would listen to my side of the story. I held them up. A clerk tried to grip me. I shot him. I killed him. I had to rob. I was starving. No work, no money, no food. I had to get help. That firm could well afford it. If my nerve had been normal! If I had not been weak from hunger, I could have bluffed them better. That clerk thought if he could catch my arm, he had me beaten. He edged towards me. I saw him. I am condemned to die. Serve him right! Why did he not beware! I was not stealing his money. If he saw I was weak, sickly, why in H—

\*NOTE—A “squealer,” prison parlance for a condemned man who yields to fear.

did he not have mercy on me, instead of trying to get me. But Evans will probably never hear the story. When I left the ship he signed on for six more years. He is out in the Eastern Pacific trade. It doesn't matter. He couldn't help me now.

What a life I have known! Teacher, drink, the sea, the Great War, demobilization, work, drink again, unemployment and starvation, slow death! Then the plan that I had thought would succeed. It failed miserably. Now, quick death, sure death, sudden death!

I am not uneasy. Am not afraid to face death. Messines, Aras, Cambrai, Neuve Chapelle—death was there, and I faced it. Still I had the consoling idea that I might come through safely; escape was a possibility. Many were to die; but some would escape death. Each one thought he would be a survivor. But now, death—certain; escape—impossible.

At the front my Lee-Enfield—I would sell my life dearly. If I were to die, I would die fighting; I would make the enemy pay for my life. A rifle helped a man to meet death. But now—a rat in a trap—what can I do! I cannot die fighting. Each one here is my friend and my enemy. They are friendly, but they keep me prisoner. They are helping to kill me. They are kind—I bear no real hatred to them. I hate the law that condemns me; I hate the man who enforced that law; I hate the public that brands me murderer! I cannot fight, I must die—like a dog!

Yesterday asked warders to tell me where execution shed is situated. They look quickly at each other. Evidently don't want to talk about it.

“Oh, never mind about that for the present!” answers the taller one, a good-humoured creature, kind and talkative.

“But where is it? Is it near this cell, or at the far end of the wing, or outside the building?”

“It is not too far!” he answers grudgingly, and resolutely turns to talk of the football results of last Saturday. He hands me a cigarette, and I listen to the news. I am not allowed newspapers.

November 5th:—Weary and in a waspish mood. I read. The books are dull to me. What is it to me how Squeers ruled Dotheboy Hall! I note Nickleby was a teacher, but not a murderer. He suffered because of his honesty, I suffer because men judge me murderer.

Warders are silent. They know I am in a mood. They are sitting over there, near my bed. Sometimes they exchange a word. They must find their task distasteful. I share cigarettes with them.

Intense craving for drink. I sit on the chair in a stupor, looking dully at the floor. My veins are like lead; my mind is stone. I can do nothing. The cigarette burns away in my fingers. I must wait, wait! It will end, it will end!

November 6th:—Another day nearer the end. Each day, each hour, each minute, brings 30th November nearer and Warder asks me if I have no friends.

“No, nobody!”

“Have you no relatives?”

“All dead!”

“All!”

“Yes, except Ernest and Margaret!”

“Where are they living?”

“I don’t know. Ernest went to Australia years ago. I lost his address. He wrote once to me; I never answered his letter!”

“And Margaret?”

“She is living in Canada. I have her address, I think!”

“You do not mind if I tell you that you should write to your sister?”

“No; I will not write a word!”

“Why?”

“Nobody wants a murderer for a brother!”

“Nonsense! You think you are innocent.”

“You think right.”

“Tell her that. She is your sister; she will listen to your explanations.”

“I won’t write, and that is the end of it.”

“All right, all right! It is nothing to me; please yourself.”

We said no more.

I commenced to read again. Throw the book aside. Sit in gloomy despair. Silence deadens my mind.

This evening had a visit from the head warder. Tall, lean, bright-eyed, human enough.

“Do you want anything?”

“No!”

“Any complaints?”

“No!”

And then turning to warder. “Cheswick, if there is anything he wants let me know.”

Before he goes out he again addresses me:

“You are marked ‘No Religion.’ You told me when you first came here that you had been a Roman Catholic and that you didn’t want the Chaplain to know that. I am supposed to tell the Chaplain if you want to see him. Shall I tell him you want to speak to him?”

“No!”

Religion has meant very little to me. I was an R.C. . . . Mother was a Roman Catholic. Father was a Presbyterian, or Methodist, or something else—he never was a church-goer. Mother had me baptized in R.C. Church. I remember she taught me prayers out of a Roman Catholic book. I used to go to Mass with her, and sometimes took the Communion by her side. When I was ten she died. They said it was fever. I knew it was worry, trouble. We were in debt. Father made me give up going to Church—no Mass or prayers. He was a hard drinker. Despite it all, he educated me. I qualified as a teacher. Had a good school. I took to drink. Manager told me I couldn’t remain in the school. I lost my position. Went to sea, as an ordinary deck-hand. No religion. No Sunday. No God. We used to call Thursday and Sunday our Sabbath, because we got more to eat, more grog, on these two days.

The War (1914-18) finally crushed all religion out of my heart. If there was a God, how could He allow us to be suffering in hellish Flanders? If there was a God, why didn’t He punish the guilty? Why didn’t He let us get away from the shells, the bullets, the mud, the vermin, and the blood!\*

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\*NOTE.—The problem of evil here mentioned is, in one aspect a mystery. Some partial solutions of the problem can be given. All these explanations point in one direction and, as a recent writer says, “by their cumulative force assure us that beyond the bounds of our present knowledge there lies a full and satisfying reason that the existing evils fall into their place in a scheme of vast benevolence and provident care.”

Some truths must be remembered in dealing with the question.

I. If mystery lurks in the working out of nature’s laws, how much more is to be expected when man attempts to explore the ways of God?

II. We are here on earth in a state of probation. We must show

Roman Catholic! I was a Roman Catholic. At present I am—nothing! A fly in a cobweb, or, as some fool wrote it: "A pale captive creeping to death."

We smoke. Stories and experiences on the Western Front. Dispute about a recent sensational war novel. I believe it is not a typical soldier's experience at the front. Some parts are typical. G—— says it is all true.

Saturday, 7th November:—Raining. Weather heavy and dull. Suits my frame of mind. We can't walk outside in the prison yard. We walk up and down the broad corridor outside the cells. Heavy, steel doors—all rivets and bolts. Index cards on wall outside the cells. Name, crime, sentence, date of release, earliest date of release. No index card outside the condemned cell! The world knows my name, my crime, my sentence! The date of my release—the earliest—8 a.m. 30th November.

One cell seems to be larger than the others. Warders explain that it is for prisoners of low mentality—they are allowed two fellow-prisoners as companions. I am the only one allowed the privilege of having two warders constantly with me.

Evening. I play chess with warders. Father taught me how to play chess. He was sick, unable to work. To while away the hours he bought a 2/- set of chess, taught me to play. He used to give me any three of his pieces I wished for, and then he played to win. He didn't know he was teaching me a game that would while away the hours here as I wait for death. I win two games, lose the third.

Sunday, 8th November:—No factory horns blowing this morning. Everything is quiet and peaceful. This is a day of rest. I have three more Sundays to live—15th, 22nd, 29th. The 30th is a Monday. My last full day will be a Sunday.

Warders talk pleasantly. Strange how they all seize on

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forth confidence and faith. How is this possible if there is to be no obscurity in God's dealings with us, if everything is to be plain and simple to our minds.

III. He who would deny the existence of God because of the existence of evil in the world is confronted with a greater problem in attempting to account for the order, goodness and beauty found in the universe.

The direct answer to the problem in the case is, of course, that God's reckoning comes in the next world rather than in this. It is only when the picture is completed that the skill of the artist is revealed. The picture of man's life is completed only in eternity.

the same topic, bells. There is the bell for breakfast; there is the bell summoning so and so—that's the bell for Church Service. Church Service! Sunday! I had forgotten. So this is the day for Mass and the Communion Table? One of the warders is a Roman Catholic. The other asks him jokingly if he has gone to Mass, and is told promptly, and with a certain coldness, that he has. More from curiosity than from any other reason I ask him what kind of ceremony is the Mass. I have a dim recollection of a priest in white raiment at an altar and two boys in surplices assisting him.

He tells me that Catholics believe the Mass to be the offering to God of the Body and Blood of Christ under the forms of bread and wine. Well, if a man really believes all that, I can understand why he wants to go to Mass, even though he is a warder in a prison. If he would not go, I would say he was a liar and a hypocrite.

I begin to think of the years that are gone, the days when I used to accompany mother to Mass. She used to go to a distant church. Father was gambling and drinking his wages. There was scarcely enough money to buy food and to pay the rent. She did not wish to go to our own church, in her shabby and faded clothes. We walked together along through the silent streets. Silence and peace of the Sabbath. The twittering of swallows around the ivied walls of the empty Protestant churches, the sharp cries of the sparrows in the streets, the cooing of pigeons in the towers—all these sounds were intensified in the thin morning air.

Mother is dead. I am here in a silent, unhappy cell awaiting the moment that will launch me into eternity. While I write these words there is an image of mother before my eyes, looking at me with a mother's love and gazing into my heart. I wonder what she thinks of me now!

Sentiment—am I becoming soft-hearted? I should imagine it is too late in the day for me to become susceptible to feeling. Still I must honestly admit mother's memory is very dear to me—even now.

## II. AN UNBIDDEN VISITOR.

Afternoon. Catholic warder asks me if it is true that I, a Roman Catholic, refused to see the Chaplain. He tries—friendly enough—to persuade me. I decline in no uncertain

language. Still he persists, saying that I must at least allow the Chaplain to come to visit me—not as a chaplain but as a friend. I doggedly refuse. He smooths over my stubbornness, talks about several other things, comes back to his original design, and—I cannot explain why—I agree. I wonder now what kind he is. To-morrow he will be up to visit the other Catholic prisoners. O’C., the warder, says he is a real man and the essence of kindness. But O’C. is prejudiced in favour of his Priest. Anyway, if I find him—a lantern-jawed, thin-lipped, strait-laced, inhuman creature, I can make sure that he won’t trouble me again. God knows I have enough trouble on my mind without any inquisitive priest coming along to harrass me with questions and texts plucked from the Bible. I hope he doesn’t think he has won a victory.

November 9th :—Read *Guy Mannering*. If all men were of the Dandie Dinmont type the world would be a happier place to live in. Find myself comparing my life with Brown’s.

Chaplain comes to see me. Tall, spectacled, talkative; assumes that we are going to be the closest friends. I doubt it. He cannot help me. I am not whining. I do not want help from him. All his piety and dribble is uselessly spent on a murderer.

I wonder why that Chaplain did not mention religion this morning? Perhaps he wisely realizes the futility of it in my regard.

November 10th :—Chilly weather. Hot pipes keep my room fairly warm and comfortable.

Warder in a moment of expansion, tells me about his family. Younger brother to Argentine eight years ago, never heard of him since. A black sheep in every family.

Silence of this place horrible, grates on my nerves. Shall I become worse? Monday fortnight may see me pale, shivering, afraid—in a state of panic! Waiting for death is my punishment.

November 11th :—Chaplain comes again. We talk about the East. He was a Navy Chaplain during his early days as a Priest. Knows East well. Talk ranges from copra to opium, from Lavinia to the Escolta.\*

\*NOTE.—Lavinia is a well-known beauty spot outside Colombo. The Escolta is an important shopping and business centre in Manila.

His conversation interesting enough; he invites himself back again on Saturday. I thought priests were different. Leaves me a couple of books by Stevenson. Read *Kidnapped*. Fine book. Stevenson says in the preface: “This is no furniture for the scholar’s library, but a book for the winter evening school-room, when the tasks are over and the hour for bed draws near; and honest Alan, who was a grim old fire-eater in his day, had in his new avatar no more desperate purpose than to steal some young gentleman’s attention away from his Ovid, carry him awhile into the Highlands and the last century, and pack him to bed with some engaging images to mingle with his dreams.”

And I, a murderer—a man condemned to die within a few weeks—I too, am carried away awhile into the Highlands and the last century. I sympathise with David Balfour. Imprisoned unjustly. I fancy my Judge echoing Uncle Ebenezer’s rhyme: “There will be nae ‘reprieves’ in my house! There will be nae ‘reprieves’ in my house!”

November 12th :—I listen to the warders talking about Prison Officials. Find out that Chaplain’s name is Father Norbert, and that all warders must salute him just as they salute the governor of the Prison. They are Protestants. Say he is a decent sort of man; always has a cheery word for everybody; never reports men if they forget to salute him. They condemn him for being “a fanatic and a bigot.” Smiles and laughs, but declares all Churches wrong except the Catholic Church. It is a good sign of a man if those in inferior station like him.

November 13th :—Talk with warders about the etiquette rules for 8 a.m. Monday fortnight. Enright is the younger one’s name. He says it would be better not to talk about it. I find out that he assisted at the last execution.

“How many are present?” I asked.

“Nine. The Governor, Sheriff, Doctor, Chaplain, Head Warder, two Warders, the Executioner and his assistant.”

“Are the executioners here now?”

“No, not yet; they come on the 28th—this day fortnight.”

Rightly or wrongly, I picture to my mind two butchers, cold-blooded creatures, with not a tremor of sentiment in their hearts as they prepare for the taking-off. I see them rubbing their hands and pocketing their guineas when their luckless task is over. Fear, agitation, or excitement, can

effect no entrance into such wooden hearts. So I think. Enright says they are as nervous as anyone else present. Says the strain on them is very great, and that they earn their money. Immediately they arrive, they go to the execution cell. Enright calls it a "cell," so it is not too far away. I wonder where that cell is. They oil hinges, levers, bolts. Find out prisoner's height, weight, then they determine the length of the rope. Heavy prisoners get ordinary drop. Light individuals get more rope!

It is all very interesting to me. Uneasiness would seize me if I would yield to it.

No fear of beam breaking—2 feet by 1 foot—cross-section, running across ceiling from wall to wall. What a destiny for a tree! No possibility of rope breaking or unloosing! There is a special noose that will do its job well. Nowadays there is rarely a mistake.

November 14th:—Chaplain again. Long talk about many things. Warders sit on the bed chatting rather louder than usual. Father Norbert very pleased when I thank him for the books. He likes Stevenson. Sorry he didn't become a Catholic. "Upright, courageous, cheery soul!" Consumption was his jailor and executioner.

Sit on bed and listen to warders arguing about the ethics of gambling. Gale insists that a married man must have liberty with his money. He earns it, owns it, can do what he likes with it. Enright says man may own the money but he has the obligation to support his wife and children. This obligation his first to be fulfilled. Gale has no real desire to find out which is the truth.—a disposition that renders all argument useless.

November 15th:—Father Norbert brings me two more books. *An Inland Voyage*, by Stevenson, and a book which he says is worth its weight in gold, *Preparation for Death*, by some one who styles himself Alphonsus Ligouri. I can see this is an arrow from the religious sheaf.

I commence *Inland Voyage*. How strange, how pointed, literature becomes, when a man in my circumstances is the reader! This on page one:

"It is commonplace that we cannot answer for ourselves before we have been tried. But it is not so common a reflection, and surely more consoling, that we usually find ourselves a great deal better and braver than we thought. I

believe this is every one's experience; but an apprehension that they may belie themselves in the future, prevents mankind from trumpeting this cheerful sentiment abroad. I wish sincerely, for it would have saved me much trouble, there had been some one to put me in a good heart about life when I was younger; to tell me how dangers are most portentous on a distant sight; and how the good in a man's spirit will not suffer itself to be overlaid and rarely or never deserts him in the hour of need."

I shall not be able to answer for myself after my trial at 8 a.m. to-morrow fortnight. I shall not be able to tell the world that I found myself much braver and better than I thought. If I had not had the baneful influence of a gambling parent when I was young, I would not now be wondering whether the good in my spirit will desert me on the scaffold! Fool that I am to moralize at this hour!

To-day is Sunday again. The convicts' workshops are silent. There are not so many bells. I know all the bells. The bell rung from the interior of each cell has a jangling strident sound that goes echoing down the corridors and passage ways. The convicts' bell has a clear trenchant beating, very positive, imperative. The main bell of the prison is deep-toned, solemn, and slow—this will ring my knell!

I see some of the convicts to-day as we walk round the prison yard. They are in line ahead, sharp wretches, manacled, shifty-eyed, garbed in light khaki; faces have that faint yellow pallor which comes from prison life. The last gang of prisoners I looked at was on the Mabini Road, Manilla. Filipinos with huge, flat round hats, coarse rough garments, striped black and grey, hanging loosely on them, walking leisurely along the road to Malabon. An ugly lot, the rabble of the East. Some looked half-witted. They were going out to work in the mud of the rice fields. Three warders accompanied them—sleek, important, each carrying carelessly on his shoulder a heavy, dark-brown rifle. Sun blazing down. Convicts talking to one another freely. Nobody stopped to stare at them; even the children minding the caribao in the fields by the road scarcely look at them. But here, no sun, a melancholy prison yard, bleak buildings of grey stone, a colourless wintry sky and silence—dead silence, horrible silence.

November 16th:—Father Norbert comes to-day. Asks me

how I like the book he gave me. I tell him I have finished it. He looks at me in amazement. I suddenly perceive that he means the Saint's book. Seems disappointed that I have not opened it. We chat for long time, nevertheless. Wants me to write to Canada. Shows good fellowship despite my sourness. This man's company pleases. Warders salute him; he has a bright cheery greeting for them always. I thought Priests were of a different type. Going away he hints to me that I *must* read the Saint's book. His emphasis on the "must" is coaxing. He is switching the points to the religious line; he cannot do that for me.

November 18th:—Dull monotony, depressed, moody. A raging passion of anger and hatred. But what use to unpack my heart of mad words! Warders leave me to myself.

Evening.: I open "Preparation for Death." Read first paragraph

"Consider that you are dust, and that you shall return to dust. A day will come when you shall die and rot in a grave where 'worms shall be your covering.' The same lot awaits all, the nobleman and the peasant, the prince and the vassal. The moment the soul leaves the body it shall go into eternity, and the body shall return to dust. 'Thou shalt send forth their breath and they shall fail and shall return to their dust!'"

Fine cant this! I close the book immediately. Who grants that I am body and soul?

I pick up "Through the Looking Glass." More entertaining, more interesting than the Saint's sermons. The Queen tells Alice about the King's messenger: "He's in prison now being punished and the trial doesn't even begin till next Wednesday, and of course the crime comes last of all." Poor King's Messenger! You have the sympathy of a companion in the same plight! The crime for which I am to be hanged has yet to be committed. I deserve imprisonment: I deserve to be called a robber: to be branded Cain—no! no!

November 19th:—The horror of this dismal place is creeping down into my heart! I gasped when I saw my sickly, sallow face in the mirror this morning.

November 20th:—Did not sleep last night. Lay awake on my mattress, looking into the darkness above me, and listening to the silence of this infernal hole. No sound except the

low thread of the warder up and down in the room adjoining. Wonder what his thoughts can be at such a black hour. The night is cold and wintry; sky overcast with tumbling masses of clouds.

Sleep is the only anodyne for a prisoner. Meals are the chief landmarks in his weary day. I have plenty of good food—on that score my white-washed cell is a more pleasant abode than the cheap lodging houses of the city. I need never worry about the next meal: breakfast, dinner, tea are, served with the same regularity, day after day. I think myself back once more in Aldershot.

I ask Cheswick, the warder, some questions:

"What must I do at 8 a.m. Monday week?"

"You have nothing to do; keep your nerve, and let the executioners do their job."

I want to find out more details. Cheswick is loath to talk. I tell him his explanations will not upset me in the least. So he talks.

"About 7.30 a.m. on Monday morning you take breakfast. Let us say you are finished at a quarter to eight. You remain here until the Head Warder comes along with the two executioners—that will be about four or five minutes to eight. No more smoking then. Executioners put your hands behind your back, handcuff them. You go along with them to the execution cell. The Governor is there and formally identifies you and hands you over to the sheriff. The executioners bring you to the centre of the trap-door. Most of the men I have seen stand facing the window. I don't know why. If you face the window you are facing the officials. It doesn't matter anyhow. They strap your knees together. A white hood is pulled over your head—tied. Rope is already fixed to the overhead beam. The noose is ready. They put it over your head. I think they fix it in a certain way round the neck. These preparations are not done one after the other, but almost simultaneously. Pierpont does the strapping; his assistant fixes the hood. It is only a minute's work to have the rope adjusted round the neck. Then Pierpont draws the bolt. The trap-door does not move, you are still standing there. He steps round quickly to the lever, pulls it back—that is all. It is all over quickly; they say it is quite painless."



As Cheswick describes the programme he kept looking away from me. He finishes. Gets up from the bed, walks up and down the cell. "They say it is a painless death," he repeats, "but we have no proof!"

Tense silence. I sit on the low, wooden chair, elbows on my knees, hands supporting my chin. I laugh, and say that I will send him a telegram about it from the shades below. I light a cigarette. Offer him one. We smoke in silence. In spite of my affected good spirits, Cheswick has upset me somewhat. He surmises that. Begins to talk about a quarrel between two convicts yesterday in the laundry. No early release for them. I will be away long before them!

4 p.m. Cheswick has upset me. I don't want to admit this even to himself. I can't blame him for making the circumstances of the execution distinct in my mind. Still it has thrown me off my balance, increased the anxiety I stifled. Yes, anxiety, doubt, uneasiness. Am I losing my nerve? Am I a "squealer?" In the mud and slime of no man's land we hardly feared death amid the crash of shells and the whine of spattering machine-gun bullets. But how ghastly it now appears, to be led handcuffed into a cold cheerless room, there to be strapped, hooded, and silently strangled. I steady my thoughts. Steel my heart against the whole business. Let them do their d——d worst, and the sooner the better.

Later. Chaplain calls for a few moments. Again disappointed that I have not taken up "Preparation for Death." I give half-promise to read more of it and to "give St. Alphonsus a chance."

Sunday, 22nd:—One more Sunday. To-morrow week all will be over. Cheswick back again on duty. I ask him more information. Says trap-door is about 4 feet square. It is level with flooring of the room. It is really two leaves of wood that fall downwards on hinges, like the two sides of a door or gate, that opens out on hinges. And drawing the bolt! Says the bolt is a piece of iron about nine inches long; it locks the lever. If you pull the lever without having first drawn this bolt, the trap-door does not open. Draw the bolt, then pull the lever.

He tells me warder was showing some convicts how to repair some boards in the execution room. One convict had a spite against this warder. When he was not watching,

convict draws the bolt, hides it in his jacket. Stands beside lever, calls warder to examine floor here; warder steps on trap-door, instantly convict pulls lever . . .

That lever will plunge me to death. I sit thinking. I feel the rope dragging the life from my body. Shall I be cramped, palsied with fear, when the cell opens on Monday morning a few minutes before eight.

Thoughts of home long ago come back to my mind. Horrible melancholy.

In desperation, not knowing what to do, I take "Preparation for Death," I open it. Page 152.

"What does the sinner do when he commits mortal sin? He insults God, he dishonours Him, he afflicts Him. In the first place mortal sin is an insult offered to God. The malice of an insult, St. Thomas says, is estimated from the condition of the person who receives, and of the person who offers the insult; It is sinful to offend a peasant; it is more criminal to insult nobleman, but to treat a monarch with contempt and insolence is a still greater crime. Who is God? He is Lord of Lords, and King of Kings. He is a being of infinite majesty, before whom all princes of the earth and all the saints and angels are less than an atom of sand."

While I read, Chaplain comes in. His eyes light up when he sees the book in my hand.

Warders are in adjoining room. He sits down. I know he wants to help me. I am rather glad to see him. Find myself telling him the story of my life. I was starving, needed food, money to buy food. Knew this firm was rich, knew when pay-roll would be made up. Borrowed an automatic; rest is known. They gave me no chance; stamped me a cold-blooded gangster!

### III. "WHAT IF I HAVE A SOUL!"

Father Norbert listens. When I finish, puts his hand on my shoulder. "Three things have ruined you," he explains, "the mixed-marriage of your parents, drink, and evil company; they have damned many souls."

He asks me if I remember prayers mother taught me. I stumble at Our Father, Hail Mary. Asks what I have been

reading. Has it been helpful to me. I answer frankly that it hasn't; that I am reading merely because I promised him. Says it is no use—must pray to God, to Mother of Christ. Gives me a book, "Catholic Doctrine" and small picture of "Mother of Perpetual Succour." Will be back on Thursday. Begs me earnestly to pray to God and "His good Mother." Am silent, stubborn, unyielding. When he is gone I sink into a lethargy of despair.

November 23rd:—This day week, the end! Slept very little last night. Lay awake thinking of that cursed cell of death. Can't banish Cheswick's words from my mind, "It is a painless death, they say, but we have no proof."

First day of sunshine; weak, sickly rays that throw a faint, square of light with blurred bars on the stone floor before my eyes. Am now so accustomed to grey skies, grey granite walls and dreary semi-dark corridors—my heart cries out a welcome to the sun.

I take up "Preparation for Death." I open it at page 207.

"Before man is life and death, that which he shall choose shall be given him! Beloved Christians, God places before you in this world, life and death—that is, the voluntary privation of forbidden pleasures, by which you will gain eternal life, or the indulgence of them, by which you merit everlasting death. What do you say? What choice do you make? In making the choice act like a man and not like a senseless beast. Act like a Christian who believes in the Gospel and says: 'What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul?'"

Am I acting like a senseless beast? Maybe! I can't know! Have I a soul? I don't know! Perhaps I have! Who is to tell me? What if I have a soul? What if there is a Hell?

6 p.m. Have been talking to Catholic warder. Ask him about the soul. Says he knows he has a soul, because when a man dies he loses something that had made him a man, that something is his soul. Says Catholic Church teaches he has a soul. Church can't be wrong. I ask why! He knows what he is talking about. Says that the Gospels are historically correct documents. In them Christ claimed to be God and established His claim by real miracles—especially by raising from the dead. He founded a Church to teach truth. Truth can belong to only one church. The Catholic

Church alone to-day has all the characteristics, doctrine, etc., of the Church founded by Christ, and therefore the Catholic Church and it alone is the true Church. He says a lot more. He is very earnest—sounds convincing.

I sit thinking, thinking. Still have doubts, questions, difficulties. Remember Father Norbert's advice to pray. I hate to think of this. Go to bed disturbed, ill at ease, and with confused thoughts running in my brain.

November 24th:—Feel more depressed than ever. The day draws nearer and nearer. Feel so helpless. Wait all morning in the hope that Father Norbert will come. I read "Catholic Doctrine." It seems reasonable. Oh, God! why did I not know all this before?

Warders leave me to myself, I will be sorry to part from some of them. When will Father Norbert come?

Open St. Alphonsus Liguori's book—at page 310.

"Let us then, if we wish to be saved, pray always, and never cease to pray. And let all confessors and preachers, if they desire the salvation of souls, never cease to exhort their penitents or hearers to pray. And, in conformity with the advice of St. Bernard, let us always have recourse to the intercession of Mary. Let us ask grace, and ask it through Mary; for what she asks, she obtains, and her prayers cannot be fruitless."

Reading last lines I remember the picture Father Norbert gave me. I examine it. If she asks God to help me die as I should, then God will help me. I should ask her to pray for me. But why? Do I believe in Christ's Mother?

4 p.m. I do not remember exactly what happened when I had written that last sentence this morning. I know that I knelt and said "Hail Mary, full of grace, etc." over and over again. My doubts, difficulties, suddenly vanish. My thoughts become lightsome and glad. In a moment I realize the misery and wretchedness of my sinful life. I have tears in my eyes—I, who thought myself hard as steel. I feel ashamed and sorry that I have fought against Heaven for so long. Warders leave me alone.

6 p.m. Father Norbert has just left. Told him all. Highly pleased. Answers some questions clearly, kindly. Says I must thank God and His Mother. Will be back to-morrow. I decide to confess to-morrow. Says I know enough doctrine.

Warders say I was telling Father Norbert humorous stories, he left the jail wreathed in smiles. If they only knew!

November 25th :—Father Norbert gives me a blessed Rosary Beads and prayer book. I make Confession. Thought it would be a hard ordeal. He helped me. Holy Communion to-morrow in Prison Chapel. Father Norbert tells me more about Our Lord. Gives me New Testament so that I can read the Passion. I pray on the beads. Warders are aware of change in me. Are more cheery.

November 26th :—Holy Communion 7 a.m. Father Norbert prays thanksgiving with me. Feel strangely contented now. Read New Testament. Jesus' words: "Peace be to you; it is I, fear not," strike me. Read prayers in the prayer book.

November 27th :—Father Norbert says he will come each day. We pray the Rosary. Feel grateful to him. Can't explain it to him. May embarrass him. Encouraged me to be patient and resigned now. Gives me leaflet with prayer. I copy it here.

"O Lord my God, I now at this moment, readily and willingly accept from Thy hand whatever kind of death it may please Thee to send me, with all its pains, penalties and sorrows."\*

Father Norbert knows I am at peace and grateful. We sit talking and smoking. When he has gone I pray the Rosary for father and mother. Read "Preparation for Death." Sometimes I pray. Read "Catholic Doctrine."

November 28th :—Famishing cold outside in prison yard. Executioners arrive this morning.

Father Norbert explains Extreme Unction. Tells me that Prison Authorities allow a slit to be made in the white hood they place over my head. He will go down to room underneath trap-door and anoint my forehead.

Have no fears now. Perfectly content.

The Mass in Prison Chapel 7 a.m. to-morrow. Father Norbert tells me about the Mass—what it really is—what it can do for me.

\*A plenary indulgence is granted at the point of death to all who, with sincere love towards God, after Confession and Communion made on any day they may choose, say the above prayer. (Pius X, March 9th, 1904).

I write to Canada. Will give letter to Father Norbert on Monday morning, to post for me.

November 29th :—My last Sunday. My first Mass for 24 years. During Mass I pray for the man I shot. Holy Communion. Father Norbert kneels with me in my cell to make Thanksgiving. Tells me to repeat often: "My Jesus, mercy!" "Heart of Jesus, in Thee I trust!" "Mother of Perpetual Succour, pray for us."

Father Norbert will be back this evening. Spend most of my time at "Preparation for Death." Say many prayers. No anger or hatred now.

5 p.m. Father Norbert has just left. We pray the Rosary together. He says Litany of Sacred Heart from prayer book—I answer: "Have mercy on us." Tells me will bring another priest here to-morrow. Two Masses. Tells me to be calm, patient. Before he goes we recite prayer on leaflet he gave me.

7 p.m. This must be my last entry in the diary. I am very thankful to Father Norbert. I cannot repay him. He said he would be content if I died like a man and a Catholic. The thought comes to me to offer this diary to him,—it is the only thing I have. He may do whatsoever he wishes with it. I think that is all.

*Letter of Chaplain to the dead man's sister, Mrs. K. . . .*

Dear Mrs. K.,—I was asked by your brother on the morning of his death to send you the enclosed letter. No doubt it will explain everything. I had the duty, as Prison Chaplain, of visiting him during his imprisonment, and I was with him in the last moments. He died bravely and, which is far more important, he died as a good Catholic.

Another priest accompanied me to the jail on the last morning at 6.30 a.m. Your brother was present at the two Masses which we offered in the Prison Chapel. He received Holy Communion during the first Mass and I made Thanksgiving with him during the second Mass. At breakfast he talked cheerfully to us. When he had finished it was about 7.45 a.m. During the few minutes that then remained he was courageous and resigned. He thanked me for the help I had given him. He also gave me the enclosed letter for you. I now fulfil my promise by sending it to you.

When the moment arrived we shook hands, and he bade me farewell. I commenced the Litany of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. He answered the responses, as I walked by his side to the execution room. This room was next to his own cell, the door in the wall leading to it, had been all the time screened from his view by a tall heavy press.

He was slightly pale, but he did not falter, and went before his God with a prayer on his lips. May he rest in peace. On that last morning, he also gave me a diary, in which he jotted down a rough account of his last days in prison, telling me that it was the only souvenir he could give me at the last, and that I could read it, burn it, or do with it as I pleased. I will send it along to you in a few days.—Yours sincerely in Christ, Father Norbert, Prison Chaplain.

*Second letter of Prison Chaplain to Mrs. K. . . .*

Dear Mrs. K.—I must apologise for the delay in sending you the diary which I spoke of in my letter. I have read and re-read it and now that I have finished it, I have mingled feelings of sorrow and gladness—sorrow that the writer is gone from amongst us, gladness that he died so well. The diary emphasizes a truth which St. Alphonsus puts thus:

“All confess that they must die, and die only once, and that nothing is of greater importance than to die well; because on death depends whether we shall be forever in bliss or forever in despair. All know that our eternal happiness or our eternal unhappiness depends on leading a good or bad life. How then does it happen that the greater part of Christians live as if they were never to die, or as if to die well or ill were of little moment! We ought to do at present what we shall at death wish to have done.”

I have shown the diary to some of my brother priests, and they are of the opinion that it should be published with some necessary changes in names and circumstances. I think it is a wise suggestion.—Yours sincerely in Christ, Father Norbert, Prison Chaplain.

# CALLING PLAIN CHRISTIANS

by FATHER OLIVER, O. Cist.

(Mount St. Joseph's Roscrea)

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This little book (Cr. 8vo, 68 pp., paper cover), is, according to the author, “a very ordinary one,” addressed to what, for want of a better phrase, are called “ordinary souls.” The definition of “ordinary souls” is “ordinary people”—not those who have devoted their lives to the service of God in the priesthood or religion. In short, the book is addressed to the laity; the ordinary laity, not the tertiary (though many tertiaries will benefit by it); its purpose is to tell them how to pray in the midst of the tear and toil of existence.

Father Oliver's breezy, sympathetic style will be appreciated by those whom he is addressing.

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