

CHAPTER IX

“IF I LAUGH AT ANY MORTAL THING,
'TIS THAT I MAY NOT WEEP.”

THE spring of '58 thawed out a national panic as well as the frozen fields around the seminary. By a strange coincidence, as soon as the young students had been ensconced in their new home the preceding May, one of the worst national panics we have known shook the country. It was short, but severe. Manufacturing came to a standstill. Railroad stocks became a drug on the market. Three of the most important railroad companies went out of business entirely. Labor was glad to get work at almost any wages. He was thought lucky who got work for half pay. Servant girls were slaving for \$1.75 a week. But in the next spring hope revived. And these three priests, despite the unstable condition of the country, their present debt of about \$16,000, their scanty resources, and the lessons of the previous year, resolved to build. It would be a two-story frame structure with an attic, attached sidewise to the far end of the old bowling alley, and running parallel with the brick building. On the first floor would be a large study hall; on the second, just as large a dormitory; and many beds could be placed in the attic. Crowded, it would house fifty boys. The high-ceilinged rooms would require the building to run some eight or ten feet higher than the brick structure. A little after Christmas it was completed,—the first of many buildings to be erected by the Seminary of Our Lady of Angels.

Excitements were fast and furious for the boys of '57, '58 and '59. The news from the world might seep in, but it meant little to those that lived in a miniature world of their own. The Mormons might massacre the immigrants in the Mountain Meadow, September '57; but what was that compared

with the excitement of seeing those trees fall, and of chopping off the limbs? John Brown might make his raid at Harper's Ferry in the beginning of December, '59; but that was nothing compared with watching Brother Leo, who had come from Texas, making a raid with his lasso on the bulls and hogs? This Brother Leo seems to have been their hero: he could do such wonderful things! He could build a hydraulic pump that would bring the water from the spring by the railroad in the Gorge right up to the back door. He could even build a path down the four hundred feet of the Gorge to the river, and make a breakwater where you could swim as safe as anything. True, nature and the older boys helped the Brother; but he was the one who thought of it and showed how it could be done. Several giant boulders lined out into the waters. Tie heavy rocks to tree trunks and sink them above the boulders. Then cedar trees with more rocks above the trunks. Then more rocks without trees. The rushing waters would pin the trees to the boulders, and all passing debris would only help to fill up the gaps; and "you have the finest swimming in the country." True, even in the summer time, it was more icy than commodious; and if you ventured out a foot too far, you would have to wave farewell to your friends on the bank; and trust that they would not forget to bring your clothes along when they would look you up, three miles away, at Lewiston; and pray that when they should arrive they would find enough of you to clothe. However, no fatalities happened; though we fancy that oftentimes guardian angels must have spiritually perspired while their charges shivered.

And even more exciting were the games with the Indians. Once or twice a week the President, like a Grand Sachem, hiked with his unfeathered warriors to the Reservation, eight miles away. The palefaces taught the Redmen catechism, and the Redmen taught the palefaces lacrosse. Commandments and "scalps" were thus freely interchanged, and sometimes both were bruised.

Those games were more exciting than even the hikes on picnics to Goat Island where they would watch the Buffalo boat warp to its dock, or would decide the college championship for running, wrestling or broad jumping; even more exciting than those Sunday walks of '58, '59 and '60 to Suspension Bridge to see Blondin, the French equilibrist, high above the mad waters, walk on a rope from the States to Canada. Twice a month, if both weather and watchers were favorable, he would not only walk, but hang by his toes amidstream, stand on his head, hop across in a potato bag, or push a loaded wheelbarrow from bank to bank. Yes, all that was exciting. In the town Blondin became the idol of every schoolboy. Almost every backyard fence held a boy with his mother's clothes' prop. The market in props grew bullish, as young mothers grew grayish. The demand exceeded the supply. Hardware dealers telegraphed the mills to speed up mass production. Seven year "hopefuls" would bargain with a candy man, "I ain't got no pennies for them sour-balls, but I'll give you two props." They became a more popular medium of exchange than marbles. Housewives longed for a safe wherein to guard them. And drug stores became fabulously rich by advertising balm for bruises and patent splints for broken bones.

Of course, the craze struck the boys on the Ridge. The trees afforded all lengths of poles, and the fences all lengths of highways. The cattle in the fields would stop their munching to watch dreamily the processions a-top the fences, and to wonder, "If we are placed behind wooden bars why are not those walkers placed behind iron ones?" Father Lynch, too, watched them and thought of his own past boyhood: he watched Blondin, and thought of his own future. He oftentimes must have felt that he was like that Frenchman on the rope. Debts were coming, coming,—raging beneath his feet as raged the river. They were leaping up at him like white-crested waves. Or they were gathering in a whirlpool in seeming stagnation far beneath him. He must not lose his balance. To lose confidence would mean loss of balance,—ruin.

Confidence must be his balancing pole—confidence, not in himself, but in his Lady of Angels. She must help him: he would help others. While trying to pay his own debts, he must not forget to help the struggling churches at Suspension Bridge and Lewiston; and above all, he must not forget his beloved Indians. Let the boys play their games with their balancing poles as they will. They'll be men soon enough when they'll have to exchange their poles for heavier burdens more difficult to balance.

And so the boys did, and found excitement in it all; but not like the excitement of lacrosse with the Indians. Only one game was comparable with that. This game could be played only in the dormitory in the winter time, when the prefect was not around, and when Brother Leo had not forgotten to place the cylindrical tin drum between the furnace register that stood in the center of the study hall floor and the register that stood directly above it in the center of the dormitory floor. It was thus that the heat in the night was conducted from the furnace to the dormitory. The game was to disrobe on the dormitory register, leave your clothes thereon to be heated for the morning, and do a "swan-dive" into bed. 'Tis true, that the accumulated atomic calories of the register were insufficient to bring the fear of fire even to a prefect's heart: the game even promoted early retiring immediately after the night prayers in the study hall, for it rewarded him that was first in bed with the lowest layer of clothes on the register, and so with the assurance of the warmest clothes in the morning—unless some perfidious somnambulist during the night should, for the bribe of a pocket knife, give the coveted position to another's clothes. But the game led to wild disorder in the morning. Twenty "Kluxers" in a huddle 'neath the lantern's misty light at 5:00 a. m. clawing for clothes was not conducive to silence and recollection, or to promptness at morning prayers. But the hard-hearted prefect could see no fun in such a game, and promulgated periodic ukases; but at the same time, he could not repress his laughter in the morn-

ing. Father Lynch advised the prefect (who was sometimes Father Monaghan, sometimes Father Smith, or one of the few seminarians who now lived in the brick house) never to lose his "balance." "Solomon says, 'There is a time to weep, and a time to laugh' "—"Yes," could say the big Father Monaghan, "but Job says the behemoth will laugh at him who shaketh a spear; and what can you expect of me when I see twenty dancing youngsters shaking stockings and shirts,—and various other articles of apparel?"

In the classroom especially the President insisted that the Professor never lose his "balance." But times were multiple when prolonged guffaws shattered all decorum. Even with the new building, quarters were still too cramped. Mr. Hoffman and his family lived in a couple of rooms, and helped with the farm, the kitchen and the domestic cleanliness. The family consisted of several youngsters from crawlers to toddlers and recent graduates thereof. They could not understand why all this quiet? They had the habit of wandering away, as babies will, from maternal apron strings and setting out on independent tours of investigation. A philosopher might be descanting with his professor on the phantasmagoric categories of Kant when a jam-dyed face of a tiny investigator would smile into the room and hopscotch around the enclosure. A theologian, discoursing with warmth on the Thomistic primordial movements of grace, or hammering with greater warmth the arguments of the atheistic concepts of the universe, would lose all control of his hammer and all sight of the thing to be hammered when a tot would sidle up to him with the request to "Button me dwess!" Or to the young geometrician at the blackboard it might be perfectly clear that the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides; but if a baby gurgling German gutturals stampeded into the room and was followed by a mother gasping Teutonic imprecations who fell just as she captured the refugee,—well, you could not blame the geometrician if for the

moment he could not tell which side was square,—if any.

But if at times the repercussions of laughter became so dangerous that they threatened to dynamite all silence and study for the rest of the day, and reverberate into the dormitory at night, all the danger could be averted by having all the fuses saturated by a perspiring, double-quick walk to Lewiston. Lewiston could stifle any laughter. Anyway, no one feels like laughing long when perspiring freely. But perspiration and Lewiston were a combination making laughter absolutely impossible; and the impossibility endured as long as the vision of the little village remained vivid in the imagination. A graceful and gentle critic of the last generation, meaning no offence, styled it "the mausoleum of defunct energy." It was but a playful quip. He loved Lewiston even though he had spent his boyhood and youth amid strident elevated trains and clanging trolleys. The citizenry of Lewiston resented the remark, as well they should. In indignation they arose and almost whispered, "Breathes there a man with soul so dead;" but they did not,—only yawned, and slept and snored instead.

But even granted that the loving whimsicality of the critic were true (and it is not), one feels not like laughing in a mausoleum. Let one do a marathon through a graveyard of mausoleums, and one has not the power to laugh. In the pagan days of Tacitus the German chieftain returning from Rome to his native Black Forest may have said to his warriors, "See Rome,—and live!" But no collegian turning from these double-quick hikes of '58 and '59, ever said, "See Lewiston and laugh!" Thomas à Kempis is authority for the statement that as often as you go out among men you return less a man: likewise, every hiker returned less a laugh,—less all laughs. He could not have laughed had he heard the cows snorting gerunds and gerundives. He would have but three things in his mind: a long supper, short night prayers, and hence to bed. And thus the sight of Lewiston oft restored the equilibrium of the seminary.

And well it might; for it is the cradle of the faith in this

region. Heroic lives have left their imprint there. Two capitals of Europe fought for nigh a century to control it. For years it was the chief port of entry into the country. It might have grown into a great city like New York or Boston; or at least, like Buffalo, Chicago or Duluth. But it did not—Heaven be thanked. It eventually proved an inspiration for painters and poets and novelists rather than for coal heavers, lumberjacks and iron mongers. Wealth hath not made it haughty; nor poverty, pitiable. It breathes an air of culture as balmy as its springtime mornings. There is something more in life than constant energy; and that something more is found at Lewiston. Viewing it from the heights one wishes that Goldsmith had seen it before he wrote of

*“Sweet Auburn, loveliest village of the plain,
Where village statesmen talked with looks profound,
And news much older than their ale went round.”*

Had Tom Moore seen it he would have forgotten all about the sweet vale of Avoca where “the bright waters meet;” and Cowley would have substituted “Lewiston” for “Islington,” and have advised the citizens to scathe any metropolitan city with

*“Let but thy wicked men from out thee go,
And all the fools that crowd thee so,
Even thou, who dost thy millions boast,
A village less than Lewiston will grow—
A solitude almost.”*

The foolish and the wicked never found a comfortable home at Lewiston. Even today it is no place for loud laughter “that speaks the vacant mind,” nor for tumult of a Sunday ball game that speaks a vacant lot alive with assassins of an umpire. The spot was meant for sleep—another Sleepy Hollow; but a “beauty sleep” of charming listlessness. Rightfully the citizens resent whate’er disturbs their slumbers. The very Rapids cease their roaring and racing when they come within earshot of the snorers, and silently step a dead march past

the wharves. The locomotives may glance like lightning down the ledge of the Gorge; but they, too, fall asleep as soon as they strike the village. The trolleys by the water's edge may race the river; but lassitude thralls them at the bridge, and they crawl across to Canada. Yes, the auto-bus from the Fort gets through the town, but languor immediately seizes it, and it can only with slow difficulty make the steep incline to the mountain top. Coming down the incline from the opposite direction, it respects the sensitiveness of the villagers, and clamps its brakes till its wheels keep time to Chopin's melancholy strains.

Thirty years ago if you were a stranger that strolled into the barber shop, the chirotonorialist might leave you but half-shaved, and stroll across the street to imprint as town clerk his seal authorizing the sinking of a pump within the village limits; but you need not have had any fears. He was sure to return and regale you with the strict morality of the community. The stripling youth then could not so much as buy a package of cigarettes within its borders. All the citizens were strict Prohibitionists years before the national law made the whole country just as moral. Some newspapers may have smirched the escutcheon of the village by stating that every block had a speakeasy; but others denied the charge, and said that every block *was* a speakeasy. It may have been some of these slanderers who begot the story that even in pioneer days Lewiston was saturated with alcohol; that when Fenimore Cooper wished a model for his Sergeant Hollister who punctuated Bible texts with bumpers, and for his Betty Flanagan whose bumpers were punctuated with only commas (or anything not requiring a full stop), he came to the Frontier House and chose Mr. and Mrs. Hustler. These slandering newsmongers thirty years ago that stated the morals of the pioneer days had not changed, averred that if by some mischance you should slip into a house unhaunted by spirits labeled and arranged morgue-like upon the shelves, you would find that the only tenant was a cat that purred and

blinked on the window sill in the sun. And they wagered that all the other inhabitants of the village had ambled down the hill to the wharf to wave farewell handkerchiefs to strangers who had come, had seen and had slept an afternoon among them; and who now, inoculated with the lotus of the place, were shambling across the gangway of the boat Toronto-bound; that the hands upon the dock were waving solemnly as to a passing funeral; that the fat-ribbed innkeeper was backed against a post trying to heave a shout instead of a yawn. Thus is beauty ever slandered.

The beautiful little place had not been always inert. Even culture has its moments of dynamic energy. A little more than thirty years ago on a warm autumnal day, John Williams, a Tuscarora brave who had discarded moccasins for Douglas shoes, conceived the idea that this town should not always be as one enthralled in the heats of an August afternoon. Such lethargy was unworthy of his ancestors. So he seized a spade, and despite the warnings of the constable, went to work. 'Tis on record now he did. The barber has preserved it in the archives of the village. This said John Williams did dig a hole; and as he dug, the hair of his head stood up, not with the realization that he was working, but with the realization that a voice spoke to him from the innards of the hole. He dropped the spade and ran; and told his fright to an old chieftain who had years ago gazed upon fields of carnage, and who now could gaze unmoved into a hole,—but not upon a red brother working there. The voice, the chieftain said, was the voice of two centuries ago. No red man must dig above that spot: every urge of his spade would rouse a voice in execration. A white brother must dig that hole.

But a white man willing was hard to find. Finally, with promises of a sirloin steak and onions, they succeeded in inveigling a tattered "chevalier de la route" to grasp the spade and to work under the silent direction of the war-scarred ancient. The crowd held its breath as the unsentimental digger dug up a wagonload of skulls that had hatchet gashes,

and finger bones with copper rings upon them, and wrists with copper bracelets; and five thousand wampum beads, a few swords and a score of battle-axes,—all that was left of the Indian village of two centuries ago. And the ancient spoke the history of that grave: he told of the time a Sachem's son had crawled silent as the snake in the night to the wigwams where now stands Buffalo. He told how the son had stolen a dark-skinned maiden to whom he swore his love would ever remain as green as the cedar. But in a few months that love changed like the leaves of the chestnut. Hatred froze his heart against her. Thoughts of her tore his heart as the ice-packs tear the banks of the river. The sight of her pricked his spirit to anger. He swore to kill her and all her tribe. Half a hundred braves shared his oath. But some hours before the intended massacre, the dusky dame slipped away in the night, and ran like a deer through the woods to the home of her father; and all the warriors of Erie's shore arose to don their feathers and their war paint and to chant a few hurried strains of war dances around their fire, and to cast a twig into the river, and to swear that before that twig should reach the water where the Rapids sleep, they should be there, and the scalps of all perfidious lovers should dangle from the wampum belts. "What happened after, this grave tells. I have spoken."

Oh, Lewiston is no place for laughter. Father Lynch knew well the history of the village, and its sobering influence upon classes disrupted by the invasions of Germanic hordes. And if the professor lost his "balance" and joined in the popular disruption, there was no cure so sure as a hike to the haven of heavenly harmonies,—and hence to home. However, he insisted that in the dormitories and the classroom professorial "balance" must be maintained whenever humanly possible. In the chapel there was no need of insistence. But, strange to say, it was in the very chapel that on one occasion the President himself lost his "balance," at least momentarily. In July, '58, the Provincial sent from the Barrens a Vincentian

seminarian, a student of theology, who would continue his studies at Niagara, do some teaching, and act as prefect over the collegians. By the spring of '59 several other philosophical and theological students for the secular clergy from various parts of the country had come. It was the custom of Father Lynch to gather these seminarians, the three priests and the lay brother in the chapel once or twice a week for what was called "repetition of prayer." The object was to train especially the seminarians in spiritual meditation: to think the things of God and to voice them in simple language without any of the vain trappings of human wisdom. A priest that could not meditate was a priest without power; a priest that could not in simple language voice his meditation was one weakened in this power. A priest that sought to clothe the thoughts of God with worldly poesy or inane phraseology was a dangerous man: he sought the applause of the world instead of its salvation. He was a man that directed attention more to himself than to God; made people think of words rather than of thoughts, or of thoughts rather than of things, of the raiment of Solomon rather than of the unadorned beauty of the lily: he was painting the lily and gilding the rose. The thoughts of God are beauty, and beauty is best unadorned. And the priest that would take the beauty of God, and direct the attention to his own human embellishments would be seeking his renown as a decorator, and using the beauty of God as the occasion for this vain renown. The action would be akin to sacrilege: using a holy thing for an unholy purpose. Besides, it would be a vain thing: the only reason he is a priest is to save souls, but here he is wasting his time in getting people to praise him rather than to love God. He is piping in the market place of the world, setting the feet of dancers awhirl with his music, when they should be on their knees striking their breasts with their hands: and he is using the word of God for his flute. He is but "a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal." People will say, "How wonderful is that man standing on the platform!" But who will

say, "How wonderful is that God hanging on a cross?"

It was with such sentiments as these that Father Lynch instructed his seminarians. These "repetitions" were very solemn. The little crowd would gather and listen to a reader of the prayers announce the subject of the meditation. For half an hour there would not be a sound in the chapel, except, perhaps, when someone coughed or changed his posture. A few minutes before the time was up, the President would give two very slow and distinct knocks with his knuckles on his priedieu—a signal to bring the meditation to a close, and to thank God for the thoughts given, for the motives urging to the acquisition of some virtue or the eradication of a fault, for the means that would lead to this acquisition or eradication, and for the resolutions to use these means.

Then at a single knock upon the priedieu, all would be seated. There would be a momentary pause: the heart of any new seminarian who had not been used to the practice could almost be heard thumping his ribs, for anyone might be called to give his "repetition," the oldest priest, the youngest seminarian, or Brother Leo. Now there was one seminarian, a Mr. Cole, who had come from another seminary to finish his theology at Niagara. If we mistake not, he had been an Oxford student, or perhaps graduate, before entering his first seminary for the priesthood. He had a peculiar English accent and a peculiar swagger in walking. The other seminarians referred to the swagger as the "Oxford Movement."

On a certain night in late April, '59, while all within were in silent prayer, two cats were holding tryst in the moonlight just below a chapel window. They both must have been studying the moon, for they were as quiet as the night. But, evidently, the shuffling of feet of those rising from their knees to be seated roused them from their reverie. Possibly, they expected further recognition by those within, and proposed a safer rendezvous over by the barn; but confidence returned when quiet settled upon the dwellers within the chapel. In a moment, a voice floated from within, "Mr. Cole, please."

They seemed to recognize the voice and to agree that no danger was to be expected from Father Lynch: he liked all dumb animals, and those two outside who were not so dumb. Within Mr. Cole arose, held before his breast his biretta in clasped hands, stood on one foot, then on the other, cleared his throat a few times, emitted a rasping conglutination of sound that proved the vocal chords were titillating all right, but needed a few "hems" and "haws." He proceeded with the aid of his handkerchief to give the necessary clearance papers to the chords, and began: "Reverend Fathers, and Fellow Students," and stopped. It was evident that the clearance papers would not be visaed by the tonsils: he must re-submit them. This he proceeded to do with the aid of the aforesaid kerchief. But outside, the voice startled the trysters, and they fell to discussing it. Both acknowledged it to be strange. They had heard the Yankee nasals, the Irish brogue and the American twang; but this had a peculiarity about it that intrigued. There was a drawl to it unfamiliar to all their past lives. One seemed to like it, and one did not. Perhaps the former had Manx ancestry quite familiar with that drawl, and so voted for the esthetic supremacy of the British brand, and voted loud. But the other argued that if the decision hung on lung power, the upper lobe of his left lung held more power than any two Manx lungs combined; and proceeded to demonstrate. The debaters seemed to hear some tittering. Maybe those within were voting on the voice, too? They would await in quiet the decision from within. And as they declared their truce, Mr. Cole was ready to resume. He began again: "Reverend Fathers and Fellow Students, as—I—was—ah—ah—making—ah—my—med—meditation—;" but outside the truce was off. Feline patience has its limits, unless you're a Manx cat. The impatient half of the argument actually screamed his disapproval of the voice, and the Manx boxed his ears. Several blows were struck and flying tackles made, when they heard the shuffling of feet within, and from many throats there were sounds quite loud. Maybe those within

were moving up to cast their votes? Those without would lie in silence a few feet apart, facing each other, and would settle their private affair after the voting. They could wait: the night was young. But within, all had grown quiet again. A third time Mr. Cole began: "Reverend Fathers and Fellow Students, as —ah—ah—I—ah . . . ;" but the disapproving one could absolutely wait no longer: this thing must be settled right now; and started to settle it. A thunder clap of loud laughter broke from the group within. Father Lynch's dignity broke through its sluice-gates. It was not now a thunder clap, but a cloudburst of laughter. Finally, he managed to say, "Brother Leo, ch-ch-chase those cats away." The priest had to think quickly. This was unseemly conduct in the holy place. They must conquer that hilarity. What would he do? Mr. Cole had sat down. To call him again would awaken memories. To take a hurried hike to Lewiston was too late. He called upon the seminarian from the Barrens. The seminarian arose, and before he had spoken two sentences the solemnity of the place was restored. In five minutes all the material thoughts of the world were forgotten as the young man in fervid but simple words poured out the thoughts of his heart. He forgot himself in the vision of his theme. Father Lynch was in another world. When the speaker finished with, "Sir, these are the thoughts that came to me in my prayer," they all fell upon their knees for night prayers, and one by one in silence sought their rooms. The young man was the first to leave the chapel: he had to hurry over to his collegians, for he was their prefect, the first regular prefect Niagara had. But no one seeing him pass from the chapel that night could have guessed that within four years his name would ring in every household of the land as the beloved poet-priest of the South, —Father Abraham J. Ryan.