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BROTHER GABRIEL

By
THE AUTHOR OF
"KITTY"



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BROTHER GABRIEL.

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BROTHER GABRIEL

BY

M. BETHAM-EDWARDS

AUTHOR OF

"KITTY," "DOCTOR JACOB," "BRIDGET,"
"A WINTER WITH THE SWALLOWS,"

&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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BROTHER GABRIEL.

CHAPTER I.

FOREBODINGS.

WINTER passed uneventfully at the City of Bridges, and spring burst suddenly upon the delicious land in full, untarnished splendour. By magic, as it seemed, the wondrous Minerva-like birth was accomplished. The dusky alleys of camellia and rhododendron flamed rosy-red. The bare almond-trees were tasseled with delicate pink, the purple and white blossom of the early magnolia

opened shell-wise, showing a creamy heart, in every garden the peach-trees made carmine clouds, and the south wind wafted fragrance of violet and mignonette in the streets. By the end of March every trace of winter had vanished.

Flowers are the loves of lonely women, and Huberte and Zoë largely shared this amiable fetichism of their sex, worshipping the lovely things as if they were angelic creatures to be prayed to, or responsive fondlings to be caressed. They grew foolishly gay over their first nosegays, which were not gathered, you may be sure, in Delmar's glades. Not for worlds would Zoë have set foot within those sacred precincts, unless alone, but all round the city were flower-bestrewed meads and sylvan haunts ; every Sunday they made little excursions with their friends. After mass and midday breakfast, indeed, no one dreamed of staying indoors. These bright



Sundays were so many Easter Days, when, to use Goethe's simile, instead of a crucified Saviour raised from the tomb, an entire population emerged from a living grave, exchanging dark, unwholesome attics and crowded workshops for green fields and wide blue heavens.

One morning, however, from early dawn, a reverse process began, and instead of the townsfolk flowing to the country, all the neighbouring villages poured into the town. It was the day of the general elections, and all who have lived in France can understand the ferment and deadly excitement of these occasions. Peace-loving people then live under the open jaws of a volcano, threatened every moment with destruction. No one can tell what will happen, and the worst is always possible!

Zoë and her friend, in spring dresses and bewitching little bonnets, sat down some-

what disconsolately to their breakfast. Of all their acquaintances, none could be counted on for a country walk to-day. Many wives and children, indeed, of ardent Republicans, were quite ill with anxiety, and the issue of the contest was fraught with the gravest consequences to the two teachers. A clerical victory, and Huberte's school was doomed. At least, so said those best able to judge.

"We shall not see a soul to-day till little Henri de Robert comes to tell us of the results," Huberte said, with an air of deep dejection. "But, for Heaven's sake, let us not stay indoors. Unless I do something, this suspense will madden me. I am sorry the new bonnets arrived, and were tried on last night. We wanted such a distraction just now."

Zoë smiled. She was always discussing the psychological demarcation effected be-



tween an Englishwoman and a Frenchwoman by means of the omnipotent Bonnet. How much coldness on the one hand, how much amiable coquetry on the other, is due to the importance attached to this amiable invention !

“Let us take our baskets and gather wild flowers,” she said, cheerfully. “At any rate, we shall have the fields to ourselves.”

“But we must be home in good time. You do not know what the town will be like towards evening. Hark !”

She flew to the open window, finger on lip—Zoë followed. In the distance they heard the tramp of congregated footsteps, and an ominous, unforgettable strain swelled by hundreds of voices.

“It is the Marseillaise ! May Heaven preserve us !” Huberte cried, turning very pale, and trembling in every limb. The

opened shell-wise, showing a creamy heart, in every garden the peach-trees made carmine clouds, and the south wind wafted fragrance of violet and mignonette in the streets. By the end of March every trace of winter had vanished.

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mingled sounds of tramping feet and ringing voices came nearer and nearer ; soon a band, six deep, of working men filed past, with that most moving line upon their lips,

“ *Amour sacré de la patrie.*”

This was too much for Huberte. She flushed crimson, waved her handkerchief from the window, and when they began their next refrain, mingled her own voice in the maddening—

“ *Aux armes, aux armes, citoyens !*”

Who, indeed, can resist it ? Who can forget the first time of hearing it ? There is nothing in the entire universe of song and melody so irresistible, so burning, so portentous as this ! Not the imagination alone, but the passions are led captive. Every word bites itself into the memory, but with blood and not acid. It is the history of the glorious French people told in a song, and

the nation as one heart leaps up at the sound !
To have listened to the Marseillaise in stirring
times on French soil is for a moment to be
one with France and her aspirations.

“How foolish of me to be patriotic when
I have my bread to win, and may be thrown
on my resources to-morrow !” Huberte said,
turning from the window and drying her
eyes. “But let us go. They will be sing-
ing the Marseillaise all day long, and I have
heard it upon horrible occasions. We are,
after all, only women, and can pluck wild
flowers and think of our new bonnets even on
the day of a general election. Were I a
man, this commotion would well please
me.”

They set out, encountering excited crowds
on their way. The churches were empty,
and the daily celebrations had been so
arranged as to suit the convenience of the
electors. The Sabbath day look of light-

heartedness and surrender to enjoyment had vanished from one end of the city to the other. The flower-market was deserted, the omnibuses and little steamers, usually crowded with holiday-makers, were deserted, the botanical gardens, which the Sunday afternoon band transformed into a fête, were left to nursemaids and children. The largest crowds were collected in front of the Préfecture, the Hôtel de Ville, and the Mairie, whilst along the quays and boulevards, bands of workmen, apprentices, and students, with arms entwined and green sprays in their hats, chanted the Marseillaise. Even the provision shops were shut as on Good Friday and New Year's Day.

Outside this tumultuous circle, lay lovely worlds of light and shadow, natural parterres, and leafy dells, under feathery clouds sailing across the blue. The two friends, after making a tedious circuit between high

white walls, shutting in suburban gardens, found themselves at last in the midst of sloping meadows, meadows to the east, west, north, and south, and as yet in their virgin glory, grass and flowers three feet high covering every inch, warmed to the roots by the hot April sun.

The colours were variegated as those of an oriental carpet, conspicuously shining above all, the starry white and gold of the regal ox-eyed daisy.

“What deliciousness!”

Huberte repeated the expression several times, stood for a moment before the ravishing prospect, then simultaneously the two friends plunged ankle-deep amid the grasses and flowers. They were soon far apart, oblivious of each other's presence—forgetful, indeed, of everything but the pleasure of finding here a stately orchid, there a grandiose daffodil, familiar

pets and darlings everywhere. The agony of the city they had left behind, the momentous issue of the struggle going on, the ache and fever consuming their friends and supporters—all these things, for the moment, ceased to be realities. They were only women idolising natural beauty. There were two worlds lying side by side under the blue sky that day, one made up of fierce contest and material interests, the other of bird-singing and child-like innocence and enjoyment.

Time passes quickly thus spent, and when they met to arrange their treasures under a sheltering hedge, two hours had already elapsed. Scarlet with heat and exertion, they rested for some time under the shadow of the birch-trees, then laden with posies as large as wheatsheaves, began their circuitous walk home.

“Let us turn into a church to pray for



the success of our friends, and rest a little," Huberte suggested, when they had reached the outskirts of the town. "Ah! do you see that congeries of new buildings yonder? We are close to your friend Father Gabriel's monastery. Why not rest in the chapel as we did one day last autumn?"

Zoë hesitated, but, in order to avoid a discussion, let Huberte have her way, and they approached the bare little structure, talking of the young monk.

"I would not willingly stand in his shoes if the election go against the Republic and the people," Huberte added, as they entered. "My cousin Raoul says that the Franciscans would be the first to suffer at the hands of the mob. The poor are enraged with them because the times are bad, and they say that the Capucins fatten on alms, whilst honest workmen out of employment are not allowed to beg. But I suppose Father Gabriel and all,

except the lay-brethren, bring money with them to the community?"

"I do not know," Zoë answered, with some abstraction. Her thoughts had wandered back to Delmar.

They stole up the aisle, and putting down their flowers, prayed silently; then, rising from their knees, sat still, facing the altar. They were the sole worshippers. As a rule, no matter at what hour on a Sunday you enter any church or conventual chapel in France, there will be large numbers of stragglers—artizans, soldiers, and domestic servants prevented from attending the regular services. To-day the little chapel was deserted, and Huberte drew Zoë's attention to the fact significantly.

"See, it is as I said just now," she whispered. "The Franciscans are in such bad odour that nobody will even enter their chapel!"

Just then, two monks entered from opposite doors, and automatically began preparing the altar for evening service. It was precisely the same kind of dumb show the two girls had witnessed on that autumn afternoon so fresh in their memories, and the actors in it were the same, namely, Father Gabriel and the brother of evil countenance.

Zoë at once saw that a great change had come over her friend, rendering the contrast between himself and his companion much more conspicuous. All the beauty and candour were there, but the look of untarnished health and high animal spirits was gone, and in their place reigned a thoughtfulness, a pallor and spirituality that better harmonised with his ascetic calling. Over the saturnine countenance of Father Ephraim had come no change, except, perhaps, that an expression of triumph underlay the lurking malice.

His sallow complexion, thin lips, and dark brow looked almost fiendish by comparison with the sweetness and transparency of the younger man's clear forehead and frank blue eyes, which not even the traditional upturning could mar.

As he moved backward and forward with mechanical foldings of the hands and bendings of the knee, an ordinary observer would have supposed him utterly unconscious of what was going on around him. But not so. He had noticed from the first the entry of those two graceful female figures, and a moment afterwards recognised Zoë by her beautiful gold-tipped hair and unmistakeable English complexion. There was an insular peculiarity, moreover, in the straight, candid glance of her sweet eyes. No French girl would have looked at a stranger thus, and, indeed, by virtue of her



bringing up, is bound to avert her eyes from the masculine presence always.

Zoë, with that look of tender pity and concern so habitual to her, studied the young man's pale downcast features, wondering what had happened to make him so sad, so attenuated, so wholly changed from his former self. She little knew that those innocent glances were filling him with self-consciousness, and apprehension, and despair, that her guileless presence was portentous of evil to him.

At last the two friends rose, and Zoë, as she passed down the aisle, deposited her flowers on a side altar. She hardly knew why she did it; she never for a moment dreamed of his recognition. To her thinking, he had utterly dropped out of her existence, yet it pleased her, for Lionel's sake, to link her prayers and aspirations with his.



The dainty bonnets, wreathed with roses, and Marie-Antoinette costumes of silvery grey, with little white lace kerchiefs crossed over the breast, disappeared from the building, leaving it colder, emptier, uglier than before. Having put the finishing touch to their preparations, the two monks also went away. But, a little later, one of the brown-draped, automatic figures unclosed the same side-door softly, and walking straight to the altar on which Zoë had deposited her flowers, knelt before it in long and passionate prayer.

When he rose from his knees, he took up the nosegay with trembling fingers, regarded it for a moment as if it were a living, speaking, adorable thing, then, with a deep sigh, placed it in a vase, and again quitted the chapel.

Zoë and her companion found the city at

fever heat. Positive results could not be known till eight o'clock in the evening, but they were guessed at with little exhilaration on the part of the Republicans. The place was swarming with priests, every suburban hamlet having sent its contingent of black-robed political agitators, and none could doubt, from their flushed faces and exultant voices, that they had done their work well. On every side were confusion, menace, and terror ; even the children were infected by the contagion, and would not go to bed till after the proclamation of the result. The strife of the contending parties had reached a deadly pitch, and no wonder, seeing what issues were at stake.

To how many besides Huberte a clerical victory meant ruin !

The two friends sat in their little drawing-room in a tremor of expectation. Every ten minutes Lise brought some alarming rumour.

Now Henri Cinq, now Napoleon the Fourth, now a second Commune was proclaimed ; at one moment the soldiery were firing upon the people, the next, a gendarme or a priest was being ducked in the Loire ! The noise without did not serve to re-assure them. Ever and anon, above the surging of angry multitudes, and the shrieks, laughter, groans, and ribaldry of the ordinary street mob, rose the fearful burden of the Marseillaise.

At last their suspense was brought to an end by the concierge, who staggered in, half intoxicated, crying—

“ All is over with us, Mademoiselle—the Republicans are betrayed ! ”



CHAPTER II.

THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS.

LITTLE alike of political ferment and spring-tide glory were admitted within the walls of the Franciscan monastery. Nothing could exceed the silence of its white-washed corridors nor the monotony of its bricked courtyards. Yet the joyousness of the season made itself felt even there, and Father Gabriel, reading in his cell, on a radiant April morning, might have afforded a modern artist as touching and poetic a subject as the famous St. Jerome of Giovanni Bellini.

The window let in a splendid panoramic

prospect of city and suburb, harbour and river, green islet and sloping banks, and rearing a stately front above all, the ancient cathedral. All these, suffused in the gold and pearl of early day, made up a sum of ideal loveliness, nor was the pensive figure of the young Capucin unworthy of such a background. He sat by the open casement, with one hand supporting his head, the other turning the leaves of an antique volume, the bended figure, in its heavy brown drapery, standing out boldly against the sunny wall. What brightness and warmth relieved the picture lay in the fresh tints of the young man's complexion and the amber hues of his hair and beard. Thought and care have lately touched those comely features, adding years of age to the smooth brow and pleasing contour, and as he reads and ponders, the expression of meditation changes to that of profound

melancholy. He sighs deeply, the muscles of his face are drawn down, finally he closes the volume with a gesture of despair.

Leaning against the wall, his eyes fixed on the superb scene before him, perhaps the sense of contrast which must have struck the minds of a spectator, then flashed across his own. Outside lay the living, moving, quick-pulsed world of hope and passion, of material interests and close-clinging domestic affections. Within sat the recluse, excluded from worldly things, cut off from political and social ties, from the perils of love and the quicksands of ambition, as virtually removed, indeed, from active life as primitive ascetic and mediæval hermit.

There was no denying this, yet he thought, as he watched the exquisite transformation of early morning into day, how do they err who imagine that we monks selfishly surrender ourselves to a career of rounded smooth-

ness and puerile freedom from care! Wrongly, indeed, is it supposed that a cowardly fear of ordinary discomforts and responsibilities drives us to seek shelter within the monastery walls. If we are spared some paltry miseries, at least we enter the arena of spiritual combat, and buy our victories with blood, agony, and direst shame!

He rose, took from his little shelf an inkstand composed of a solid piece of cork hollowed in the middle, and opening a little note-book, bound in vellum, and having metal clasps secured by a key, began to write. This diary, begun some time before, and added to from day to day, was substantially a letter to Delmar, only awaiting transmission across the Atlantic by a friendly hand. An American dentist settled at Les Ponts was about to pay a flying visit to the States, and had promised to execute commissions for several persons, among others the de-

livery of Father Gabriel's manuscript. The young man looked with affection on this receptacle of his secret thoughts, and always carried it about with him, tenderly wrapped up in a red cotton pocket-handkerchief. To scribble a few hasty lines to the friend of his bosom, after modern fashion, would no more have occurred to him than we worldlings would dream of penning his bulky volume, and calling it a letter. The manuscript was neatly executed, and written in that colloquial Latin which was as familiar to him as his mother tongue.

"You may now regard the newspaper as a running commentary on my letter," he wrote; "but before telling you of what has more particularly occurred here in political affairs, I will proceed with my own narrative. Those inner conflicts, of which the foregoing pages are the true and minute history, written for the ear of my friend



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only, are ended, and I have come out victorious. For dreary month after month I have wrestled with Love and Hate, but these master-passions of the human heart have not vanquished me. Bleeding, crushed, wounded, I yet battled manfully with my foes to the last, and not in vain. Were your lovely kinswoman to appear before me at this moment, I feel, I *know*, that I should not be abashed in the presence of her beauty. Every day I am thrown into contact with that other foe, who, to me, appears as evil incarnate. You know whom I mean, yet I no longer shrink from it with pusillanimity. I feel that its power over me is waning. A word or two more about the woman ere I drop the subject for ever. That hateful voice, ever suggesting sin, hissed in my ear the other day, 'Poor boy! you are in love. The poison has begun its work; you can play the saint no better

than the rest of us !' and I turned away without reply. I could not hurl the word 'liar' at my adversary. For days I prayed and tried to break myself, flesh and spirit, with penitence and fasting, when the supreme hour of peril came. Last Sunday afternoon, when I entered the chapel with Father Ephraim, I saw, at a glance, that she was there. The place was beautified with as exquisite a vision as ever dazzled mortal eyes. I prayed and looked on the ground, yet could but see

"There were flowers about her golden hair and on her bosom, and she was clothed in tissue that seemed spun out of silver, over which was a veil-like garment of transparent white. Her face is far more beautiful than it used to be, at least to my thinking. The soft bloom on the smooth cheek is there, the sweet lines of the small mouth, but the eyes are infinitely deeper in colour, fuller of in-

expressible tenderness and love ; and once, as she gazed on the altar, I fancy that they filled with tears. She prayed earnestly, with one slender white hand supporting her head, her other holding two little gloves and a spray of myrtle. Then taking up a large nosegay of field-flowers, she deposited it on the side altar as she passed out. But when she had gone, the vision was still before me ! I wrestled with myself, I knelt fasting in my cell for the greater part of that night, I gave up the next day and the next to holy exercise and penitence. At last the fever has burnt itself out, and I sit writing to you, 'clothed and in my right mind.' I repeat it. Love and Hate lie vanquished at my feet. The enticingness of the one no more than the horror of the other can have power over me any more. But now, following on the heels of these two, comes the awful shape of Death. My victories have only begun.

Let me explain myself a little. You are a reader of the newspapers, and will have seen how gloriously the recent elections in France have furthered the holy cause of the Church and the Truth throughout many provinces, especially this one, although it must be admitted that, on the whole, the Republicans and enemies of authority have small cause for complaint. Still great acrimony and hatred prevail, above all, here, where, as you know, party-feeling runs high, and the anti-clerical spirit rages with unusual savageness. It is well known that the Conservative candidates were returned mainly owing to the exertions of the priests and their zeal, and its rewards have brought about a fanatical crusade against us all over the province, that must inevitably end deadlily for one side or the other. Whenever we appear in the public streets, we are hooted and hissed at; ribald cartoons are

displayed in low cafés and taverns, representing us undergoing all kinds of undignified punishments; the ultra-radical papers teem with abuses, and it is said that a plot is on foot, more especially directed against my own holy order. We Franciscans are regarded with extraordinary hatred by the poor, because of our poverty, and the very alms we beg for them, they regard with vindictive grudging and unfair accusations. But they go farther than this; egged on by unprincipled advisers, they circulate the most abominable slanders about us, aspersions on our moral character, which, if true, would turn our pure and peaceful abodes into veritable sinks of iniquity. All this, of course, we must bear, and whatever else befalls. We are threatened, so our friends tell us, with pillage, incendiarism, massacre, and if we go on our May missions as usual, are doomed.

“Do you know what these May missions are? Possibly not, so I will briefly explain that, in the sacred month dedicated to our Blessed Lady, it is our custom to set forth, one of us in one direction, a second in another, always choosing the haunts of poverty, ignorance, and vice, to preach the true faith. Nothing stops us, neither the jeers of the scoffer, nor the hideous allurements of the abandoned, the drunken orgies of the scum of the population, no more than the threats of the hired assassin. It is our duty, and it is always done. You know as well as I do what the dregs of society are like in a rich, miscellaneous populated city, half manufacturing, half sea-port, like this. Not even in Paris could you find fouler-mouthed men and women, filthier dens of crime, than exist here; and there are always plenty of political sycophants ready to lead on the multitude to deeds of violence. No wonder,

then, that when we gird up our loins to set forth on our yearly task at such a season of ferment, we do it with prayers such as the martyrs of old might have uttered before us. We hail the Divine call, if not so joyfully, at least as resignedly as they."

Here he stopped short, laid down his pen, and looked at the glorious landscape before him with a wistful, almost a conscience-stricken face. Could he indeed affirm this? Did he contemplate a violent and perhaps horrible death resignedly? After a few minutes, he added,

"Alas! my friend, we are but human after all, and I will confess to you an inward frailty—with which I am sure you can sympathise. Life, considered merely as life, has inestimable charms for me. To drink in the fragrance of this delicious morning, to fill my whole being with the beauty of the

renovated earth, to feel that I have part and lot with the abundant, joyous being around me, is, in fact, to disavow any craving for martyrdom, especially martyrdom of the kind that little advances our great cause. Call it not frailty, rather instinct, that revolts against the bloodthirstiness of the mob. Suppose that one innocent monk is murdered to-day, a holocaust of priests will be called for to-morrow, and the result will be a religious and social war far more terrible than any we have yet known. Of course, could I lay down my life to-morrow for the real advancement of the Faith and the Church, I would do it jubilantly, and even hail torture as bliss unspeakable. But to glut the passions of a frantic, ill-guided populace, to play into the hands of political renegades and adventurers; worst of all, to call down the vengeance of the law on the inno-

cent rather than the guilty, is a martyrdom no rational being could regard except with repugnance.

“Yet, mind you, there is no drawing back. When to-morrow morning comes, we shall each go our ways, and if I am destined to be the victim, I offer myself a willing sacrifice. The light is sweet, and life is lovely and dear; but what are these in comparison with duty and our sacred vows? The poorest, the meanest-spirited of us, can at least purchase a glorious immortality in exchange for his miserably ephemeral, uncertain existence. If I die to-morrow, who knows what I may not escape? There are times when I look into the future with a strange and oppressive sense of mistrust.”

Here again he dropped his pen, and covering his face with his mantle, remained for some time lost in meditation. That day he wrote no more, but the antique volume that

had been in his hands at dawn was taken up again and again, and conned with almost a passionate earnestness.

It was a volume of St. Basil, containing the famous Homily on the Forty Martyrs, a piece of writing that commends itself to all readers, less for the splendour of its periods than for its ardent piety and pathos.

The theme is a touching one, and is narrated and commented upon by many ecclesiastical writers. Forty Christian soldiers, under the Emperor Licinius, are bidden to choose between martyrdom and apostasy. Bribes and threats alike fail to move them, and they are sentenced to die by exposure to cold. The scene is Bithynia, the time mid-winter of extraordinary severity. Exhorting each other to this the last of their earthly victories, and hurling the defiant cry, "I am a Christian!" at their tormentors, they are cast naked at nightfall upon a

frozen lake. Their sufferings are horrible, and one of the forty, before nearing the end, is vanquished, and surrenders his faith, crying for mercy.

The number of the forty martyrs, however, is not diminished ; one of the pagan soldiers keeping guard is overcome by the constancy of the thirty-nine, and declaring himself a Christian on the spot, takes the place of the apostate. At daybreak the dead and the dying are cast upon a pyre, and their ashes scattered to the winds.

Little is needed to heighten the effect of such a narrative, and St. Basil relates it with almost Biblical fervour and simplicity. Naturally he dwells rather upon the glorification of the victors than the discomfiture of the vanquished ; and he concludes with a ringing pæan of triumph and a jubilant exhortation to the faithful to follow the example set before them. We, who read in these



later and more humanitarian times, cannot help feeling deep compassion for the renegade. The episode of his lapse, indeed, chiefly touches us in the story, and as we ponder, we feel convinced that it is but one out of thousands. Perhaps the annals of those who have fallen away from their faith would teach us more than those of the crowned and the glorified, were they indeed read aright!

It was the opening peroration of this homily that the young man now read and re-read. Every burning word, every glowing image, seemed to reproach him. Where, indeed, was that spirit of self-renunciation, that all-embracing proselytism of which the Father wrote? Could the Church now be compared, in his words, to an impatient Quire, awaiting re-union with the Eternal Hosts? Were her servants ready as one man to be translated to the heavenly kingdom?

Was this life, indeed, in their eyes, dust and ashes, a blank, a nothingness, and the world to come a living reality, ever present, and ever speaking to their hearts of perpetual bliss and sainthood? Alas! no, he said. The spiritual and the ethereal part dominated as little in the monk as in the worldling. The splendid self-abnegation of primitive Christianity had vanished. Alike priest and layman were a prey to petty passions and selfish interests, and incapable of those sublime acts of devotion recorded for their example. The divine flame that once burned brightly as a lamp set on high places, showed a dull and feeble light, every moment threatened with extinction.

That day and night were chiefly spent in pious exercises and meditation, and the next morning, at dawn, the following passage was added to his voluminous letter :

“My brother, the summons has come.



This very morning I go forth on my perilous mission, which some strange presentiment tells me is to end fatefully, for good or for evil. What ordeal I am destined to pass through I know not; this I know, I shall not return the same I go forth. On my way to the Île de la Madeleine (where I am to occupy myself in preaching to the people, and which, you may know, is a maritime station at the mouth of the river, densely crowded with an ignorant, mixed, and debased seafaring population), I shall leave this small missive with your friendly fellow-countryman. He will hand it over to you, as well as the key of the volume, and it may be the last tidings you ever hear of your friend, Father Gabriel. Farewell, my brother, again farewell !”

CHAPTER III.

LIFE FOR LIFE.

NEVER did the ancient city of Les Ponts wear a lordlier aspect than on that May morning when Father Gabriel set out on his mission. Spire and dome and cupola flashed in the brilliant sunshine; stately ships waved their pennons lightly on the breeze; glorious avenues of orange and magnolia stood out against the purple sky; the river, smooth and silvery, glided between its flowery banks. Now summer made its life-giving presence felt alike in the veins of young and old, rich and poor, and the political ferment of yesterday seemed to have

passed, leaving no trace behind. Instead of the dread refrain,

**“Aux armes, aux armes, citoyens !
Formez vos bataillons !”**

was heard the sweet shrill music of children's voices, chanting the hymns of the Church. At this season of the year a time-honoured custom lends these handsome streets almost a pagan picturesqueness. From early morning till sunset, long processions of white-robed girls, wearing bridal wreaths and coronets of flowers, and boys with white scarfs on their arms, wend their way to the different churches, singing as they go. These are the candidates for the first communion, girls and boys who have long been preparing for the solemn consecration. The town has put on a gala look in their honour, schools are shut, the wheel of labour moves slowly, and for the most



part people wear holiday dress. It is especially the festival of the poor. The humblest Cinderella then is turned into a fairy princess; needy parents going without bare necessities for weeks beforehand, in order that their darling may be dressed in white like the rest.

It is, moreover, an unimaginable feast of flowers. There are flowers on every woman's bosom, and round every child's curly head, a flower-show in miniature is to be seen at every street corner, there are carpets of flowers for the feet of marble Virgins and saints on the altars, flowers on the meanest counter, in the most squalid attic. The air is heavy with fragrance, the prevailing deliciousness is almost intoxicating. Enough, indeed, of beauty and sensuous enjoyment were here to wean even the ascetic from spiritual contemplation, and the most ardent patriot from political dreams.

Live and enjoy, seemed the lesson borne on every petal-perfumed breeze.

Just when the splendour of the day was at its height, when the dazzling sky had not a cloud, and the stately merchant palaces by the riverside gleamed like piles of gold and ivory, when the water below glowed clear and deep-hued as a sheet of malachite, and the orange and magnolia blossoms hung motionless amid their glossy leaves, a dim ominous noise made itself heard from one end of the city to the other. The remotest thunder on a sultry day would be louder and more conspicuous, yet it penetrated far and wide, reaching the dullest ears.

The priest at the altar heard it and trembled, the happy children stopped their canticles, the workman in the cabaret threw down his pipe and followed it, the coquette before her looking-glass, the mother by the

bedside of her sick child, the merchant at his desk—one and all felt themselves stirred to the very roots, shaken by a passion of terror. There was no more repose then throughout the length and breadth of the city—trembling in every fibre, like a forest on the eve of a storm, it awaited its evil hap.

The City of Bridges, as has been explained, is divided into many parts by the bifurcation of the river, and the confluence of a smaller stream with the greater. It was from one of the remotest of these islanded divisions that the tumult seemed to come, every moment deepening in intensity, every moment spreading new perturbation among the listening multitudes. People ran hither and thither with white faces; some paused to listen, like ambushed soldiers awaiting the enemy; others rushed forward, hurling defiance at unseen foes; many stood still,

paralysed with terror. The greater number, however, were collected along the river side, and their suspense soon came to an end.

From this magnificent line of quays the city rises panoramically, and with almost magical effect; westward stretch the unique line of bridges from which it takes its name, arch after arch spanning silvery, garden-bordered streams; eastward, the wide open country, and the broadening river flowing towards the ocean. High above all, built terrace-wise upon its proud vantage-ground, and imposingly girt with donjon and battlements, stands the famous capital of these ancient provinces.

On a sudden this superb and hitherto peaceful scene was turned into a veritable Pandemonium, the hush of expectation was drowned in an outburst of clamour, a mingling together of shrieks, yells, howls, imprecations.

tions, every imaginable discord of which the human voice is capable ; then a dense human stream was poured from a narrow inner street on to the broad open quay, and from one side to the other, rising shrilly above the tumult of footsteps and voices, rang a watchword, the meaning of which all present knew well.

“To the river ! To the river !”

The shout was caught up on every side ; it was echoed from the low-lying fishing-hovels on the shore, from the washer-women's batteries under the bridges, from the market-place in the harbour mouth. And just as the cry gathered in force and volume, so the frenzied multitude, moving in a procession-like mass, grew larger and larger. Whence came this motley crew ? Could so fair and prosperous a city indeed hold men and women of such fearful pattern ? There came half-naked workmen from steaming sugar-works, wan-faced, tat-

tered women from cotton-mills and tobacco-factories, half-starving rag-gatherers and street-sweepers, with hag-like, wizard-like physiognomies, women in horrible finery, beggars hideous to behold, children turned prematurely old and wizened by misery and vice. A veritable human scum was here, a mass of soured, warped, infected humanity, as it seemed beyond all hope of healing.

And the victim?

He was a Capucin monk, young enough and well-favoured enough, one might have thought, to touch the heart of any woman, much more of mothers. There was something pathetic about the beauty and innocence of the face, bowed meekly on the breast, blood streaming from the smooth white brow on to the curly brown beard. With downcast eyes, and lips firmly set, he moved, or rather allowed himself to be forced along, not occupying his mind with

prayer or religious exercise, not seeing, as in a vision, the after-glories of martyrdom, but bending all his strength towards one object, namely, to meet his fate, if not as became a martyr, at least as became a man.

He knew that so shameful a death would answer no good purpose, would rather sow seeds of wrong and wickedness past counting; he felt convinced, moreover, that he had been betrayed, that he was the victim of a detestable intrigue, and that the wretched creatures demanding his blood were hounded on to their crime by political plotters. All these things mattered little. His business was to die without a word.

It was not the mortal agony—forestalled perhaps by a few years only—that he dreaded and rebelled against, but the injustice of the deed. He was being put to death to serve evil, and not good. There was no saintliness or savour of apostolic glorification

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about such an end. He did not feel exactly pity for his tormentors, and he did not pray for them, but he could not help invoking God's anger upon those who had egged them on to this deed.

Still it would soon be over, and the sooner the better ! He was faint and weary from the pressure of the crowd. He only wanted the rest to come quickly. That thought predominated over every other. The aspirations of his once serene life in the monastery, the friend far away, all these things were now as if they had never existed. He was only striving to keep silence. His duty towards God, towards the world, towards himself, seemed summed up in that word.

Yet when the crowd stopped, and he felt that the supreme moment had at last come, a tremendous impulse to speak took possession of him. He wanted to say a word that should move his persecutors, not to pity

now, but to self-reproach hereafter. They should surely know that he compassionated them, and was conscious of the snare into which they had fallen. Many another innocent life might be saved if he fearlessly uttered the truth before perpetual silence came.

He lifted his head and gazed once more around him. There stretched the wide, beautiful river, with its sloping banks and bowery islands, there rose the cheerful city and stately cathedral, summer birds were darting across the azure; boats were dancing far away on the waters. All was life, joy, and sunshine, except for the wall of dark, cruel faces about him. That momentary glimpse of terrestrial beauty, and sense of variance between the peace of nature and the brutality of man, checked the rising protest within him. In haughty silence he submitted to the throttling fingers



laid about his neck. The river lay close under his feet. In a few minutes more all would surely be over !

On a sudden a loud murmur ran through the crowd, he felt himself freed for a moment, and looking up with faint eyes, saw what seemed a heavenly vision, pure and lovely, flashing across the hideous scene.

It was the figure of a girl dressed in white, a veil floating from her golden hair, with flowers on her bosom and round her brow. Her cheeks were tinged rosy-red with indignation, her sweet lips parted in horror ; and, as she stood thus, she looked indeed like an angel of intercession come down from the celestial hierarchy on his behalf.

She was only just in time, and thinking of nothing else but how to save him, she put herself as a shield before the young

man and his tormentors, and cried, in a clear voice, that rang through those wild ranks—

“What harm have I done to any of you? I am an English teacher, and gain my bread as you do. But who would murder this innocent man must first do harm to me.”

There were two movements in the crowd, one for, one against her. The half-drunken wretch who seemed self-constituted leader of the band, tried to put her back with a rude oath. Zoë did not flinch; she felt her knees trembling under her, and she knew that her victory—if, indeed, victory were possible—must be a moral one; pushing away her persecutors, still showing an undismayed front to the crowd, she said,

“You may kill me, if you choose, but I will try to prevent you from becoming murderers all the same. You have souls, you

have children—if you shed blood to-day, you will bring curses on their heads to-morrow.”

The words had effect, yet she saw that she had still a battle before her. There were menacing cries on all sides.

“We are accursed now,” cried one, “and it is the priest’s doing.”

“It is the priest who betrays our innocent daughters!” shouted a second.

“The priest who keeps us in subjection!” cried a third.

“Down with the confessional!—down with the monasteries!—down with the monks!” cried a fourth.

The last words were caught up and vociferated on every side. Zoë felt her courage going. Must she, then, leave him to die?

Tears streamed down her cheeks. It

seemed to her unutterably horrible to have to meet such a death on a summer day, and in the flower of his youth. She bent over him with a look of angelic pity and sweetness, having no word of comfort to offer, only able to show her compassion by wiping his lips and brow with her handkerchief. The look and the action, however, did not pass unnoticed ; she had gained an advantage of which she had little guessed. Curious, but hardly cruel eyes, were now fastened upon her. The women mocked her, yet not unkindly ; the men stood still, as if awaiting the word of command.

At last a stentorian voice was heard from their midst, and a man of herculean form pressed forward. Laying an iron grip upon Zoë's shoulder, he said,

“ Girl, do you love this man ? ”

Zoë's pure eyes met those of her inquisitor. He was a giant in size and strength,



and as she gazed into his face, she read, with her quick woman's instinct, exactly how much of the human leavened that enormous mass of flesh, bone, and muscle. She gazed tremblingly, seeing not the hundred pair of eyes then fixed upon her, but only this man's; in his the strangest mixture of devilry and compassion.

"I love him as all Christians are bound to love one another," she replied, falteringly, not yet despairing of mercy.

Thereupon arose a tremendous clamour, and she saw that her answer had done no good. Reproachful names were hurled at her, malicious looks were glanced at her. Again and again she was rudely pushed from Father Gabriel's side, and all chances of saving him seemed lost. It was a scene of indescribable confusion and uproar. What did the people want? Would not her death and his satisfy them? She stood



pale and silent, resigned to her fate. At last the herculean arms of her protector were dealt right and left deadlily on their behalf; he beat back the crowd with a volley of invectives, and when he had cleared a little space, he turned to her, saying,

“ Answer me yea or nay, do you love this man ?”

The veil fell from her eyes now. She saw the snare that had been laid for her, and the terrible price she was asked to pay for her companion's life. She could indeed save him, but only by telling a lie—a lie, moreover, that meant self-defamation, and a forfeiture of maidenly honour. The deed seemed impossible; yet under that delicious summer sky, with the river rippling by in the golden sunshine, with a sense of renewal and joyousness wafted in every breeze, the innocent, imperilled life beside her pleaded hard. It flashed across her mind that good

or evil report could matter little to a lone woman like herself, and that, after all, the prevention of this crime might be better than anything she should thereby lose.

None but those standing near the pale, trembling girl heard her reply, but all knew the issue when the gigantic hand of the umpire imposed silence, and a voice of tremendous volume—a voice that had the sound of a trumpet in it, that penetrated the farthest ranks of the close-serried multitude—uttered the words,

“Let the monk go, and the woman have her way!”

CHAPTER IV.

VISIONS.

HOW, at last, she escaped from that terrible scene, she hardly knew. Stunned, speechless, passive, she was thrust into a boat with the rescued man, and the pair, thus snatched from the fury of the mob, were then abandoned to their fate.

Her first feeling was of ineffable relief. As they drifted slowly down the river into a quiet twilight world, the tumult left behind became as a hideous dream. Tide and breeze alike bore them onwards. The din grew fainter and fainter; the crowded quays receded farther and farther. Soon they

were midway in the harbour mouth, alone under the azure sky and faint twinkling stars. It was an evening of heavenly loveliness. Sky and river, city and dimpled hills, were clothed in rose and amber, an opaline radiance succeeding the splendour of the setting sun. Then the crescent moon appeared high in the heavens, and all the scene was bathed with silvery light. There was no sound but the soft lapping of the water, and the distant angelus chimed by far-off churches.

Such exquisite harmony, coming immediately after what had seemed like a vision of Dante's Inferno, filled her heart with gratitude. She silently thanked Heaven for their deliverance, not yet troubling herself with what might happen on the morrow. At least, she had averted an abominable crime, and saved an innocent life.

She turned to the prostrate form of

Father Gabriel at her feet, and gazed upon him with tenderness and commiseration. How young he was!—how well favoured!—how guileless! A mother of men-children tending her fatherless boy could not have worn an expression of purer, more passionate pity. She had bathed and bandaged his wound, in the first instance, and had given him water to drink, but, after a momentary revival, he had sunk down on a heap of sacking at the bottom of the boat, pale as death, and evidently unconscious of his condition. The long day's fast, the unaccustomed exposure to heat, the strain put upon his untried powers, both mental and physical, were telling upon him, and watching his white face and rigid limbs, she shuddered, thinking that, after all, he would die.

“Poor boy!” she said, moved to tears.
“Who is there to weep for him? Could

his mother see him now, she would surely wish he had never been born !”

The utter forlornness of his position struck her painfully. If worse misfortunes and dangers should befall him, who was there at hand to shield, pity, and comfort? Was there any other religious system in the world so coldly, designedly isolating as his? Could anyone who knew him doubt that he yearned for sympathy and affection? Sweetness, confidingness, candour, were written upon those inanimate features; yet who could be more alone than he? By virtue of his calling, he was bound to stifle every natural yearning and every human instinct. Were not death, after all, better than this maimed, false, anomalous life?

And by little and little, as she thus pondered on her companion's fate and probable future, she realized the full bitterness and perplexities of her own. Huberte would



be driven from sheer necessity to abandon her now. The story of this misadventure would be surely spread far and wide, and her name become a reproach and a scandal throughout the department. Whither should she turn? Where should she make her new home? Whichever way she looked she saw only humiliation and dismay. As the minutes wore on, an increased sense of desolation took possession of her. Evening had faded now, and night followed, gently lifting the transparent veil from sky and river, flooding all with dazzling metallic lustre.

Zoë strained her eyes in the direction of the port, with its twinkling beacon-lights and dark, closely-massed shipping, but no moving speck broke the broad, scintillating surface, and meantime they were drifting nearer and nearer towards the sea. They were then left to their fate.



All this time, her companion had been lying perfectly still; but soon he began to talk strangely, as one in deep sleep. She lifted his head, and again and again moistened the burning lips, but he continued to ramble on incoherently as before. She now saw that he had become slightly delirious, doubtless in consequence of protracted fasting.

Frenchwomen, in default of the English indulgence of perpetual cups of tea, have the amiable propensity of always carrying some comestible about with them—bread, sugar, or sweetmeats—and Huberte and Zoë, who were often out from morning till night, were no exceptions to the rule. It was, therefore, not without a flutter of expectation that Zoë now dived into her pockets for a certain roll with which Huberte had provided her that morning.

“Processions never come to an end, and

you may be invited to a dozen collations without getting one," said the provident Huberte; "so provide against all emergencies!"

Yes, the roll was there, and she now offered it to her companion. The offer was accepted with the best results. A look of renewed life came into the young man's face, he breathed a sigh of relief, smiled gratefully, then he fell into a calm sleep.

Zoë tried to sleep also. Night had come, and there was no chance of delivery till the morning. Dangers beset them on every side, but they were such as she could neither foresee nor avert. There was nothing to do but resignedly abide whatever might befall. Her position was too desperate to make even the prospect of death unbearable. She knew well enough that they might be upset and cast into the river

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at any moment, without a possibility of being rescued. Yet, after all that had happened, she did not shrink from such a contemplation. Shame and dishonour were before her, and they were long-lived, whilst death by drowning was brief, and death in any shape could only come once.

She was soon asleep, however, and no wonder dreamed fantastically. She awoke suddenly to find that the day had dawned, and that the boat had pushed against a projecting tongue of low lying shore. Before them, making a delicate amber radiance above serried spikes of brilliant rose-coloured flowers, ascended the unclouded sun ; far away innumerable orchards and market gardens, bright as emeralds, caught the chastened glow ; around lay the river blending with the sea, grey, pellucid, unruffled, behind the city, pencilled delicately in violet



and gold against a topaz sky. All was very still. The deliciousness of the scene made Zoë forget for a moment her perplexing position. She sat with wide eyes and parted lips, drinking in the beauty of the new-born day.

A voice roused her from this reverie.

“Have I been dreaming?” Father Gabriel said; and as she listened, she hardly knew if he were addressing her, or thinking aloud. “I was led in a wondrous vision from the depths of hell to the highest heaven. I was maimed, bruised, tortured, and lo! some one in the likeness of an angel bore me away, and I rested within her arms as a child on its mother’s bosom. She spoke softly to me, dispelling my agony with smiles and words of perfect love, and I realized at last what it was to live the divine life apart from earthly stain. For ages and ages we tasted such bliss together, and our life was one



perpetual song of praise and joy. But there crept a shadow between us. It strove again and again to divide us, and it threw darkness upon me, so that I felt myself becoming strange to behold, and at last I saw that it was my own ! As one accursed I fled, leaving that glorious one alone, never once daring to look back."

He started, roused himself, and added, whilst he gazed at her with mingled incredulity and rapture,

"You here ! The saviour of my life ! The angel of my dreams ! How wonderful is all this !"

"I but did my duty," she said. "You would have done the same, had you been in my place."

He was still watching her, only by little and little coming down from the heights of fantasy vision to hard reality ; unwillingly, and by the slowest degrees, snapping the

thread that bound him to those exquisite golden visions.

“You are a woman,” he said, “and you not only braved death, but insult, to rescue me. You stood alone amidst that vile multitude—as a white flower cast upon an offal heap—and nothing daunted you, neither threats, nor gibes, nor horrible insinuations. For the rest of my life I shall worship you as a saint.”

Again Zoë blushed, but looking him straight in the face, flashing upon him the light of those candid, honest eyes, she said, quite naturally,

“Perhaps I ought not to have interfered. But there were thousands against one man. It was too cowardly.” Then, hurrying through her sentences, she added, “Why are men so cruel? Your death could have done no good. The days of martyrdom are over. But I must tell you the truth, though

I am sure you will not believe me. You have been made the victim of a political plot."

"Ah! It is as I thought, then. I confess that I set out on my mission with gloomy forebodings. The city is in a state of great ferment. The elections have driven the Reds and Socialists to desperation. Who should be singled out for vengeance but the priests?"

The conversation having taken this practical turn, he was obliged to resign himself, though he would fain have poetized the situation a little longer.

Zoë looked at him pityingly, and began to speak, then left off with some embarrassment. Should she tell him what she believed to be the truth, and disabuse his mind of error for once and for all? He read her thoughts, and smiled a little loftily.

"I know what you wish to say," he said.
"You want to explain to me that it is the

reverse of what I affirm, and that the plot has been laid by the priests instead of the people. Is it possible that you, above all others, can give credence to these vulgar slanders? I had hoped you were wiser."

"You will think that I have been corrupted by evil company," Zoë continued, "and you will, of course, despise and mistrust me, but I must speak out. I cannot affirm that what I say is absolutely true. But so I believe it to be. The intended crime will be laid to the door of the Radicals. Their candidate had just been defeated by means of clerical pressure."

"Say, rather, clerical zeal."

"Hear me to the end," the girl continued; with that untrained eloquence so new to her companion. "The popular feeling was roused against the priests, and especially against the monks, who would go forth on the morrow to preach resignation, and joy

in the world to come. It seemed just possible that one or two violent leaders might egg on the exasperated multitude to deeds of vengeance. The people were maddened, all kinds of unfair proceedings were imputed to the priests, and the rejected candidates on the Liberal side were popular favourites. But, on the other hand, do you not see how all this would play into the hands of your own party? The murder of a single priest or monk by the mob would do more to injure the democratic cause than the loss of a score of representatives. The people were set on you by hired leaders, and the real instigators of the crime are to be found in your own camps. There, you have the truth. The ultra-clerical party is bound to crush Liberalism without any regard to means. Does not, indeed, the end ever justify the means in the eyes of your teachers, the Jesuits?"

The daringness and outspokenness of this speech aroused his admiration, not unmixed with horror. She saw that he was preparing a battery of arguments in self-defence, and added, gathering her mantle about to go—

“I know that you will not believe me, and that you regard me as a slanderer of your holy church. And who, meantime, is to prevent the innocent from meeting the deserts of the guilty? It is this I grieve most about. Father Gabriel, you are young, you are innocent, you have lofty aspirations. I beseech you, do not let your life be warped by the hypocrisy and evil ambitions of your teachers. I must go now.”

“Hear me for one moment!” he cried, entreatingly. “You are bound to give me an opportunity of convincing you, ere we separate for ever.”

She smiled sadly and incredulously.

"It is best for both that we should not stay any longer together; the sun is mounting fast, the labourers will be soon out in the fields. Let us each go our own way whilst as yet there are few to observe us."

"Will you not hear a word?"

"I dare not stay. You little know what harm I have done myself already. We must never, never meet again!" she answered, her eyes filling with tears. "Farewell, farewell!"

A third time he tried to persuade her, but in vain. She sprang lightly ashore, and gathering her white drapery round her, set off towards the town, not once looking back.

The young monk gazed after the white-robed figure till it disappeared amid the orchard blossoms by the riverside; then,



having performed his orisons, and pondering painfully on what had happened, he also quitted the boat.

One duty lay before him. His mission must be fulfilled, were every day to bring new perils. He returned unhesitatingly to the field of his appointed labours.

CHAPTER V.

NEW LIFE.

THE season was one of almost matchless splendour. Far away the hills lay wrapt in golden haze, but the house stood islanded in shadow, around it rippling the mellow corn, a warm amber sea, broken by bowery coverts for man and beast. There were glorious walnut and service-berry trees standing solitary as lighthouses amid waving wheat and barley, tiny orchards alternating with patches of dark green hemp and snowy-blossomed buckwheat, everywhere ripest sunshine and coolest shade. The garden was a wilderness of flowers, which grew as they

willed, none being ousted from their favourite abiding-place. You walked under hanging roofs of honeysuckle and jasmine, between stately avenues of lily and larkspur, and tangles of carnation and starry corn-flower, Four O'clock and Sweet William.

In striking contrast to these regal parterres, was the modest dwelling of its owners, with its little dining-room, brick-floored, whitewashed, and bare of furniture excepting deal table, dresser, and chairs; the adjoining parlour of somewhat larger size, and made comparatively luxurious with window-curtains, table-cover, and gay rugs; at the back of that lay the bed-chambers of the family, and above, the rooms set aside for visitors, all severely simple as the cells of a monastery.

By five o'clock every morning the little household was astir, and after her early cup of coffee, Madame Pitache would spend a

precious hour among her flowers. These loiterings out of doors went far to reconcile her with the uncongeniality of her husband's tastes, the disadvantages of a country life generally, and, above all, of being a woman of intellect, cast as a pearl before swine. Papa Pitache, as she called her husband, would be drowsing on his pillow at this time. Petty domestic cares had not yet begun, and evil news could not arrive till the appearance of the postman at midday. She thus obtained a little time for thinking, which she considered a duty, and for making out the day's plans, benevolent, literary, and practical, Aunt Félicité being a consummate housewife, as well as an authoress, with strong political and philanthropic leanings. She brimmed over with the milk of human kindness, but would have welcomed the mission of a Charlotte Corday or Madame de la Rochejacquelin. To die quietly in your

bed seemed unworthy of a true French-woman, even of the present day, whilst not to suffer persecution for righteousness' sake, in other words, for advanced political opinions, was regarded by her as an indelible stain upon family honour.

On this especial morning, the benign features of Madame Pitache wore an unusually serene expression. Snipping off a carnation here, a rose there, she dropped them into her basket with a self-approving smile. There was no reason to-day for making the drawing-room look prettier than its wont. The flowers were culled and arranged so carefully, just because she happened to be in good humour herself, and satisfied with her literary ideas.

Whilst thus occupied, she did not hear the grating sound of wheels outside the house, nor the opening of the garden door; and a footfall on the gravel-path was of too

common occurrence to startle. Frenchwomen adore surprises. When, on a sudden, she felt herself caught in a loving embrace, she uttered an affectionate little scream, and the names of three or four possible intruders in a breath.

“No, Aunt Félicité, it is not Juliette, nor Edith, nor Noémie, but Huberte, your own Huberte, and I have come to you because I am in trouble,” Huberte said. Then the two embraced each other a dozen times before further explanations could be entered upon. At last the kissing and crying were over, and they sat down side by side and hand in hand.

“Aunt Félicité,” began Huberte, very proudly, and flushing to the roots of her hair. “You will not, perhaps, be astonished to hear that I am ruined?”

“My poor child! My unfortunate darling! Go on.”

“Things have turned out worse than we feared even. The Republican defeat at Les Ponts was sure to tell upon the school. But the new Préfet, the Mayor, and the whole Town Council are against us. The municipal support is withdrawn. There is no possibility of paying my way without it. I shall be thrown, in two months’ time, out of employment.”

“And you have worked so zealously, so self-sacrificingly ! My poor dear Huberte. It is hard.”

“You have not heard the worst. You know my friend Zoë, whom I love so dearly. We lived like sisters together, and shared our earnings in common. She is ruined also, and her misfortunes do not end there. Poverty we could both bear uncomplainingly, but disgrace ! Think of it, Aunt Félicité.”

Aunt Félicité’s ears grew on a sudden

wonderfully alert. She loved sentiment and romance, and was ready to forgive almost any offence committed in the sacred name of what she was pleased to term, *Les amours*. *Les amours*, indeed, were the gods of her idolatry.

“That sweet girl with blue eyes innocent as a new-born baby’s, and captivating Anglo-Saxon complexion and hair! Do tell me what folly she has been running into! And English, moreover!”

“You have doubtless seen in the newspapers an account of what happened at Les Ponts, after the elections,” continued Huberte, blushing again and again, as she blundered through her story. “There was a mob, the people set upon a young Capucin, and were about to thrust him into the river, when a woman interposed and saved his life.”

Madame Pitache watched her companion

with rapidly-brightening eyes. A child listening for the close of a fairy-tale could not have hung upon the narrator with greater eagerness. Poor Huberte, to whom the very mention of her aunt's favourite words, *Les amours*, was an infliction, gasped out the rest, as if the words were choking her.

“That girl was my friend Zoë. She was made to tell a lie. The wretches would not let him go till she—said—that—she—loved—him——”

Thereupon Huberte could not contain herself any longer, but burst into tears of mortification and dismay. Madame Pitache, whilst caressing and soothing her niece, was unable to resist a smile.

“The darling! How I should love her!” she cried, with great enthusiasm. “Why do you weep, my dear Huberte? Your uncle and I laughed and cried over the story, for of course it got into the papers.”

“Think of the scandal, the curiosity, the false interpretation ! It will never be forgotten, never !”

“I hope it never will, I am sure. Think of the immense service that girl has rendered republicans ! Nothing could have happened more fortuitously. The monastic orders (and I could tell you a thing or two about them, were you a married woman !) are discredited, and the clerical party discomfited, whichever way the inquiry ends. People will persist in believing that there was more romance than charity at the bottom of it, and that had the man been old and ugly, he would most surely have been thrown into the river !”

“Aunt Félicité !” protested Huberte, indignantly.

“But your friend’s name did not transpire. Do not be so cast down. She disappeared, it was said, and has never since been heard of.”

“Yes,” Huberte said, wiping the tears from her hot cheeks. “I would not desert her at such a time, dear aunt. I hid her by means of a faithful friend for several days in the country, and pretended that she was gone to England—how could I help fabricating such things? I put on a bold front, and went about my teaching as usual. If people interrogated me on the subject, I was silent. But I will not betray her, were my life to depend on it. I will stand by her to the last.”

“So she is not in England, then, this beautiful Zoë, the heroine of May, this mysterious deliverer, this golden-haired angel of intercession?”

“All her relations in England are dead, and I am the closest friend she has in the world. We could not be separated. We shall begin a new life somewhere together. But meantime she has no place of refuge,

no home. Aunt Félicité, you mentioned to me, some weeks ago, that you were looking about for a companion, some one who could read to you, write for you, and keep your accounts. Zoë does all these things beautifully. She is sweet to look upon, and has a musical voice. Would you let her come to you for a time?"

"Delicious!" Aunt Félicité cried, in raptures. "And Papa Pitache, I am sure, would be enchanted! We shall love her dearly. She shall figure in my next romance. But come into your uncle's room, and tell him all about it."

The vivacious old lady rose, and took her niece's hand, about to lead her away, but Huberte stopped short, again overcome by nervousness.

"I have done wrong, I know, but please do not be angry, Aunt Félicité. We quitted Les Ponts together, my friend Zoë and I.

We went for a few days to a village on the river-side——”

“Then she is waiting there for a word? Let us hear what your uncle says, and you can write at once.”

“I feared to leave her there alone, lest suspicion might be aroused,” Huberte said, looking first out of the window, next on the ground.

“Then she is here !”

“Dearest aunt, you have said it.”

Upon hearing this news, Aunt Félicité became a prey to opposite emotions. Her first impulse was of unfeigned delight. Life was usually much too even, nay, monotonous for her romantic disposition, and a girl with a beautiful face and an unparalleled story would surely banish common-placeness for a time. But when the image of Monsieur Pitache, fidgety always and impatient of novelties, flashed across her mind,

she recoiled. What would her husband say to Huberte's precipitate initiative? The heroine of a street mob, however captivating to read of and delightful in reality, might prove embarrassing as a guest, especially to ultra liberal-minded people like themselves, surrounded with uncomfortable neighbours. There was the curé within a stone's throw, the convent a little further off, and newspapers penetrate everywhere in these days. How could Zoë's presence be kept a secret in the place? How could it be made palpable to Papa Pitache?

"Let me think alone for five minutes," she said, after kissing her niece re-assuringly. "We must be wary. Meantime, do you quietly take your friend upstairs, and by the time breakfast is ready I shall have arranged everything."

Arranging everything was Madame Pitache's euphuism for laying those little

snare the fondest wives will set for their husbands. She meant to unveil the truth by-and-by, but there are more ways than one of breaking awkward news, and meantime Monsieur Pitache was only to know as much as was good for his peace of mind.

When she had hit upon a plan for making matters pleasant all round, her face grew radiant with mingled self-satisfaction and relish. Nothing so irresistible, so wholly unforeseen, had ever happened to her before. She was at last,—so she fondly said to herself,—without any machinations of her own, checkmating her political enemies, and playing into the hands of her own party. It was of the highest importance that Zoë should remain a mystery, and that her own version of the story should be withheld from the public—in fact, Zoë herself had a state importance, and was a stake in the welfare of the

country. There was, however, some inconvenience, even peril, in thus harbouring her. Such conduct might become legally reprehensible, or, at least, might lead to suspicion and trouble.

Madame Pitache gloried in the idea of discomfiting her adversaries at any price, and she knew well enough that her husband would be induced to see the affair with her own eyes after a time. But he did not like surprises—at eighty years of age few people do, unless they are of the mildest description. So Zoë's arrival was put before him in the easiest and pleasantest aspect imaginable.

“Come, Papa Pitache, we must have your company to breakfast to-day. Here is your favourite niece, Huberte, and the new companion whose arrival I have reserved for you as a pleasant little surprise.”

“I thought you were tired of companions,” Monsieur Pitache said, drowsily, and

only half opening his eyes. He was in perfect health, but considered himself an invalid, and, by some process of reasoning, had arrived at the conclusion that, so long as twelve hours of the twenty-four were spent in bed, it little mattered which ; so he usually retired at midnight, and rose at midday or thereabouts, looking the picture of health when emerging from his bedroom.

“I am tired of empty-headed little coquettes like Mademoiselle Berthe,” replied Madame Pitache, “but I cannot do without somebody’s eyes to depend upon, and your own accounts, my dear, are all waiting to be added up. This young lady shall await your orders to-morrow morning.”

“Very good—very good,” answered Monsieur Pitache, sleepily. “And Huberte—is she well and flourishing?”

“Poor dear Huberte! The school is rather in a bad way. But we had better

not ask her too many questions. She has come to enjoy herself just for two days, and will tell us everything in the long holidays, which, you know, begin in August."

"Very good—very good. If I am late at breakfast, give her some of your good liqueur."

"But why should you be late at breakfast? You are killing yourself by your unwholesome habits. Do be reasonable."

"Why should I be early at breakfast?—why should I be reasonable?" was Monsieur Pitache's quotidian reply to such reproaches, and seeing that nothing more was to be elicited from her recalcitrant spouse just then, Aunt Félicité shut the door somewhat impatiently.

She joined her guests upstairs, and, when breakfast was over, retired to her dressing-room and wrote a portrait of Zoë for intercalation in her next romance:—

“Edith, for so I will call my beautiful Englishwoman, is tall and lissome, rather than slender. Her arms and hands are exquisitely formed, with little dimples, and a pure, healthful white skin, showing the blue veins underneath. She has a look of health and strength, an out-of-door look, I will call it, rare in Frenchwomen. Her cheeks and lips are fresh as roses, her eyes clear and vivacious, her nose, of course, a little short for symmetry of contour, yet the prettiest in the world. The abundance of her bright brown hair, with light yellow streaks on its outer surface alone, would make her worthy of being portrayed, whilst, after all, it is none of these things, but the sweetness and staidness of her manner that fascinates the beholder. You see, too, that her pensiveness is neither innate nor habitual. She is a creature made for joy, love, action; made, also—the



calm, fearless brow tells that—for acts of supreme self-devotion and enthusiasm. There is fire, as well as sweetness, underlying that simple, stately manner. My delicious Edith! what man, woman, or child could help adoring you?

“Just now I am tired of common heroines. I must have Edith or nobody, and I read in her face a much more romantic story than any I have yet framed. Is she in love? With one, with two, or with whom? Let us sit down calmly, and study the living romance put before us.”

CHAPTER VI.

AN INTERLUDE.

WHILST Aunt Félicité poetised the situation, adding every day to her romance, of which the English girl was the heroine, Zoë fell into her natural place. It was a life of smooth, rounded uniformity, the kind of grey, cool, gently-stirred existence that reminds us of summer days when there is no ruffle in the pellucid sea, no tossing of the forest leaf, no freshness in the air. The lack of unusualness, rather than the press of care, drives women mad, and Zoë felt, indeed, at times as if she were

drifting from a world of actualities into a waking sleep. After the perpetual bustle of a teacher's life at Les Ponts, and the wonderful emotions and excitements she had gone through, the present seemed a mere parody, an empty echo, and memory alone something to live upon. Yet such discontent was surely next door to wickedness! The season was glorious, her surroundings captivating, her new friends over-kind. She must, she would learn to drone after the fashion of other people! The difficult part of her new career was its drowsiness. Had she been permitted to scrub floors, or wash clothes in the river, she would have been happy, but her daily tasks were of a far easier and more stupefying kind.

"What delicious mornings we shall have together!" Madame Pitache said, "and what a blessing you will be to me! I have never before had a companion with a



grain of literary taste. Huberte tells me you are well versed in literature. We will go over my manuscripts together."

Zoë acquiesced readily. Anything seemed better than the first interminable days they had spent over needlework and surface talk. Aunt Félicité, finding that little in the way of confidence could be elicited from the proud, pale girl, regarded the manuscripts as a lucky expedient. There were love-stories among them, and she thought that they might lead to revelations. So every morning, as soon as the early cup of coffee and stroll in the garden were over, Zoë joined her hostess in the little drawing-room, and they worked their way through the dreary pile till midday. Breakfast, and the arrival of the postman with letters and newspapers, made a little break, when the manuscripts were resumed till dinner. This took place at five o'clock, and when the sun

was sinking, they could go into the garden, or take a little drive—but the sleepiness and emptiness of those interminable summer noons, the ineffable flatness and unrealness of Aunt Félicité's compositions, the invariableness of the little marital squabbles over breakfast and dinner! Who could describe them? Would they ever end?

Yet she chided herself roundly for such discontent. After all, was she not an outcast, a pariah, and these kind people, offering her friendliness, protection, and shelter, angels of pity and goodness? What would have become of her without them? So she feigned an interest in this bit of writing and that, and made little remarks as she read, which brought a smile of intensest self-complacency to Aunt Félicité's placid face. There was nothing in all this world she held so dear as her manuscripts. They had been refused by all the publishers in Paris. She

knew well enough that they would never bring her reputation or money. She had a dim perception at times that they bored her friends. But for all that she loved them insanelly, and was blind to their shortcomings, as mothers to the defects of their ill-favoured children. Books pleased her, and romance—or, as she expressed it, *Les amours*—relieved the dulness of her life. Her own writings only could make her oblivious of care, of growing age, and bodily infirmity, and could lift her into a world without a cloud. Fortunately for Zoë, therefore, her protectress was far too distractingly occupied to divine what was passing in her mind. One day she came into her room and said, with tender insinuation,

“You are happy with us, my sweet girl, are you not? You have no desire to go away? Huberte writes word that her school will weather the storm.”

"Then she will stay at Les Ponts?" Zoë said, colouring uneasily. It dawned upon her that she was alone in the world.

"She ought to do so. Her position there is an honourable one, and it would be difficult indeed to get such good pay elsewhere, not to speak of rooms and firing. But she will be guided by you."

"I cannot go back, and her prospects must not be sacrificed to me. We love each other dearly, but that is understood," Zoë answered again, with that proud, lovely blush Aunt Félicité beheld with such admiration.

"I knew what your answer would be, and I have already talked to my husband on the subject. We are both in love with you, and we have no daughter to brighten our declining years. You love me, I know, and sympathise with an old woman's literary aspirations, vagaries, if you will. Stay with

us, dearest Zoë, make your home here amid our flowers and vineyards. At least remain till you hear the voice of the beloved summoning you from afar ! Unwilling should I be, indeed, to stand between you and the bitter-sweet experiences of love and romance !”

Words cannot express the unction with which Aunt Félicité’s last sentences were delivered, and much more was said on the same subject, Zoë listening with meek assent and unready answers.

“Will nothing unbend these cold English-women ?” thought Madame Pitache, as she watched the girl’s face. “Is it possible that a lovely creature like this has no foolish dreams like the rest of us ?”

“Does Monsieur Pitache know all ?” at last Zoë asked. “I should not like to stay any longer under false pretences.”



Madame Pitache laughed with a little gesture of self-approbation.

“Be easy on that score, dear child. I have managed everything beautifully. When I saw that the affair was going to be hushed up, there was no longer any reason for keeping my husband in the dark. The investigation was kept as quiet as possible. Nobody was more than nominally punished, and Huberte’s cleverness in concealing you has prevented an awkward piece of scandal. You cannot return to Les Ponts, but you can lead an easier, daintier life here.”

Zoë, looking out of the window, made mechanical replies. By tacit understanding the subject of Father Gabriel had been ignored, but she saw that Aunt Félicité wanted to say something about him now.

“Huberte tells me that the young Capucin whose life you saved has also left Les Ponts.

How she came by the information she does not say."

Zoë turned from red to white, and trembled violently.

"Let no one remind me of him," she cried. "I will thankfully stay here. But I must begin a new life. Only Huberte shall remain to me of the old."

For a moment the pent-up memories and musings of the last few uneventful weeks gained the mastery. Abandoning herself to a moment of delicious grief, she threw herself on her friend's bosom, and added—

"What I did for Father Gabriel I would do for anyone else to-morrow, were I to be stoned to death for it afterwards. He is nothing to me, only he is the friend of one I love better than anything else in the world, and that is why I dare not think of him——"

"Huberte just hinted at an unfortunate



attachment, but, of course, broke no confidences," Aunt Félicité began, caressing the tender cheek and sun-kissed, wind-tossed hair. "Dear thing, look upon me as a mother, and unbosom yourself."

"Not yet. I know you want to be very good to me, and you have been angelically kind already. By-and-by—in a year, perhaps—I can talk of him. It kills me now," Zoë said. Then she lifted her fair head from its resting-place, put back the captivating locks that had strayed from the comb, and said, between laughing and crying, still wholly unlike herself—the self-contained Zoë of an hour ago had vanished as if by magic—"How smooth life were but for this! I am no longer of any use in the world. I hate myself for such weakness, and yet nothing can do me good any more."

"That is a grievous word, and surely a rash one," Madame Pitache said, about to

discourse at length upon her favourite text, *Les amours*. Zoë, however, implored, nay, commanded a truce, and regained self-possession as quickly as she had lost it.

A few minutes later, Aunt Félicité gazed with astonishment at the girl's calm brow and quiet looks. The storm had passed, leaving her a shade paler, a trifle sadder, and that was all. The manuscripts were worked at more cheerfully than usual, and conversation was kept up during meal-times with unusual alacrity.

Next morning early Aunt Félicité knocked at Zoë's door with an armful of books. It was a little collection of George Sand's works.

"You have no companions here of your own age," she said, "and my husband and I are old and prosy. Read George Sand, my child, and you will no longer be alone,

but will revel in youth, love, and beauty with your peers."

Zoë put away the volume carelessly, and for some days had no recourse to her friend's panacea. Novel-reading in France is regarded as the forbidden apple held out by the serpent of evil to Eve's daughters, teachers especially being supposed to keep aloof from temptation. Except the daily instalments of fiction doled out by the journals, nothing in the way of light literature was admitted within Huberte's chaste domains. Oddly enough, therefore, Zoë, always well pleased to follow her friend's example, had never made the acquaintance of George Sand—that astounding super-human genius, universally crowned, sceptred, and bent knee to—invested, indeed, by general consent with the inalienable sovereignty of romance!

As the slumbrous days wore on, however,

Zoë's ardent young nature craved for life, colour, and movement, and the little library offered itself as a harbour of refuge from the prevailing monotony around her. The summer heat was now at its height. From early morning till near sunset, doors and shutters were closed to keep out the sultry air and blinding sunshine. No breath was blown from the warm blue hills, and the brilliant day glided almost imperceptibly into the still more brilliant night. There was a delicious hour of coolness then, but no cloud veiling the large lustrous stars and deep purple heavens, and only just enough breeze to stir the scent-laden air.

Whilst Aunt Félicité knitted and her husband drowsed in their garden chairs, Zoë would pace the broad gravel walk, full of restless thoughts. Her impatient spirit rebelled against the fetters imposed upon it as a newly-trapped wood-bird against its prison

bars. Could she live year after year thus evenly and tamely? Could she, by little and little, learn to take comfort in the softness and roundness of mere material well-being? Every bodily want was supplied, every kindness bestowed upon her, yet she fretted and pined and longed for the hours to pass.

The best part of the day was that exquisitely peaceful, perfumed twilight in the garden, if indeed twilight it could be called! The atmosphere was so luminous that the plane leaves hanging motionless on their stalks looked like silver coins, and the large star-like lilies gleamed with asbestine lustre. Amid the glorious carnations, Zoë walked, drinking in the fragrance, stooping to kiss the crimson and creamy petals, gazing with rapture on the strange beauty of earth and sky, wondering if indeed the spirit of Delmar hovered about her now.

Such moments of transport only seemed

to heighten the contrast between her outer and inner life. Beyond the garden walls lay the broad valleys and swift-rushing rivers, and thronging cities for which she yearned. Was she perpetually cut off from all these? Again and again she said that it could not be.

In despair, she turned to George Sand, and the spell worked. The days were no longer clayey and common, but golden-threaded and rainbow-winged. She found herself in a world at one with her dreams, peopled with beautiful, ardent souls, who claimed Delmar and herself as kindred, a world brighter than her hopes had been, fonder than her looking back. For a time, at least, weariness was banished, and the dawn wore a look of welcome. A fairy wand had been put into her hand, turning the daily portion into daintiness and delight. There was enchantment even about these

homely ways, fascination in these unpoetic existences, freshness, vitality, unexpectedness everywhere.

So the summer passed, and the gorgeous season of fruit harvest and vintage was at hand.

CHAPTER VII.

MYSTERIES.

AFTER the tremendous excitement of her installation under Aunt Félicité's roof, followed a long lull of uneventfulness and suspense. No one knew what was happening at Les Ponts. The newspapers held their peace, as they generally do in France on important subjects. The prattle of the public was arrested from various motives. Some people were silent from interest, others from fear, the greater part from calculation. It required, moreover, extraordinary courage to blurt out the truth, as yet, ere the proper evidence was



forthcoming. The Republicans dared not say—"The whole affair is a plot instigated by the Jesuits to bring discredit on our cause." The clerical could not retort—"If ever an abominable fiction was invented concerning our holy church it is this. For the first time in his life, the man set eyes on the woman who saved him!"

But, in the meantime, the facts got noised abroad, as certain facts will, in spite of all kinds of precautionary measures. The story shocked the devout and tickled the profane. The former were scandalized that reproach should come through an insignificant Capucin, whose drowning after all would have been no great misfortune to his community, and an ineffable boon conferred upon the Catholic body at large! The Radicals were enchanted at the miscarriage of what they considered a dastardly intrigue, and were ready to dower the

maiden as loyally as their means would allow, were she only to be found! Her whereabouts in this secluded country village was not likely to be discovered, however, and it was rumoured abroad that the Capucin had also disappeared. The inquiry seemed likely to end in nothing serious, since the two principal witnesses, Zoë and the monk, were not forthcoming.

“The young Englishwoman, tall, slender, with chestnut hair and blue eyes,” as her description ran in the police reports, “had gone off the very next day to her native country in a merchant vessel taking passengers from Les Ponts to Liverpool.” And, oddly enough, a girl answering to such an account did sail to England at the time. There were often governesses and maid-servants who preferred this five or six days’ sea-voyage to the heavier expense of the long railway journey by way of



Paris and the northern ports, and as passports are no longer necessary, it was difficult to certify identities. Thus Zoë had little occasion to trouble herself in this matter.

Huberte was to arrive in September for the remainder of her holidays, the first half being devoted to that implacable necessity of a Frenchwoman's existence, sea-bathing, and Zoë looked forward to her coming with something more than impatience. The unnatural inactivity and seclusion of this country life were telling upon her once healthful and resolute temperament. She no longer wore the bloom of health that had added so much to her beauty, and the habitual suavity of manner would be varied with fits of restlessness and irritability she found impossible to conceal. The four garden-walls enclosing Aunt Félicité's pleasant home seemed to be prison bars, as,

indeed, in a certain sense, they were. The notion of allowing a young lady to take long country walks alone was not only preposterous, but positively objectionable in the eyes of her French protectors, and there was no one who could accompany her. Occasionally the old-fashioned hooded carriage would be ordered, and a series of drives would be made; nothing else except rare visits from neighbours varied the day, which usually wound up with an idle hour or two in the garden. Aunt Félicité and her husband, though perpetually skirmishing with each other—marriage, in their eyes, seeming to confer the privilege of saying unpalatable things—petted her as if she were the orphan of a political martyr. Everything smiled upon her, but in vain.

On a sudden the evenness of existence was broken by something mysterious and disquieting. She found out that she was

watched. Unknown footsteps tracked her own, unseen eyes followed her movements.

At first she refused to believe it, and, looking in the glass, said to herself, "I am ill and fanciful. Forced idleness is killing me or depriving me of my intelligence; I must go away, I must work." But when two or three days passed, each bringing unassailable evidence, she could no longer doubt. An ever-watchful presence haunted the place suspected only by herself. Conviction was thus brought about.

When dinner was over, and the three resorted to the garden, Monsieur Pitache and Aunt Félicité would take a turn or two on the terrace, then settle down in their easy-chairs, leaving Zoë to get her exercise unaccompanied. This consisted in pacing up and down the terrace before them, and afterwards making the tour of the gardens, the first laid out in parterre, alley, and bosquet,

the second made up of orchard and vegetable gardens. A little river, spanned by a rustic bridge, ran between, and both were surrounded by granite walls about the height of a man. Zoë would repeat her circuit again and again, always being within call of her protectors, but out of sight, and there were generally others near, the gardener and maids watering the flowers or gathering fruit, and the children of the farm-steward playing on the grass plot. It was only when she reached the farthest point from the house that she was ever alone. She had noticed once or twice an invariable sound of footsteps on the other side of the wall; they halted when she halted, hastened when she hastened, and kept time to her own with irritating assiduity. If one of the servants happened to approach, the sound ceased immediately, but if she returned to the same spot unattended, it recommenced. Further,

she discovered that the watching was not confined to this especial hour of twilight. About midday all the activity of the household centred in another direction, and the garden was utterly deserted. The dining-bell then brought the washerwomen from the brook, the threshers from the barn, the hemp-dressers, the farm-labourers, dairy-maids, and the rest of the staff from their various avocations, when all sat down to a merry meal taken outside the kitchen door. The dogs kept them company; Monsieur and Madame Pitache drowsed indoors over their newspapers. Just then thieves and murderers might have stolen into the house by the front way unperceived.

Zoë would often put on a large straw hat, and spend this glowing hour under the walnut-trees; but she found now that she could no longer do this without being spied upon. There was the same sound of hurrying foot-

steps near. Once or twice, even, she fancied that she was called by name.

By whom was she watched, and for what purpose? A foolish fear took momentary possession of her, when she recalled the events of a few months back. Huberte had often told horrible stories of women being shut up in convents and madhouses, for political and family reasons. She had saved a man's life, but had scandalized a religious community ! It must be on this account that she was thus tracked and observed. Perhaps some secret deposition from her hand was needed to reinstate him in the good opinion of his superiors. Or her own version of the story might be sought for other purposes. But why this stealthiness, this dread of discovery? One moment she laughed at her fears, the next she exaggerated them. It was clear that something must be wrong, and if so, she ought to leave

her kind friends at once. She might bring about trouble, or at least embarrassment, and whether an object of suspicion, or mere curiosity, she was in duty bound to rid them of her presence.

On the eve of Huberte's arrival she determined to convince herself that she was not dreaming, and after the usual circuit deliberately slackened her pace at the loneliest spot. True enough her pursuer was there. She stood quite still, and simultaneously the echoing footsteps halted also. Someone was waiting and listening. Far away could be heard the voices of the children at play, and the singing of a little goose-girl, as she conducted the flock home; all else was still.

"Zoë," cried the voice, in a low tone of vehement entreaty. "Zoe, speak to me."

She felt her knees trembling under her, and her heart beating fast. Could it be Lionel? The whispered voice was unrecog-

nizable, but the passionate, almost agonized tone of supplication, for a moment convinced her that it could be none other. She tried to speak, and found no words.

“The side door is not locked,” added the voice, still in a whisper. “Oh! will you not come? I have watched and waited so long!”

“Who are you, and why this secrecy?” she said, at last.

She was still half believing that it was Delmar. Two paces off lay the side door, in a second she could be there. But she felt powerless to move.

A third time the voice entreated her, and again she was reminded of Delmar. The last remnant of self-composure now vanished. She forgot the probable imprudence of such a step, the possibility of being discovered, the false interpretation likely to be put upon her conduct. Delmar had come because he

needed her, and whose else but his were her life, her love, her little all? She sprang to the postern, and opened it with trembling hands. But the figure awaiting her was not Lionel. Thus much she saw at a glance, and turned white and cold. Nothing seemed to matter now!

“Who are you?” she repeated, in thin, far-off tones, and not moving a step from where she stood. “I am here—Zoë Delmar. What would you have me do?”

“It is I—Gabriel. Have you forgotten me?” replied the stranger, coming near. “But we must not stay. I already hear footsteps in the distance. Oh! for the love of Heaven, meet me to-morrow, soon after dawn—by the dolmen——”

“One word,” she said, with a hand on the door. “Why are you here? By what right do you ask this interview?”

“By the right of an alien, an outcast,” he

answered. "I have no longer a place of shelter, no longer a friend in the wide world. Promise me what I ask."

She noticed that he wore the dress of a civilian, and it flashed across her mind, as a solution of the mystery, that he had renounced the monastic career—he had freed himself from his vows!

"I understand," she said, in a voice full of pitying concern. "I must not call you Father Gabriel any more."

"It is even so," he replied. The footsteps drew nearer; he retired, and Zoë closed the door softly. Bidding her friends a hasty good night, she went at once to her little room, and sat down by the window, full of anxious thought. It was one of those superlatively delicious nights seen to perfection in this part of France. All the wide landscape was flooded with silvery light of crescent moon and stars. Close underneath



the open casement breathed the perfume of a thousand flowers. The garden looked like an enchanted place, so sharp and clear were the alternations of light and shadow, shadow itself being luminous in the exquisitely transparent atmosphere. Far away tinkled the Angelus of the village church, no other sound disturbing the silence. Every moment new stars shone out, and fresh solemnity and beauty were added to the scene.

Zoë gazed upon it, thinking of Delmar and Gabriel, for their spirits both seemed hovering about her now. What was Gabriel, indeed, but a part of her life, since she had only seemed to live since knowing Lionel? All else was poor and colourless. Every day and hour spent near him were written on her heart in golden letters, a glorious calendar none could read but herself.

Because Gabriel was Delmar's friend,

therefore, she was ready to serve him to the best of her ability. She knew that she had acted imprudently in consenting to his request, but prudence and expediency did not enter into her calculations. This ill-earned, smooth-cushioned existence, under Aunt Félicité's roof, was galling in the extreme to her proud, impetuous nature. She must live for some purpose, or not at all, and if she could befriend Gabriel, it should be with heart and soul, with might and main. Ah ! was Lionel thinking of her this wondrous September night ?

The household was always astir by sunrise, and Zoë had once or twice of late rambled in the fields near the house for the purpose of blackberrying. She needed no excuse, therefore, for absenting herself on this particular morning, and, light as a wood-nymph, sprang across the dusty road and dewy meadows leading to the

dolmen. She had some distance to go, but it was the first real walk she had taken for months, and the rapid exercise brought a healthful bloom to her cheeks, and a natural brightness to her eye. Everything filled her with a new sense of youthfulness and hope—the crisp morning air, the twitter of the birds, the flowery turf, the changeful sky. The consciousness of being expected and longed for, moreover, and the conviction that she was not cut off from deepest human sympathy, but had part and lot in a life as perplexed and solitary as her own, imparted new self-reliance and courage. An infinite pity and tenderness filled her whole being. If not for sympathy, indeed, for what else was life ordained?

As she drew near the meeting-place, the scene became unique and almost grandiose. Far around, strewing the heath, lay masses of blue granite, the huge dolmen towering

over all—weird, sombre, symbolic. Gorse and heather in full bloom made a brilliant background to this, whilst straight above it slanted upward the crimson sun, amid delicate rose and amber-coloured clouds.

She saw that he was waiting for her, and, without a word, the two sat down under the shadow of the dolmen.



CHAPTER VIII.

A LIFE-STORY.

“**Y**OU are ill?” were Zoë’s first words, as Gabriel advanced to meet her from the dolmen. She was shocked by the young man’s altered appearance. His cheeks were white and sunken, his eyes feverishly bright and large, his body greatly attenuated. It seemed difficult to believe that it was the Father Gabriel of former days !

“ I was ill a few weeks back, but that is past and gone. Let us talk at our ease, and begin from the beginning,” he said. “ Surely none can play the eavesdropper here?”



“No, indeed,” Zoë answered, smiling, as she glanced around.

Far away on one side a line of windmills broke the horizon; on the other, rose a château with glittering pinnacles; on either side lay belts of pasture and land cultivated in patches, whilst immediately about them stretched the bare, craggy, menhir-strewn plain, untenanted even by the ubiquitous geese. They were seated on a block of stone outside the dolmen, a gloomy pile of three or four masses of granite raised temple-wise, with a narrow, cavernous opening. Nothing could be stiller, eerier, lonelier.

“Why do you hesitate?” Zoë asked at last, her companion having risen with uneasy glances to the right and left. “There is no one near. I have not much time. Please begin.”

Those brief words roused him. He re-seated himself by her side, and looked into

her face long and eagerly. That searching glance told his story beforehand. It was an ineffably pathetic look of appeal and trust—of candid surrender to a pity and tenderness already proved to be unstinting and angelic—that met her own. Not a vestige of admiration now troubled those guileless blue eyes. Brotherly nearness, sympathy, nay, clinging affection were there, and eager, unmeasured, reverential gratitude. That was all. Zoë's eyes answered him unhesitatingly, and without fear.

“You will be my friend?” he asked, holding out his hand—“you will not abandon me now that I am forsaken of all others?”

“If I can be serviceable to you, you know I am ready,” she replied.

“No, that is not enough. Promise me what I ask,” he reiterated, still clasping the girl's hand; then, seeing that she

still held back, he pleaded, "You do not know how utterly forlorn I am. Without friends, without shelter, without a calling, without a creed, even, I have come to throw myself upon your love and pity."

"There is my cousin Lionel," Zoë said, blushing—"he promised to stand by you if ever an hour of need came."

"He cannot save me, though we love each other dearly," the young man said, with some impatience. "Will you shrink now, when you have showed yourself to be so noble? The life you saved is in your hands. It rests with you whether, indeed, I live or die. Ah! I see you are at a loss to comprehend me. Let us, then, begin from the beginning, and then you will understand. When you have heard all, I am sure you will be ready to do what I ask."

Seeing the look of surprise in Zoë's frank eyes, he explained himself with something of his old *naïveté* and unconventional downrightness.

"That is surely a piece of self-sacrifice not to be compared with the first. Why should you be astounded at my request? I am ignorant of the ways of the world; I find myself suddenly thrown upon my own resources. What will become of me, unless you come to my aid?"

"Tell me everything first," she said, quite practically, "then we can consult together as to what is best to do."

He turned round, so as to have his face opposite to hers whilst he spoke, and began, soon exchanging his quiet narrative for the rhapsodic eloquence and superabundant gesticulation of the Franciscan orator. From time to time, Zoë held up her slender hand imposing self-control. She feared that his

high, impetuous tones might attract attention even in this isolated spot.

“I cannot depict my youth to you, my sister. Words were impotent to pourtray a picture so bright, so unsullied, so full of pure, heavenly aspiration. As a young child, I had sorrows—who has not?—but my earliest recollections have grown dim by comparison with those of my later years. I was left an orphan in infancy, and never knew what is called family life, though love and care in abundance were bestowed upon me by the good old priest whose adopted son I became. There were no women in the house. An aged sacristan and his son lived with us and performed the menial offices of the household. You, Zoë Delmar, are the first woman I ever knew. We lived in a solitary but strangely beautiful spot between the mountains and the sea, and a

cluster of fishermen's houses and a tiny church made up the hamlet. Behind the mountains, which were a gold and purple glory in sunset and sunrise, lay a pleasant green valley, parted by a wide river, and in my childhood, I used to look down upon it with admiration and longing, as if it were, indeed, the Heaven I was taught to strive after and dwell upon in my secret thoughts. The sea, also, became a part of my life. I fancied its quiet murmurings, as well as its tempestuous roaring, were all meant for me, and felt alternately approved, warned, and admonished. Then the flowers that carpeted the hillsides in June! With what rapture I gathered them to deck our humble altar! What lovely visions of celestial places they brought before my mind! Yes, I was indeed innocent and happy then, and little did I dream of the future in store for me,

the thorny paths, the bitter Calvaries, and all the tribulations prepared for the children of Adam !”

He was now greatly excited, and Zoë, who saw a little peasant maiden with her flock of geese in the distance, put her finger on her lip, betokening the need of caution. He wiped his forehead, paused for a minute, then continued, in a lower key, yet with the agitated manner and the rolling of the eyes, Zoë knew so well—

“ Well, that life lasted till my fourteenth year, when my more than father died, and I thereupon entered a seminary, in order to be prepared for the priesthood or monastic career, as I should afterwards determine. Again everything and everybody smiled upon me. I had but exchanged one happy existence for another. We had spacious libraries and corridors, wide pleasure-

grounds, an exquisite little chapel, all, indeed, that was conducive to innocent enjoyment and religious feeling. Our protectors and teachers were sympathetic, encouraging, and paternal. No one could feel insignificant, much less alone, whilst each was taught to regard himself as a member of the vast body of the Church militant, a crusader ever warring against unbelief. This conviction made life unspeakably real and full of meaning to me. Here was the Truth, the divine significance of human destiny, the inscrutable will of God made manifest towards man. All else was empty, vile, or, at best, vanity and delusion. We were brought face to face with sin, its name was pronounced, its abomination unveiled, but all the time we were taught to regard ourselves as far apart from it as the white man from the Ethiop.



You cold Protestants cannot realise this feeling, made up of aspiration, partly of faith, and which almost amounts to a sense of personal infallibility. Error floated in the very breath we inhaled, yet, by virtue of our belief, we were kept untainted, whilst outside was nothing good, true, or ministering to salvation."

He paused with a sudden look of anguish, pressed one hand to his brow, unable to go on.

"Courage," she said, divining what was in his mind. "You have made an exchange rather than suffered loss. God and righteousness remain."

She saw that he was deeply moved, and, rising, stood before him in the sunshine. For a moment she let him weep, then she lifted his tear-wet fingers from the pale cheeks, and smiling sweet-

ly and encouragingly, constrained him to look up. How could he but be comforted? There she stood smiling upon him with tears of compassion in her kind eyes, making, as it seemed, the whole place alive with celestial love and peace.

“Do not be cast down. You have but been seeking all this time, and every year must be a step forward to those who pray. Dear brother, take heart.”

“You are angelically kind,” he answered, gazing upon her like one entranced. “I am one moment in the depths of despondency, the next buoyed up to the gates of heaven, with transports of hope. Are you really a woman, or an angel in human guise sent down to lead me aright?”

Her eyes again rippled, this time not with tears, rather with a gentle, arch mirthfulness.

Mixed with the pathos of his appeal was a certain childish, unworldly abandonment that she found irresistible. More than once during this interview poor Zoë had pictured to herself Aunt Félicité's concern at her long absence, and the inquisition she would be subjected to on arrival.

"I am indeed a mortal like yourself," she replied, sitting down with a little sigh of resignation. "And, alas! I must beg you to go on. Time is going fast. I cannot stay here more than half an hour longer."

"Why cannot you stay? I could willingly sit here and talk to you till sunset," the young man said, ingenuously. "I have bread with me, and there is water, clear and fresh, in yonder stream. What else do we want?"

"You forget that I am not my own mistress," Zoë answered, briefly, and with a

slight touch of impatience. "I have no liberty now. I am a paid servant, and must not neglect my duties!"

She took her little watch from her girdle, looked at it with a regretful pursing up of the sweet lips, then put it back in its place with a sigh.

"I must positively be back at L'Oisilière in an hour's time. I am most anxious to hear the rest of your story. Pray continue."

"It is not the last opportunity you will give me? We shall meet again tomorrow?" asked her companion, looking alarmed.

"First tell me everything. Then I will answer your questions," Zoë said. Whereupon he took up his recital exactly where he had left off.

"How little do you Protestants under-

stand what angelic hosts, saintships, and miracle-workers mean to ardent young neophytes like myself! I felt, and my companions also, that divine ministrations and holy intercessors hovered about our way, and that the Virgin and our patron saints would grant us anything we might ask. It was a blissful illusion. I lived, indeed, in an atmosphere of prayer and ecstatic adoration. Golden visions of beatitude floated before my half-closed eyes. Many a time, when kneeling at the feet of the Virgin, rapt in prayer, she became real and living to me, and I felt like a child in presence of its mother. Here was my world, the true meaning of existence, the essence of things; all that lay outside such religious aspirations seemed intangible and deceptive. But I must not dwell too long upon these good and happy days. They glided by quickly, and I awoke

one morning to find myself no longer a child, but a youth on the verge of manhood, with a clear and unmistakable destiny opening before me. From the first moment that the notion of becoming a monk presented itself to my mind, I never doubted in my vocation. I loved books and meditation, and could not conceive of a holier and happier lot than that of a recluse, withdrawing himself from the temptations of the world and the perils of the flesh, living, indeed, as if for him they existed not. Am I wearying you ?”

“Your story interests me greatly. I entreat you to go on,” she answered, looking again at her watch, and adding, with that little frown he had seen before—“We have only ten minutes more left now.”

“It is impossible for me to finish my narrative so quickly—I have not yet got mid-

way," he said. "Promise me, ere I proceed, that you will meet me here again to-morrow, or perhaps at sunset to-day."

Zoë paused and reflected. Yes, she had better leave him now, and return at even-fall. She ought now to be at Aunt Félicité's side, pen in hand. She rose and took up her hat and parasol.

"I will come again a little before sunset. I really must go back," she said, very kindly.

"Promise," he asked, reiterating the petition with a kind of desperation.

"Nay, there is no need. I have said it, and I will not break my word," she replied. Then, without a word more, she smiled and nodded adieu, and with quick, light step, hastened back by the way she had come.

The young man watched the slender

figure till it disappeared behind the dolmen ; then, covering his face with his hands, pondered long and painfully.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ROMANCE OF THE BEARD.

ZOË awaited Huberte's arrival that afternoon with a fluttering heart. She should no longer be alone. Zoë and Huberte, when together, hardly needed any other happiness, and the separation of the last few months had but intensified their affection.

The railway station was a dozen miles off L'Oisilière, or the Bird's Nest, but an omnibus brought passengers to the neighbouring village, half-way, and it was here Zoë waited. Everything and everybody arrived by the omnibus, nuns and priests, peasant folks and

soldiers, newspapers, letters, market baskets, and railway parcels. No wonder that its appearance was hailed so eagerly. The village coquette awaited her new finery, the mother her long-lost conscript, the politician his newspaper, the lover tidings of his mistress.

As the cumbersome old vehicle pulled slowly up the hill, Zoë drew back a little, but the waving of a white handkerchief told her Huberte was there. Soon she recognised her friend's face, which was scarlet with excitement, and heard her voice reiterating with extraordinary vivacity two words, the meaning of which she could not catch. By-and-by, however, the omnibus came to a stand, whereupon Huberte, still having her head out of the window, and gesticulating violently, repeated—

“The Beard ! the Beard !”

Was she mad ? thought Zoë. But no,

she was only wild with glee ; it was Huberte's own unaltered self she had the next moment in her arms, and the two kissed each other on the cheek a dozen times, Huberte crying between her embraces in the same utterly self-abandoned tone—

“The Beard ! the Beard !”

“My dearest Huberte,” Zoë said, her blue eyes opened wonderingly, “why are you so excited about that especial word ? You are making people stare at us, which you used to mind so much.”

Huberte caught hold of her hand, and the two, lagging behind the little crowd, talked in a low voice.

“You cannot have forgotten that night when we were all almost drowned ? You were on an island with—you know whom, and I was at home. The mystery is solved at last.”

Zoë was slowly recollecting Huberte's

adventure, and at last a glimmer of light flashed across her mind.

“Ah! then it was as I said! Monsieur Papotte has long cared for you—he has asked you to marry him?”

“You darling! It is so, but in every way more wonderful! Yes, Zoë, you know what a man-hater I have ever been, but now I retract the hard things I have said about the sex. I acknowledge that there may be found one angel among twenty thousand of other kin. Chivalry exists still, my dear, and the Beard has made me not only a happy woman, but a lover of all human kind.”

A few tears stood on both sides, and another embrace followed this speech. Then, hand in hand, they diverged from the public way and climbed a steep hill, on the other side of which the carriage awaited them. No one was near now, so they could talk freely.

“I did not write,” Huberte began, in a calmer voice. “How could I pen the words—Zoë, I am ruined, and it is your doing? No, I determined that I would conceal my chagrin as much as possible, and never reproach you in word, deed, or even thought. But I could go down on my knees to you out of pure gratitude now, for through all these misfortunes has come the crowning bliss of existence. Monsieur Papotte would never have presumed to propose to me but for my altered circumstances. He is a widower and has several children. His means are small. He did not feel at liberty to ask any woman better off than himself to marry him, for whilst I was earning my three thousand francs a year, he had no more, and five people to maintain on the sum.”

“I always had the highest opinion of Monsieur Papotte,” Zoë said.

“My dear, he is the soul of honour and chivalry! When he said to me, ‘Mademoiselle Huberte, share my poor fortunes,’ I felt ready to throw myself into his arms. But womanly pride first, love afterwards! I merely answered, ‘Monsieur, you do me too much honour; we must both reflect.’ It is all settled at last. The school will be patched up as best it can without municipal support, and I shall continue to direct it, receiving not quite a third of my former pay. But the Beard, the Beard has transformed everything!”

They had gradually ascended the shoulder of the bold hill crowning the landscape, and, squatting down on the turf, gazed dreamily around. It was, indeed, an enchanting prospect. Below flowed a wide, silvery river, spanned by an airy bridge, emerald islets breaking its smooth surface and wide stretching pastures on either side.

Beyond river and river-banks, rose gently undulating hills, crested with quaint Romanesque tower or turreted château. There was not a cloud in the brilliant September sky, not a suspicion of autumnal haze in the transparent atmosphere. All was clear as crystal, bright and sparkling; a veil had just been drawn, as if from the new-born earth, revealing its virgin freshness to the children of men.

“What a contrast is this noble panorama to the dusty little lane we have just quitted!” said Huberte, who seemed all at once capable of the strangest enthusiasm. “And just so contrasted, Zoë, is my former life with the present. I was living in a narrow little groove without anything ever happening to lift me out of myself, devoted to clogging cares and miserable little feminine puerilities. Now there is no longer any pettishness in me. I have shaken off my

wretched egotism. I feel as if I had suddenly come into the possession of wings, and life has all at once assumed magnificent proportions. Such is the magical effect of the Beard."

The two girls smiled gravely, Zoë, for the moment, forgetting everything else but Huberte's supreme contentment. Then the latter went on, in a more subdued tone,

"You see, dear friend, there is this difference between us two—you would have been a lofty-minded creature, under any circumstances ; I was mean-spirited and desperately narrow, so long as I was left to myself. Nothing could make you other than you are, whilst I stand in need of the magician's touch."

All this time Zoë's clear eyes were rippling with an under-current of fun. She had wept out of sympathetic joy a few minutes before, but now this soberer mood

had vanished, and she saw before her the picture of Monsieur Papotte exactly as he was in the flesh—and not according to Huberte's ideal—a spare, brown-skinned, weak-eyed, thin-voiced little professor, with a hirsute beard, it is true, and the kindest heart, yet very unideal and unheroic both as regarded the inner and outer man. Monsieur Papotte was an excellent teacher of the young, as far as his routine went, but he had no enchantments about him, and was sadly addicted to catching bad colds, and a morbid dread of draughts, always a drawback to a man's agreeableness ! As Huberte continued to expatiate, one might have supposed him to be as good to look at as Danton, and as eloquent as Mirabeau.

They prattled on for an hour or more, then descended to the little inn in the valley, where the carriage awaited them. Huberte ordered coffee, and took out her

purse with a royal air. She no longer gave a thought to the impropriety of two young unmarried women entering a wayside inn for refreshments alone, and, under ordinary circumstances, would not have dreamed of the expense. The Beard had revolutionized everything.

When they arrived, Zoë left her friend to unburden herself to Aunt Félicité, and sought the solitude of her little room. Throwing open the shutters so as to flood the place with warm amber light, she leaned on the window-sill in deep thought. Just such golden afternoons as these had been spent with Lionel amid sylvan scenes a year ago! How they had rejoiced in Nature together! A wayside flower, a passing cloud, a twittering bird, were then enough to stir their inmost beings with strange, pure rapture. The hidden meaning of lovely things seemed then revealed to them both, and

instantaneously, electrically, by a kind of magic.

All this was past, and, bereft of Huberte, she felt suddenly orphaned and forlorn. Huberte could never again be the close friend of old. Their paths would diverge as east from west. Huberte needed her no longer.

By-and-by, she heard her friend's footsteps in the neighbouring room, and not wishing to be disturbed, drew the window-curtains about her, and feigned a drowse. Huberte stole in softly, and, imagining that Zoë did indeed sleep, retired as noiselessly as she had come, not, however, without leaving a sign. A letter was in her hand, and moving on tip-toe, she deposited it on the table, where it could but meet her friend's eye on awaking.

When the five o'clock dinner bell sounded, Zoë started up, flushed and heavy-eyed. She had indeed been sleeping, and, fresh

from sweet, shifting dreams of Lionel, she woke to find a letter from him. But there was no time to read it then. It was not till after the meal, which held out longer than usual, owing to Huberte's lively talk, that she could steal a moment of leisure; and even then she sat for a long time with the missive on her lap, looking at it, touching it, trembling before it, but fearing to break the seal.

It was not, however, a letter to cause any violent agitation. Lionel merely wrote with an enclosure addressed to Father Gabriel:—

“I have received communications from our dear friend Gabriel, which fill me with anxiety concerning him. Do you think you could be the means of handing him this letter for me through Mrs. O'Meara, or any other common acquaintance? I cannot of

course write anything private to the monastery, and what I have to say is of that nature. Of ourselves I dare not write now. For the present, farewell. All good angels watch over you, Zoë! Yours always,

“LIONEL.”

But not a word was breathed concerning him to Huberte, whose feminine curiosity had considerably diminished under her altered circumstances. What could happen now to take one's breath away? Happiness made her more amiable, but also more selfish, and even the thoughts of her bosom friend were no longer read by her as a book. Formerly she used to note the alternating clouds and sunshine of Zoë's sweet face. Now she had only eyes for the benign physiognomy of Monsieur Papotte, which was always before her, waking or sleeping. A heavenlier vision might be imagined, but



Huberte did not think so, and drew again and again in her mind the small upturned nose, the brown complexion, and the bright little eyes of her adored.

CHAPTER X.

GABRIEL'S STORY CONTINUED.

TRUE to her word, when the west was one vast conflagration of crimson and scarlet, and the east was just beginning to shimmer with the silveriness of the rising moon, Zoë made her appearance at the appointed place. She no longer wore a white gown, and large straw hat wreathed with flowers, but in her dove-coloured dress, and long transparent grey veil, seemed to belong to the evening as much as the pale, tremulous stars and pensive twilight flowers. There was abundance of light, a light far more beautifying than the garish atmosphere

of day, and as she sat with her face turned to Gabriel, he thought he had the company of an angel. Never living picture possessed lovelier background, eyes, hair, and features being framed by the soft azure of the sky.

Without delay he resumed his narrative. His manner, she thought, seemed calmer than before, and he gesticulated less. She little knew how worn and weary he was, or the life of privation he was leading. All that day, indeed, his food had been dry bread.

"Time will not permit me to do more than give you an outline of my youth and early manhood," he began. "You must fill up the picture for yourself. I cannot describe to you any idea of the deep, unbroken content that settled upon me after I had decided to enter the Third Order of St. Francis. Naturally joyous rather than spiritual-minded, I betook myself to un-

limited prayer, penance, and fasting, hardly allowing time for rest, much less for recreation. I grew at last to believe that I was fitted not only to adorn the monastery but the Mother Church. I drank deep draughts of scholastic philosophy, resolved first to become wise, and then to devote myself to the instruction of others. You have perhaps heard of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Angel of the Schools ?”

“Yes, indeed,” Zoë answered, with a smile. It struck her as odd that he should not have the faintest idea of what he might expect from her intellectually. She forgot that he had never talked on easy terms with a woman before, and that his intercourse with her sex had chiefly consisted in spiritual conferences through the bars of the convent grating, or in convent parlours.

“Ah ! I forgot how much your kinsman

instructed you! The writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, you must know, form a necessary and important part of our education. No monk can take rank as a teacher of philosophy who is not thoroughly versed in them, and years are devoted to the study. No one who has gone before, and no one who has come after, can be compared with him. Kant and the German philosophers have but caught sparks of light emitted from that wondrous luminary. His thoughts, clear as crystal, form a region in which the mind of man walks unfettered by mortal dross. St. Thomas Aquinas, the great Angelical, was my intellectual teacher, as St. Francis was my model in divine things, nor did I dream that I should become an unworthy disciple of these two. But my ambition did not stop here. I was not satisfied with breaking the flesh and illumining the mind. I wanted to be

skilled in the hearts of men, and to become wiser in that worldly wisdom the fathers of the Church possessed so largely. With this end, I turned from St. Basil and Balmez to the masters of fiction, and read vast numbers of novels, old and new. These stimulated my curiosity, and made me hail with eagerness the acquaintance of men like Delmar, and of women like you. The very essence of Catholicism lies in its sovereignty over the human heart, and this sway the humblest and least mentally endowed priest or monk is bound by the nature of things to covet, as much as the cardinal in his scarlet and the Pope on his throne. Nothing is too high, nothing too low, for the Church here. She seeks to sway alike the strongest man and the feeblest woman, and to do so it is necessary to learn the working of the passions and impulses of all."

He broke off suddenly, looked into the

candid eyes fixed upon his own with much pitying interest, and exclaimed, in tones half triumphant, half self-reproachful—

“That is why I so persistently sought your friendship, and that of your kinsman. I wanted to fathom your secret thoughts, to read you both through and through. With him I think I made considerable progress. I divined the influence you exercised over him. Proud and reserved as he is, he could not conceal it from me.”

She averted her face, looking straight before her, suddenly transported to a world of other kin. How could she listen, seeing that he had touched upon this theme? He went on, her poor lame thoughts limping after him as best they could.

“It was just within the limits of possibility that such knowledge might work for holy ends; and to the Church, as you know, it is permitted to do evil that good may

come. Anything that might bring you within her pale, would be regarded as desirable."

"Oh, I beseech you, go on with your story!" she said, impatiently. "We have not too much time. I want to hear the end."

The young man, thus expostulated with, somewhat reluctantly took up the thread of his narrative. It gave him intense relief to pour out these confidences, but, in turn, he would fain have had her own. There was this difference between him and Delmar—between priest and lay-man—that Zoë interested the latter so intensely just because she was Zoë and no other, whilst to Father Gabriel she was a mere sum-total of human attributes, a sweet sample of humanity more than anything else.

"When I first knew you," he continued, "I was in the happiest mood, because I felt

at one with myself, with the world, and my calling. Do not suppose for a moment that I had reached manhood ignorant of what evil meant. As I said before, the nature of sin was expounded to us. From our earliest years we were taught to know what the temptations of the devil meant. Much of my reading, from my fifteenth to my twenty-first year, was of a kind written, one might suppose, to corrupt rather than to purify the mind of youth. But this mental stage had to be gone through with a deep moral purpose. I was never permitted to forget for a moment that, wherever I might be, there was evil, and that the most innocent heart has ever need of purification by divine grace and priestly absolution. Sometimes my questioning spirit revolted against the teaching thus forced upon me. I said, 'Some men, myself among them, are not born with this inclination towards evil.

Why, therefore, am I to be perpetually reminded of what is the abnormal rather than the natural condition of man, and made to imagine a pitchy abyss in my own soul which does not exist?' These arguments I wrestled with for days, and it was not for a long time that I grew to believe myself wrong, and the system in which I was reared right. At last I was brought to believe that indeed my own whiteness and tranquillity of soul were imaginary, existing in idea only, and that in every son of Adam lurked the hidden devil with which we have to fight till the last. Oh ! had it but been otherwise !—had I but been left to my own natural and harmless thoughts, what misery would have been spared me !"

She was entirely re-absorbed in his story now, and gazed upon his white face with sisterly concern. How pale he was !—how worn ! When these sudden passions of grief

or remorse came over him, he looked like one whose life and strength were nearly spent.

“You are surely still very ill,” she said kindly. “If you are too weary, let us not talk any more now. My friends at L’Oisilière are kind, and if you permit me to tell them your story, I am sure you would be welcome at their house.”

“You must tell no one. I am not ill, only footsore and over-anxious. I began to despair of ever getting a word with you, and that helped to unnerve me. All will be well when I have unbosomed myself, and you consent to do what I ask. But I must go on. As I said, I was never in my life so buoyant and satisfied with life as when I first knew you. My mental horizon was widening, I began to realise new intellectual forces within me, which quickened my naturally lively ambition. I studied



French, German, and Italian, entertaining all kinds of schemes for turning my philosophic acquirements to account. I came to the conclusion that I was not insignificant, and readily accepted whatever encouragement, sympathy, and applause came in my way. And there was no kind of spiritual ferment now at work within. I ceased to think of the Catholic scheme argumentatively. I accepted it as a whole, never doubting that it was the one complete and flawless spiritual organization destined to overshadow and embrace every other. My religion, indeed, was a mixture of individual complacency, diversified with fits of mental hallucination and of indolent surrender to the spiritual authority of those I acknowledged, in my heart of hearts, to be often my inferiors as human beings. On calmly reviewing the past I give myself little credit either for devotion, humility, or a

spirit of self-sacrifice. I regarded things from the calm stand-point of one who has espoused a cause on grounds of pure expediency, and has made up his mind that such a course is taken ultimately, and for better or worse. There was no suspicion, no misery, no darkness in my mind now; but, on the other hand, there was oftentimes self-exultations, exaggerated contempt of mankind generally, and a terrible artificiality in religious exercise. This must necessarily be. All things, however, went smoothly, both as regards my inner and outer life, till one day, shortly after my acquaintance with you, a stranger came to the monastery. Zoë, you have seen the man who has been my evil genius. Do you remember that April day when you came into our little chapel? The scene is ever before me. Beside me stood a spirit of evil, wearing human guise, and opposite, looking straight

at me with her pure eyes, was a woman with the face of an angel. Surely you have not forgotten?"

"I remember it all," she answered.

He was again growing strangely excited, but those tranquil tones soothed him.

"And you noted his face? You marked the dark under-look of the eyes, the saturnine curl of the thin lips?"

"It seemed to me that the countenance was an evil one. I trembled inwardly. I felt afraid for you."

A little shiver of pain was discernible in his frame as he listened, answering,

"You might well tremble and pray for me. I felt sure that you mentioned my name in your prayers. Was I not right?"

Zoë crimsoned and hesitated. Alas! how could she tell him that it was not so, and

that only Delmar's name had been on her lips when she knelt down?

"I thought of you with kindly interest," she said, and that reply satisfied him. He continued, with occasional outbursts of vehemence,

"But I must go back to the time of his coming; you know, or perhaps I should tell you that it is not necessary in certain religious bodies for the members to have been trained for the vocation. Anyone may enter, and after passing a certain novitiate, to be determined by circumstances, be received into the fraternity. Thus it is with our own order; and perhaps half of our number are those whom disappointment in worldly affairs or weariness of fleshly indulgences have driven to seek repose within the monastery walls. Worse motives sometimes prevail, and such was the case with Father Ephraim. What a history is this to



put before you! and yet it must be for the proper understanding of my story. This man is a Provençal of high birth and great wealth, who began life as a diplomat in an oriental court. He was corrupted to the core by the society in which he found himself. He returned to Europe, after many years, a broken man—his health ruined by all kinds of excesses—quarrelled with his family, and, in order to spite them and deprive them of their heritage, took refuge among us, making over to the community the whole of his vast fortune. There is a story for you! And it is but one of many.”

Zoë shuddered. There was something unspeakably weird in such a confidence and such a situation. Night was gathering about them. The scene was hushed to eeriness. In front, like files of ghostly sentinels, stood the monolithic stones, black against the blueish-grey sky. A few large star-shaped

flowers lifted dazzling white blossoms out of the dusk. Far around slept the cold, unanswering world beneath fields of paly-gold stars. She did not know what fear was, but would fain have the interview ended now.

“Must I stay any longer?” she asked, drawing her cloak about her. “Will not to-morrow do for the rest?”

CHAPTER XI.

A PROMISE.

“**A** LITTLE while longer, for Heaven’s sake!” cried the young man. “I have not much more to say. Oh, do not undo the crowning beneficence of your life by a piece of unkindness now! Give me ten minutes more—ten minutes by the clock, if you will.”

Poor Zoë re-seated herself, entreating him to be as rapid as possible. Her friends would be growing anxious about her prolonged absence, she said, and the night air was getting chilly. Out of consideration

for her, he must bring his narrative to an end as quickly as possible. These words—"Out of consideration for me," accompanied by the suggestive act of wrapping her mantle about her, struck him as a piece of utterly new personal experience. He had hitherto been asked to obey laws and regulations as such, but never to exercise consideration for any human being.

"You are cold!" he cried, looking conscience-stricken.

"I ought to have brought a shawl with me," Zoë answered. "Pay no heed to me. Please go on."

She was possessed with the sweetest temper and the serenest mind in the world, but she had an acute perception of unreasonableness in any shape, and much as she pitied Gabriel, she could not help feeling dissatisfied. Why had he not written? Why had he not presented himself at her

friends' house? She was again being compromised for him, perhaps, and this time to no good end.

"I will not waste your time, indeed," he began, self-reproachfully. "I will be as expeditious as possible. Let us first go back a little—namely, to the period of Father Ephraim's arrival. From that day my peace was gone. Why the man singled me out for his dislike I know not, unless it was because of my extreme youth and, perhaps, self-complacency. He was, by nature, malicious, and his greatest gratification consisted in inflicting mental not physical torture. There are men of this evil kind. He saw in me a fitting instrument for his wicked designs, and at once set to work to carry them out. I was vain of my philosophic attainments. What so easy as to bring me into ridicule? I was delighted to get a little intercourse with the outer world,

notably with your cousin and yourself. What so easy as to throw suspicion upon my movements? Lastly, I was happy, I was unexperienced, I was guileless. He did not content himself with trying to discredit me in the eyes of my associates, but endeavoured to lower me in my own estimation, and to make me appear to myself the abject thing I was not."

He turned to her suddenly, and asked—

"You have not forgotten that night on the island?"

She did not speak, and he repeated the question, thinking he had been misunderstood. Even then Zoë had not a word to give him. She could only bow her head. Her heart seemed to stand still at the recollection.

"Accident had brought us all three there. No one else for a moment dreamed of regarding the meeting with you as de-

signed. But he discovered that I met you from time to time elsewhere, and insinuated that your fascinations, and not consideration for the poor frightened women, made me stay behind when the boat put off. Truth to say, I had not then recognized you."

He was silent for a moment, then added very slowly, and with a strange mixture of pride and humility,

"If, during those long hours of watching, I gazed upon you and felt spell-bound by your beauty ; if I grew to envy your countryman the privilege of adoring you ; if, by little and little, I learned to realize that life could never be the same after that experience, and that wherever I went I should carry the portrait of an angel written on my heart—I ask you, Zoë, was this a crime of the first magnitude?"

She could not see his face, but she knew

that he was weeping, and she also wept out of pity for herself and for him. The allusion to Delmar unnerved her utterly, whilst his pure utterances went to her heart. Her woman's instinct told how guileless he was, how unsuspecting of evil, and she felt growing within her the kind of protectiveness a sister feels for her younger brother.

"Do not weep," she said. "Pour out your heart to me as to a sister. I begin to understand."

"You are so wise, so strong, you will judge me aright, I know; but I have suffered so much that sometimes my poor brain is in a tumult, and I hardly feel sure of expressing my thoughts. Oh, Zoë, help me!"

"I will not abandon you, dear friend. Be calm," she said, and with more words of the like soothing kind, quieted his uneasy spirit. He continued—

“Was it not monstrous, then, to exaggerate a harmless admiration, I might say reverence? By dint of his reiterations, I at last grew to believe that it was with me as he said, and that I was a wretch unworthy the pity of God and man. I saw in my own person a desecrater of the holy Church, a defiler of my divine calling, and the excessive carefulness of my bringing up but seemed to put the picture in a more glaring light. I indeed for a time hated life and memory, the very sunshine and common world, so insidiously did the poison work within me. Try as I may, I cannot paint to you the horror with which I was inspired when I considered my falling away. You, an angel, seemed to me on a sudden turned into the likeness of a syren, an enchantress, a sorceress ! Over-fasting, access of penitential exercise and introspection only seemed to aggravate the evil they were intended to

destroy. My mind no longer fixed itself upon facts and tangibilities, but upon imaginings and chimeras. I believed that, like the saints of mediæval times, a mocking devil followed me wherever I went, suggesting perdition. There was no crime of which I was not ready to believe myself capable. I was in hell, the gates of darkness were closed upon me, and no one held a drop of water to my burning lips."

"My poor friend, my dear brother!" she said. "But the suffering is past and gone. Forget it. Be happy."

"You do not know the worst I had to undergo yet, Zoë. Have patience with me. I must unburden myself, and I feel as if my over-burdened brain would give way, and I should grope ever after in a hopeless maze of delusion and fantasy. Thus, then, the winter passed and spring came, bringing no peace, but only new misgivings and conflicts.

The bright, joyous unconcern of early years had vanished, and instead of settled determination and self-reliance, I floundered between alternate doubt and self-congratulation. One day I said to myself I was not fitted for my calling, the next I firmly believed that no other could satisfy my aspirations. Actual questioning of the Catholic doctrine had not yet assailed me. I acknowledged uncompromisingly that there was no salvation under any other. But I gradually, and by almost imperceptible degrees, came to regard the monastic system as an outsider, and having once advanced so far, retrogression was impossible. There are, of course, many monks who can do this, and yet, from purely personal motives, such as indolence, love of quiet, and weariness of the world, remain in the cloister till the last. I was too passionately sincere to temporise thus. Either I must fulfil my vows in the spirit, or break

them altogether. Such a possibility, however, had not occurred to me on that May day when you laid flowers on our altar, and left me filled with the strangest mixture of grief and joy, exaltation and despair. I was then occupied with feelings of a quite different nature. I was preparing for death."

He wheeled himself round, suddenly bringing his face on a level with her own, and said, in eager undertones:

"Zoë, I have something fearful to tell you, something you must never whisper to any living soul. You remember what you said to me that morning when we were cast adrift on the river?"

Zoë's blue eyes flashed, and when she answered, her voice had almost an arrogant assertion in its clear, musical treble.

"What I said then I firmly believe now. You were the victim of a plot instigated by

the ultra-clerical party, to throw reproach upon the Republicans !”

“You were right,” he said. “I turned from your suggestion in horror then, but I can no longer doubt now. All the time that I was preparing for martyrdom with the zeal and single-mindedness of the Church’s early defenders, my blood was coldly calculated upon as a political stake. I was to perish in the flower of my youth, not that the divine principles of the true faith might be vindicated, but that the enemies of the Vatican should be crushed ! It became clear as crystal. The city of Les Ponts is a stronghold of Liberalism, not unleavened with downright Radical principles, and a blow dealt there would be felt throughout every portion of Republican France. The monastic orders, moreover, were just then held in particular disrepute, owing to an abominable crime that had been committed by a

Carmelite in the next department. See, therefore, how every circumstance told into the hands of the schemers. The fuel lay ready, and a spark only was needed to kindle it into flame. One innocent priest or monk murdered by the mob—synonymous with the word Republic on clerical lips—would do more to damage the Liberal cause than any number of electoral victories. What was my life worth? What was any life worth in comparison with such political gain as this?"

There was unmistakable triumph in Zoe's unusually serene face, as she listened to this part of his narrative, only interrupting him with a word of comfort or soothing from time to time. How could she help rejoicing, she who had ever regarded modern monasticism as sheer mania? To her clear, practical intellect, Gabriel freed from his vows, and become a layman, was,

by comparison with his former condition, like the healed in Scripture, whom his friends found sitting "healed and in his right mind."

"You know what followed. A dire suspicion flashed across my mind at the last. When you rescued me from a violent death, I felt more thankful than a would-be martyr should. I was already beginning to doubt."

He stopped, gave a great sob, and added, in a voice that went to his listener's heart, so burdened was it with recollected suffering—

"The well-spring of life was poisoned within me; I could find comfort nowhere, and the worst of it was that I could unburden myself to nobody. My word was doubted; I came to be regarded as a visionary, perhaps a liar. There was no compassion, no justice, no fellow-feeling. After that escape due to your courageous interposition, everything wore an altered look,

and existence was made intolerable to me. I was by turns subjected to severest reproof and direst humiliations. Abominable meanings were put upon my plain, straightforward explanations. Your brave conduct was cast into my teeth ; every incident of our former acquaintance was turned to evil account. I stood dazed, overwhelmed at the accumulation of evidence piled up against me. I saw myself covered with guilt ; then I fell ill."

"My poor friend !" exclaimed Zoë, with deep pity.

"Stay—the worst is yet to come. Would you believe it? When I lay stricken down with fever, and the slightest vexation or even annoyance might prove fatal, the very man whose presence I found odious was appointed to attend to me. Alas! there is no such thing as human sympathy within conventual walls! Life is valueless, and suf-



fering, whether mental or bodily, a matter of indifference there. If Father Gabriel dies to-day, another will take his place to-morrow, and there is no reason for tears or regret. For weeks I was on a sick-bed, seeing no one but a lay-brother and Father Ephraim, having outwardly all that I wanted—at least, all that the rules of the monastery deem necessary—whilst within I was racked with doubts and suspicions. And all this time I seemed to hear Delmar's voice calling me from afar. You know how we two loved each other. I was strangely drawn to him in the earliest days of our acquaintance, and our friendship ripened to perfection as the time wore on. I poured out my thoughts to him as to an elder brother, a master, a wise counsellor, and he ever listened patiently and lovingly. Did he tell you what his parting words were to me ?”



“No, indeed,” Zoë answered, in pensive tones. It broke her heart to talk of Lionel.

“I will tell you, then. This is what he said—‘*The time is gone by when you can find the ideal of your riper years within the monastery walls. You have outlived that stage when self-deception upon self-deception is possible*’—and the words haunted me at times ever after. His clear spirit seemed to bend down, as if to catch me up into a serener atmosphere. I felt that the region of thought in which he dwelt was pure and calm, and longed to be away with him, removed for ever from doubt and darkness, at rest for ever. What a smile he had! I see it now. I saw it then, and it lured me away from my tormented, writhing life. Zoë, I woke one morning to believe that life a lie. Now you will understand why I am here. But to go back to my illness. If you have ever been ill, Zoë, you will

understand the ordeal I went through. Not that Father Ephraim showed me any outward unkindness. Such conduct was no part of his plan, nor was it, perhaps, in his character. If I thirsted, he gave me water with a willing hand ; if I wanted food, he fed me, when I was too feeble to feed myself. But all this time he was laying snares for me, under a guise of friendliness, worming confidences out of me when I was no longer master of my will, or even my words, extorting a confession of crimes I had committed in imagination only."

He forgot, indeed, that she was a woman, he only remembered that she was his friend.

"I was made not only to defame myself, but your own fair name. I knew not what I said. I was racked with torment. Zoë. pardon me—pity me."

What could she say ? Her fair head was bent low on her breast, her heart beat



quickly. She knew not whether to flee from his side or to weep with him once again. His tone of entreaty and remorse gained the victory. When he had urged upon her consideration one passionate plea after another, she could only reiterate quietly, almost coldly, the pathetic words,

“We are both innocent and unhappy. God help us!”

For a moment they silently prayed together. Twilight had meantime melted into night. High overhead sailed the crescent moon above a fringe of stars. Around them, sombre and grandiose against the metallic sky, rose the stately menhirs. At their feet glinted large silvery-blossomed flowers. All was sweet, solemn, grandiose.

“The rest of my story must now wait till to-morrow,” Gabriel said, seeing Zoë rise and gather her cloak about her. “But, before we part to-night, promise that you will not

abandon me to my wretched fate. We are brother and sister in misfortune. Let us comfort and help each other!"

"What would you have me do?" she asked, in the same calm, resigned voice. Her thoughts were wandering. She felt in a dream.

"Help me to battle with the world," he said, eagerly. "I am homeless, helpless, and an outcast. Teach me how to live."

He went on pleading, indeed, as if for dear life, and dwelling upon his own feebleness and incapacity, her strength and practical wisdom, representing his condition so utterly forlorn without her that at last she yielded.

"I will not forsake you," she said. "What help or comfort I can give shall be yours. Take courage."

Then after a few more words they parted, he betaking himself wearily to his humble lodging in a neighbouring village. Zoë,

with light step and fearless heart, making
her way through the solitary fields alone.
Which of the two pondered most deeply as
they went it would be hard to say.

CHAPTER XII.

CLOISTER AND HEARTH.

BEFORE parting, however, she had obtained permission to take Aunt Félicité and Huberte into her confidence, and consult with them on his behalf. It may be imagined how her two listeners relished the story; how they laughed, wept, and embraced each other; how they questioned their pale, passive heroine, wanting to know everything in a breath! The effect of the narrative upon Huberte was wholly unexpected. Instead of being overwhelmed with arguments and objections, Zoë found herself cheered, praised, and encouraged. Huberte's intel-

lectual as well as moral horizon had been wonderfully enlarged of late. Where before she was fain to see nothing but feminine little obstacles, and to regard every step in a new direction as dangerous, she now seemed equal to any emergency, and to delight in difficulties and perplexities. The notion of Zoë setting forth with her protégé to seek their fortunes as best they could, would have horrified her a few weeks ago, but now only presented glowing images to her mind. The world, indeed, had become one vast, continuous romance to Huberte. She saw the most common-place realities through a veil of poetry. Every man, woman, and child in the universe, wore an ideal look to her enthusiastic eyes, and she felt herself a larger, nobler human being. The three women sat up till long past midnight without coming to any decision. What could best be done to help Gabriel in his

dire necessity? Did he understand any manual art? Or in what way did he propose to earn his living? To all which questions Zoë answered with a shake of the head. Whilst they talked of his future she could only think of the part she had pledged herself to play in it, and the new life drifting her from the old. Could she indeed do what he required of her? Could she draw back from her half promise?

A great French writer has said—"No one I know of has ever explained that phenomenon of personal fascination which is akin to Love, but not Love itself."

Thus it was with Zoë's liking for her friend, and thus had it been with the liking of the two men, Delmar and Gabriel, for each other. Delmar had felt drawn towards the young monk in the first instance as a brother, whilst the elder man exer-

cised a tremendously strong influence over his friend. But for Lionel's words, indeed, Gabriel might have remained a Capucin to the end of his days. His voice, above all others, as he expressed it, had seemed to summon him from afar.

We know not how these things are. They remain mysteries till the last. Delmar would never feel the same warm interest in another friend of his own sex. Zoë, in spite of her self-sacrificing disposition, perhaps, yielded chiefly to Gabriel's request because his nature was in harmony with her own. The candour, enthusiasm, and transparency of the young man's character were all the more acceptable, as her own simplicity and excessive straightforwardness made her feel almost daily out of tune with this easy-going, gracious, semi-artificial French life. The two, indeed,

were outwardly not unlike each other, and the fact of her added years gave her ease in his company.

“Courage, my child,” said Aunt Félicité, as she gave Zoë her good night kiss with more than usual tenderness. “It breaks our hearts—if you must go—to lose you. But there is a finger of Providence in these things, and the mutual sympathies of a romantic friendship may help you to forget the deeper feeling of Love.”

Any other Frenchwoman would have made the same kind of speech, though none but Aunt Félicité could have dwelt so unctuously on the last word, though it comforted Zoë little. In spite of the unusualness of her present position, she could but bend her mind to the practical part of it above all. She saw clearly enough that her path must be a thorny one, and the very ingenuousness and want of experience on her com-

panion's side would inevitably increase her difficulties. Next morning, however, Aunt Félicité came into her room with a beaming face and a temporary plan which might at least smooth matters for the present. Sitting beside the open window, they sipped their coffee over their confidences.

"I could not resist telling my husband," began the elder lady, with a pretty little blush mantling her fair old cheeks. Aunt Félicité had been a beauty in her day, and yet possessed the bloom and softness of the rose-bud time. "I knew it was wrong, but you extracted no promise from me, and the step was taken in your own interest. Say that you forgive me, my sweet girl."

"Nay, what can it matter now whether I forgive or not?" Zoë said, kissing the old woman, though extremely mortified. "I must never entrust other people's secrets to



you again, that is all," she added, with an arch smile of reproof.

"But, my dear child, you do not know what a friend I have secured for you in my good Papa Pitache. My poor good man suffers from a mania, in other words, his detestation of priests, and the clerical system would ruin him, were it not for me. He is always befriending the victims of opinion, and is dying to help your friend. In fact," she added, "I have ordered the carriage to be at the door immediately after breakfast. We will drive straight to Gabriel's domicile, and bring him back with us. My husband insists upon having him as our guest till something is settled."

Zoë acquiesced gratefully then. In a few weeks' time he would look quite another creature, she said.

"I knew that one part of our scheme would please you, but let me tell you

frankly two conditions are essential to your well-being. We must secure him employment, and yourself—since you cannot leave him—protection. It is all very well to talk of being adopted brother and sister, my dear, and I can quite conceive that in England you would find such relations unembarrassing, but here it is different. You must make people believe that it is so indeed, and allow yourselves to be called by the same name.”

Zoë arched her eyebrows, and gave a little frown. What remarks idle people might make about her she regarded as a matter of utter indifference.

“The thing is easy enough. You look upon him as a brother, and he regards you as a sister. Call him by your name.”

Zoë made no answer.

Then they went downstairs, and got through the morning's work briskly, Aunt

Félicité pausing now and then to sigh over her manuscripts. Zoë had been arduously working through the enormous pile during the last few months, but the task seemed as far as ever from being accomplished, and what would become of it now?

“I shall never, never have so apt a secretary again,” Aunt Félicité said, as they put away papers and note-books for the day. “Who will henceforth act the part alike of inspiration and critic? I feel, indeed, as if I had written my last page. Yet, if indeed it must be so, I rejoice, because I see in this strange concatenation of events the bringing together of two kindred souls. You two were without doubt destined by Providence to spend your lives side by side, and all other poetry and romance has been like a will-o’-the-wisp leading you hopelessly astray.”

Gabriel consented to Aunt Félicité’s affectionate proposals—who, indeed, could have

refused them ?—but no sooner was he fairly installed at L'Oisilière than he fell into a state of such extreme mental and physical depression that the whole household had to occupy itself on his behalf. He was not only ill, but heart-sick and overstrained, requiring the tenderest sympathy, abundance of that motherly ministration Aunt Félicité was so well able to give. She had lost an only child—a son, moreover—in early youth, and it gave her exquisite satisfaction to be thus put in mind of him. He reminded her of her boy in a thousand ways ; he had the same winning smile, the same candid blue eyes, the same clear brow, or, at least, so she fancied, and she was never happy except when ministering to his wants.

But only Zoë had power to interest him, and even Aunt Félicité's constant services were accepted with mechanical thanks. He was indeed ill, and wanted the stimulus to

health these tender friends could not give. There are fevers which hang about us for months, nay, years, stealing the sleep from our pillows, the sunshine from our days, the sweetness and savour from common things. It was not a fever of remorse, nor a fever of ambition that consumed him as a flame, but a stronger passion still, namely, the hatred born of injustice.

He could not forget or forgive. He dwelt with almost morbid persistency on the last stages of his own history, asking himself if, indeed, there was no retribution for those who had used him so cruelly. For a time, at least, his sympathies and interests were drawn from the outer world, and fixed upon himself—perhaps the unhappiest condition into which a human being can fall.

“See,” he said to Zoë, in one of their garden confabulations, “from what height I have fallen! I was something—I am

now nothing, and the glory I believed in has vanished, leaving no trace behind. I must tell you frankly that what most of all drove me from the Church, when I examined it, no longer as an enthusiast, but as an inquirer, was the want of belief I found there. Hitherto I had been living in a world of unrealities, but now I was a free, clear-visioned, responsible human being, and all my judgments were modified accordingly. I realised at last that, during those happy years of boyhood and youth, I had but been a victim of glamour and illusion. That doubt, much less total, scoffing unbelief existed in the very bosom of the Church I so revered had never entered my mind. On a sudden I saw myself beset with it, hemmed round with it on all sides. It became plain to me that Catholicism has become essentially a political lever, instead of a spiritual influence, and, indeed, as such

had long ceased to be regarded even by its staunchest supporters. Its heavenly uses of the olden time were utterly perverted, and in their stead I saw cold calculation, and a spirit of intrigue, which set worldly aggrandizement above all higher good, and the subjection of the human intellect before every other end, moral, social, and spiritual. I recoiled in horror from the revelation. I was induced to hate those who had so crushed, blinded, hoodwinked me. By what right does the Church so deal with her children?—why does she affect to be that which she once was, but never can be again?—why does she lay upon herself the curses of ages to come, for thus arresting the cause of progress—in other words, the happiness and well-being of mankind? There is surely no guilt in the world's history like her guilt, no degradation like her degradation! First of all, she imposes her

sway by a system of refined and diabolical cruelty unexampled in the annals of the most barbarous races, namely, by the Inquisition; and now, seeing that a beneficent legislation—based upon no religion at all, mind you—checks such crimes, she would fain gain her ends by gentler, but no less dishonourable means, by degrading the intellect and pandering to the basest passions of human nature. The day of reckoning must inevitably overtake her. Who will shed a tear over that dire and final fall?"

Again and again he would break forth in this strain, Zoë alternately soothing, cheering, and encouraging. His mental attitude was only natural. He exaggerated his wrongs, he magnified his sorrows, in fact, his brain for a time had given way under the abnormal stress put upon it. His brooding nearly approached a mania.

Then followed a short spell of severe ill-

ness, during which he was tenderly cared for by his kind friends, and, meantime, many places were thought of for his future. Zoë, looking on his pale face and wistful eyes, felt, indeed, that she could not leave him now. She must try to help and comfort him at least a little longer.

Again and again he put out a feeble hand, saying, "You will not leave me, my sister, my friend," and she could only bow her head sadly in token of assent.

One day Aunt Félicité took her aside with a cheerful face.

"I see, dearest girl," she said, "that you are much troubled about the future, and my husband and I have heard of employment as soon as Gabriel is quite well again—at least, in body, for I fear his mind will not easily recover its balance. Everyone will then take it for granted that you are in reality what you appear to be."

“How little it all matters ! I do not mind the rest, so long as we can earn our bread and help each other.”

“Intractable thing ! When will you become reasonable ? Well, now for the second part of my programme. As soon as Gabriel’s health is perfectly restored, he shall begin to work, and we think we know of a beginning for him—a humble one it is, true, nothing could be more so, but he must not expect much at first. Does he understand book-keeping ? Would he enter a mercantile house as clerk at a salary of two thousand francs yearly ?”

“I am sure he would, and I can teach him book-keeping. I passed first in that division when taking my teacher’s diploma,” Zoë cried, suddenly. “You darling Aunt Félicité, I must kiss you a thousand times !”

“And when that is done, we had better

go downstairs and get through our morning's work as quickly as may be. But I must tell you one thing which will pain you. That post I speak of, and which my husband feels quite sure of being able to secure for your friend, will take you far, far away from your old friends. It is in a timber merchant's office at St. Yves, some hundred miles from here, in the extremest corner of the west !”

“We must go thankfully wherever we can earn our bread. I shall surely find pupils there,” Zoë said, full of gratitude.

That very day, seeing that Gabriel, now convalescent, was more collected than usual, she disclosed the scheme, saying to him kindly, yet not without a touch of reproach,

“Dear friend, you are doing yourself harm, and not good, by staying here any longer. This is not life indeed, but a mere

dragging on of idle existence for both of us ; we must no longer thanklessly enjoy."

"You are right," he said ; "ease and pleasantness cannot make me whole again. Work may prove a better medicine. I am ready to begin when you say the word, for you will not, you cannot forsake me," he added, eagerly.

"I will go with you," she answered, looking away from him, serious, resigned, unjoyful.

"Let everything else be as you wish," he cried. "Having said that, you have said all. Heaven bless you, my sister—my guardian angel !"

"Then we will start to-morrow."

So the brave girl set to work. Her preparations for departure were soon made. Nothing could damp Huberte's spirits, but the rest of the little household were very sad, and Zoë felt the parting keenly. After

all, this flowery, sunny spot on the banks of the Loire had nestled into her heart. There was nothing here to recall the coy graces and coqueties of the country round the City of Bridges but an exuberance of vegetation and a lavishness of verdure almost unrivalled throughout France. She wandered about the gardens, as bright now with their pyramidal splendours—for what may be called carpet gardening was fortunately here an unknown thing—as in June, taking in one glorious picture after another. There were little blue firmaments of *Hortensias* here and there—bits of skyey turquoise flashing amid the green—zinnias thick as roses, forming a perfect scale of pinks and carmine, Four o'clock, creamy coloured and rose, starring its satiny green leaves, and asters in glowing constellations everywhere. Autumn here was not a visitation of grey

mists and saturated woods, as in our native England, but a right royal successor to summer, with sunshine of ripest gold, air transparent as in April, and the most gorgeous flower pageants of the year.

“We shall soon meet again,” said Monsieur Pitache, embracing his guests heartily, as the carriage drove up to convey them to the river-side. “We will fête you at the New Year, and drink confusion to our enemies. Adieu, my children.”

Zoë kissed the old man on each cheek, and thanked him for his goodness with tears of gratitude. The women-servants were next embraced by turn, and then she took her place in the old hooded carriage between Huberte and Aunt Félicité.

The three said little, for their hearts were full, but Zoë was quite self-possessed now, and when they alighted at the quay, watched

the steamer approach with a brightening look.

“I *must* be glad to go,” she said to her companions, as they sat apart from the pondering Gabriel. “I have hitherto been of no real use to any living soul. Now I shall feel that every day—nay, every hour, has its responsibility.”

“Ah !” Huberte cried. “There you precisely echo my feelings. One hole of Monsieur Papotte’s stockings that I have darned will suffice to sanctify a day !”

All smiled at this, as they chatted cheerfully till the steamer came up. Then they made their adieux, as the way of women is, with fond whisperings, tears, and kisses. In a few minutes more Zoë was standing alone by Gabriel’s side waving her handkerchief to the fast diminishing forms on the river bank.

The water glowed silvery bright, the sun

shone in a cloudless sky, the landscape on either side smiled in green and gold. There were children gambolling about, and, mingled with the sound of careless talk and laughter, a band of music played cheerful airs.

Am I in a dream? Zoë asked herself, as she gazed around and glanced at her companion's face. She was beginning to realise the nature of her promise. The past was nothing, and she had linked her future for joy or for sorrow with that of the pensive figure by her side.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE WORLD'S END.

THE pair travelled chiefly by river, and thus spent a week over the journey ordinarily accomplished by tourists in two days. Wonderful indeed were the transformations of those seven days! First of all they were gliding between the broad bright valley of the Loire, where the vast stretches of rich champaign were emerald still, and the October sunshine lent a mellow, heart-reviving warmth; next, quitting the region of the vine, they passed into a wilder, more sober-tinted world, with alternating forest, hill, river,

and plain, woods already embrowned here, purple moorland there, lovely little idyllic scenes to-day, beetling grey rocks and a turbulent blue sea to-morrow! At the last came a final bit of railway, a long coach ride between sombre fields, solitary brushwood, and sleeping villages; finally, a stupendous vision of clustering spires that seemed to touch the stars, rising high above the ambered wastes and far off silvery sea.

The cumbersome old vehicle plodded on for miles, having that picture before it, till the orange threads in sea and sky gradually faded, and twilight, blent pearl and azure, slowly enveloped the scene. Nothing now remained distinct in outline but those far off airy pinnacles standing out darkly against the transparent heavens, and, as it seemed, almost transparent earth, so translucent the light, so tender and delicate the shadows, here!

All on a sudden, a few lights twinkled near, the horses unbidden quickened their pace, and the travellers drove with triumphant dash and clatter into a narrow, ill-paved street lighted with lanterns swung across on ropes. Zoë, seated beside the coachman, looking up, saw that the spires she had been gazing at for the last two hours were close at hand.

They had arrived at the solemn little city of St. Yves en Finistère, which is unlike anything else in the world, real or imagined. Having one foot in the western sea, the other on the weird Dolmen land of the ancient Armorica, St. Yves is exactly now what it was in the middle ages—a city of churches only, rather indeed one vast cloister, where the business of life is chiefly a preparation for immortality. A tranquillizing, unearthly, heavenly beautiful place, with tints and harmonies no more transfer-

able on paper or canvas than the exquisite consonances of its rippling tides.

Zoë was too drowsy to think of spires or stars that night, but was astir next morning early, and in an hour's time had realized very nearly what her forthcoming life would be, as far as outer circumstances went. They were enviably housed in many respects. Her room, with its brick floor and whitewashed walls, boasted of regal luxuries in regard to view, looking across a long straggling garden still full of flowers, crests of sea-pine, beyond these the pale blue sea, with low-lying purple islands breaking the grandiose horizon.

A lovely landscape is a Bible to some minds, and Zoë's outlook filled her with thanksgiving and contentment. She knew she should ever find there the text that she needed. Adjoining this was another little room, humbler than the first, looking upon

the quiet street and quaint mediæval houses in grey and white stucco, the stately peasant folks moving about in their sober costumes admirably harmonizing with the background. Here their meals were to be taken together ; whilst below, on the ground floor, were the kitchen and sleeping room of their host and hostess, adjoining a dingy little court, the workshop of the former ; and above these, reached by a little ladder, a tolerably comfortable attic turned into a dormitory for Gabriel.

“Mademoiselle is not dissatisfied with my accommodation ?” asked the good woman of the house, when Zoë had completed her survey. “Alas ! I admit the rats are troublesome, but Le Bon Dieu always sends something in the shape of a torment to lead us to Heaven, and rats, at any rate, are better than ghosts. Some houses here I know of swarm with *them*.”

“We shall be very happy, I am sure,” Zoë said. “You give us too much for our money! But now tell me, where can I find any little girls to teach? I cannot be idle. Gabriel—my brother—” poor Zoë got out the words slowly, and with a very near approach to blushing—“will not earn enough for us both to live upon!”

“Ah! mademoiselle, little girls indeed! There are no girls little or big here. They all go to the convents to be educated. But I will consult with my husband, and meantime let your brother speak to his employer. We cannot manufacture little girls, but between us all may hit upon something.”

The first day of their new life began brightly. Finding her companion unhandy at upholstery, Zoë sent him out for a walk, and, with her landlord, set to work in the sitting-room. It was wonderful what they achieved in a few hours. A cheerful curtain

put up here, a few bookshelves there, pictures on the walls, flowers in the windows, bits of warm-coloured carpet on the floor, feminine knick-knacks on the chimney-piece—all these little nothings worked marvels, and when, after a considerable search through the place, a piano was procured on hire, nothing else seemed wanting either for comfort or grace. The finishing touch was put to the little parlour by Zoë's work-basket—always the prettiest and most pathetic piece of furniture in any room—and when Gabriel returned, no wonder that he gazed about him amazed. He realized for the first time in his existence the poetry of home!

“Yes,” Zoë said, with that bewitching little nod of self-approbation also new to him—he was seeing, indeed, a new Zoë every day—“the room will not now make everyone look ugly, and when we have a bright fire blazing on the hearth, and our little

lamp lighted on the table, and tea spread after English fashion, we shall fancy ourselves in England."

He glanced at the thousand trifles she had displayed so tastefully—the rows of books upon the shelves, the pictures on the walls—then at herself.

"How rich you are, and I have nothing! But in time things will be evener with us, Zoë. I will work hard for you, as a brother should, and you shall not work at all."

"That would be cruel kindness. But now take me down to the shore. I must see the sea to-day, to-morrow, and every day of my life whilst I am here. How happy we are to live so near it!"

She put on hat and cloak, and they set out in the fading afternoon light. The air was soft and balmy as in June. Far away flamed the western sky over the glittering sea. Farther still, the purple islands show-

ed their poetic outline against a band of primrose cloud. Nearer were clusters of sea-pines, black as pitch in the limpid atmosphere, and gaunt stone Calvaries that lent a weird pathos to the scene.

They walked on silently, and in half an hour had reached the strand. There were a few fishermen's huts built about the rocks, a gendarmerie, and that was all. Before them lay the tremendous expanse of sea, shore, and sky, the glorious sunset tints gradually, almost indefinitely, melting into azure and grey; behind twinkled the lights of the silent little city, crested by its matchless spires. The whole scene was one of indescribable loveliness and solemnity.

"What a wonderful place!" she cried, dropping upon a slab of rock, and gazing around rapturously. She had been in almost extravagant spirits throughout the day. The newly acquired sense of freedom and

activity delighted her, and, after the monotonous ease of the last few months, even the exertions and hardships of her new existence had charms. But what most of all gave contentment was the perfect sincerity in which she might now indulge. For the last few months she had been under the necessity of occasionally feigning cheerfulness and satisfaction with her mode of existence, above all, interest in Aunt Félicité's manuscripts. Now she could be perfectly open. As far as her relations with Gabriel went, she had nothing to conceal, and the candour of his behaviour to her, carried perhaps even to excess, nevertheless made matters easy.

"Yes, the place could not suit us better," he said, brightening under her influence. "We both love nature. We shall want nothing else."

"Except little girls to teach. I am re-

solved to make a round of business calls in the place to-morrow, and it will be hard if I do not find one. When the number is raised to six, we will indulge ourselves in a boat, and visit yonder island."

It was impossible not to catch something of her animated mood, and the young man, who had hardly smiled for months past, laughed almost gaily.

"You seem to forget that we are to have two thousand francs a year! That is a large sum. I will take you to the island to-morrow."

Zoë echoed his laugh merrily, and immediately after gave a reproving little shake of the head.

"Pardon me, I know how far two thousand francs will go in housekeeping, and you do not. Besides, your book-keeping is far from perfect at present; I do not feel so very sure that you are fit for your work as yet."

"Perhaps my employers will let you help me?"

"That is a comforting idea. I will present myself at the timber-yard with you tomorrow, and make the request. Or, who knows? They might find me some humble occupation in the office also, which would make everything smooth."

Thus they chatted on after brotherly, sisterly fashion, and when she had rested, wandered for another mile or more along the shining brown sands. There were fisherwomen returning with their nets, sailors hauling in a fishing-smack, and children at play under the close little harbour. That was all. Far around, the waste of waters blended silently with the purpling heavens. At their feet, making silvery little constellation here and there, gleamed multitudes of glistening pearly shells.

At last it was time to return home, and

still talking quietly and easily of their future life, they went back by the way they had come, having ever before them the airy cathedral spires and the famous Creizker Tower, with its unique openings making it appear as if studded with stars. Nothing so unimagined and so poetic had ever met their eyes, and they gazed with mingled awe and rapture. Something then seemed to take possession of Gabriel's heart instead of that Faith he had prized so dearly, and lamented with such bitterness. He was secretly praying all the time, and she knew it.

The mood was transient, however, and when, half an hour later, she summoned him from his garret, nothing could be more cheery or home-like than the scene before him.

The wood fire crackled on the hearth, the

lamp shed a pleasant light, the tea-table was spread after English fashion, and, to add to the domesticity of the picture, a kitten frisked on the hearth.

Zoë, standing by the fire, tea-pot in hand, had never been more winning to look at. There was no thought in her mind of her appearance or of his opinion about it. Self-consciousness she had felt in Delmar's presence only, and now she simply wanted to make her companion happy as a matter of duty, and to be happy herself for his sake. The long walk by the sea, the beauty of the place, the novelty of their condition, helped to make her glad and hopeful. In quite new circumstances it is possible to forget, and she felt that forgetfulness alone was needed to give her peace.

The meal lasted a long time, for they were both tired and hungry, and when it

was over, she sat down to the piano. She played now simply to amuse her companion, and to divert his thoughts into a new channel. Music, as a personal matter, was newer to him than to a deaf person suddenly healed of his deafness. He had hitherto indeed put music in the same category with church ceremonial and decoration, vestments, candlesticks, processions, and so on, just so much coldly calculated emotion for the people, and nothing more. He could, with difficulty, understand Zoë's first rapture over her newly-acquired possession, still less her enthusiasm about the first piece of music she took up. It was a sonata of Beethoven's, and, after playing the composition, she went through it again, a phrase at a time, pointing out the pathos of an *Andante* here, the joyousness of an *Allegro* there, the significance and poetry of musical terms such as the *Da Capo*, the wondrous transformation

effected by *Minor* and *Major*, the multitudinous wanderings of the melody from the key-note and back to it again.

All this was a wholly novel and unexpected experience to him. He listened as he had never listened to music before—namely, with his intelligence, an intelligence sharpening amazingly under her quiet admonition. Then she sang to him; not the monotonous canticles of the Church, but blithe or touching little English songs that made his eyes moisten, he knew not why.

“You must learn to sing with me,” she said at last, when it was time to put out the lights and go to rest. “And I will teach you to play; that is to say, if you are not dull about it!”

“How wonderfully you play and sing!” he said, with great admiration. “I did not know that you were so accomplished.”

She put away her music-book, hardly hearing his praises.

“I hope you will grow as fond of music as I am,” she said. “It will be a great consolation to you, I know. I shall flee to the shore whilst you practise your scales and exercises !”

Then she playfully bid him do this behest and that, put a chair straight here, replace books on the shelf there. Finally the lamp was extinguished, and, candlestick in hand, they bade each other a quiet good night.

“Zoë,” he said, lingering on the windy threshold, and looking into her face with emotion, “this is the first day of our new life together. May God bless it for thee, dear sister, and for me !”

“Amen,” she responded, for a moment bowing her fair head over their clasped hands.

That was all her prayer, but the young

man, alone in his solitary attic, prayed long and earnestly ; he prayed, indeed, after a wholly different fashion from that of former days, but, as it seemed to him, for the first time, not using the formulas with which he had been acquainted since childhood, instead the unsought impassioned words that came to his lips.

Nor was it in his own interests that he prayed. Life in the world had already begun to teach him a great lesson ; he was unlearning the selfishness of the cloister, and living, not for himself, but for others. He did not ask for heavenly grace or spiritual enlightenment, power to prevail over men, or superabundant zeal in religious exercise. It was Zoë, and Zoë only, he was thinking of just then. Oh ! might she be happy, might she be rewarded for her devotion, might their life, indeed, be blessed together ! That was all, yet he thereby realised the

meaning of prayer in its divinest sense. He was drawn nearer humanity, and, therefore nearer to God.

CHAPTER XIV.

LA FÊTE DES MORTS.

IN a week or two more the pair had serenely settled down to their new life. Everything smiled upon them. It was as if they had embarked upon a tranquil sea, with favouring breezes and unclouded sky.

First came Zoë's success in the matter of finding employment. When she suggested to the head of the timber firm that she was experienced in book-keeping, having passed an examination in that subject before taking her teacher's diploma in France, a sudden ray of satisfaction illumined the somewhat withered physiognomy of her interlocutor.



This young Englishwoman was too lovely for a bureau, it was true, but being English, and consequently puritanically free from giddiness and a proclivity for affairs of sentiment, having, moreover, no other fellow-worker but her brother—she might surely make a very nice junior clerk.

It happened that two were wanted just then, one for book-keeping, and one for foreign correspondence. Zoë understood German and Italian very well; she would thankfully accept, moreover, a thousand francs yearly, which could not be offered to the father of a family. Yes, what the brother could not do, the sister could, and he felt sure, judging from their appearance, that they would not be unpunctual, dilatory, or likely to get into any kind of scrape out of office hours. The timber-merchant, moreover, was enchanted to oblige his friends, Monsieur and Madame Pitache,

who were sure to recommend him honest folks only. So the two were engaged forthwith, and though their occupation was monotonous in the extreme, and the hours of labour long, both felt as if they had suddenly come into a fortune. Three thousand francs between them, which might, in the course of a year or two, be increased, seemed positive wealth, and Zoë wrote to her kind protectors with a heart full of gratitude. "We are perfectly satisfied with our lot," she said, "and will do all in our power to deserve it."

A more uniform existence cannot be imagined, but routine is ever a moralizing force, and the two soon found that doing what they must, grew very like doing what they would. By eight o'clock they were at their desks, and hard at work till twelve, when they returned home to dinner, Gabriel preferring the primitive monastic hour to which

he had been accustomed all his life. At two they resumed their posts till six, except on Thursdays, when the office closed at noon; tea, music, reading finished up the day. On Sundays and half-holidays, they spent the greater part of the time out of doors, and such recreation atoned for the monotony of their working hours.

Zoë was by temperament and inclination a child of the open air, but she had to teach Gabriel how to enjoy Nature. What, indeed, had she not to teach him? She found him blind, deaf, insensible alike to natural beauty, art, and all that is best and highest in knowledge. He was extremely learned; he had read enormously and with passionate avidity; yet, by comparison with his sweet companion, he was untutored as a clown, and ignorant as a child. No one was ever less learned in the ordinary acceptation of the word than Zoë, only she had moved in

the world with her eyes open ; she was utterly free from prejudice of any kind, and, added to a lively intelligence, she had an unusual amount of feminine insight and tact. Thus it happened that she daily and hourly gained influence over him, as much by force of attainments as character. Her Yea and her Nay, indeed, became the rule of his life, and took the place of that spiritual subjection he had just escaped.

Could her beauty count for nothing ?

“What a beautiful young couple !” the town folk would say, as the pair passed them on their walks. “What sweet blue eyes the girl has ! What pretty brown curls ! What noble brows, and what a likeness between the two !”

There was, in truth, one of those curious resemblances which we occasionally find without reason. Zoë had playfully commented on this fact, saying, as the two stood by

the fire one day, having their reflections opposite in the looking-glass,

“Is it not fortunate that we should both have the same kind of face? Who could help mistaking us for brother and sister?”

“Strange,” he answered, looking first at her reflected face in the mirror, then at his own. “Yes, it is so; but I had never seen it before.”

Then he turned away with almost a look of trouble, and that topic was never again alluded to between them. The neighbours continued to admire the fair hair, blue eyes, and tall, slender stature of the pair, but if anyone spoke of Zoë's beauty to Gabriel, he turned the subject into another channel.

We are only seen at our best when resting, and the first holiday they spent together brought them infinitely nearer each other than the past few weeks of work.

It was the second of November, and a general day of solemn rejoicing. In the Catholic Calendar this is called the *Fête des Morts* ; but after praying for the dead, and holding communion with the spirits of departed friends, people make merry all the same. No offices or shops are open on that day, at least, in such devout little cities as St. Yves ; from early morning, the bells chime to mass, and crowds of peasant-folks in holiday attire, sombre black and purple, wend their way from the country. The weather was soft and balmy still, with a grey sky gradually unveiling the blue, and a delicious mellowness in the still air. Zoë felt in the highest spirits. A whole day out of doors seemed like escape from prison after the last few weeks' close office work. They were going to spend a great part of it on the sea ; they were tolerably sure of fine

weather, and if not, the warm, gentle rain of this caressing climate came rather as refreshment than otherwise.

By eight o'clock they were trudging merrily towards the little port, two miles from the city. The road, with its high hedges and ferny banks, had an English look about it; but the climate was of other and more enticing kin. As they walked on, the sedate grey morning blossomed into blue and gold, like some unfolding flower. Tender little white clouds sailed overhead, and then settled just above the horizon. Soft, sweet air, with a taste of the sea in it, met them from the west. Birds were chattering on the boughs. All was quiet tender grace and joy.

An hour's quick walking brought them to the quaint, little old-world port which marks the most western point of France. If St. Yves is mediæval, monastic, the very

acmé of religious calm and solemnity, Roscoff is just as unique in a different way. There is occasional life and stir about its tiny port, and its inhabitants wear a subdued look of business, yet it seems when the traveller arrives here as if indeed he had reached the limit of the world, and beyond lay no habitable zone. The place is in a perpetual drowse. Wheels move seldom, and with somnambulistic slowness over its quiet streets. House doors are opened and shut with a dreamy deliberation. People perform the daily avocations of life with the serene nonchalance of the fabled Lotus-eaters.

Only a storm can transform this land of matchless drowsy-head into a Titanic world of fury and terror, and on certain squally days of the year are to be seen here such freaks of wind and wave as rarely greet our eyes elsewhere. Then the whole force of the

atmosphere and sea seems to spend itself upon this lonely little spot.

“What a wonderful corner of the world !” cried Zoë, who was more animated than Gabriel had ever seen her. “Gabriel, look at the sea yonder, not the intensest part, among the purple and orange, but far away where all is pale green and silvery. We must sail so far. Then we shall really feel that we are out at sea.”

“As you please. But I cannot understand you to-day. You are in such wild spirits.”

“I ought to be in wild spirits,” Zoë said. “I love freedom and out-of-door life better than anything, and to-day these are mine for the first time for months. You do not know how miserable I was at Aunt Félicité’s. I think if I had stayed with her much longer I should have grown quite imbecile. Now my life is harder, but it is at least rational,

and I am rewarded for my toil. Do not you feel this too?"

"I begin to realize it; but how different is my case from yours! I do not think that anyone—even you, with your woman's tact and insight—can realize the difficulty of living for the first time without spiritual guidance—in other words, without a creed."

"It troubles you?" she asked, with tender concern.

"It perplexes me. I ask myself, is it possible that a world so beautiful, and a race of beings so gifted, can be created without a divine purpose; and if so, it naturally follows, without need of divine interference. You, my sister, I confess, are a perpetual enigma to me. You believe, I suppose, in God, and live happily and thankfully. There, as far as I can see, your religion begins and ends. Yet it seems enough for you."

"We ought not to spoil our holiday with

these grave thoughts," Zoë answered. "But you shall have an explanation for once and for all. I fear I appear to you as little better than an infidel. Indeed it is not so. I do not believe we can find faiths when we seek them, but whatever religiousness God puts into my heart, I cherish gratefully. I hope for more as time goes on; and, meanwhile, is not a thankful life worship after humble fashion?"

"The humility you speak of used to look very like arrogance to me in the old days," he replied, smiling. "Even now I am not sure that I do not occasionally blame you. I cannot help seeking night and day, asking a thousand questions of God, of Life, of Nature. Shall I ever be answered? Sometimes despondency whispers No."

"To-day, at least, is not a riddle," she said, encouragingly. "It is now ten o'clock in the morning, and our holiday has hardly begun.

Instead of four office walls, we have the sky above us, and the sea and yonder glorious islands within reach. Not to be overjoyed under such circumstances must be the height of folly, if nothing worse. Think how hard we shall have to work to-morrow !”

That little genuine outburst of practical common-sense had the desired effect. He put away anxious thoughts, and entered into her careless mood. On a sudden both found themselves hungry, and turning into a wayside inn, sat down to the rustic table-d'hôte with excellent appetites.

The quality of our digestion is often a bond of union, and the uncritical palate of youth, like the gods of old, brings like to like. Zoë and Gabriel had never felt themselves on closer or more affectionate terms than when feasting together, as it seemed to them, so sumptuously that holiday morning. She was beginning to look upon it as a

matter of course that they should end their days together, that, whatever else might happen, her future was bound up in his. Because this seemed inevitable she could gradually reconcile herself to it, and her growing content arose from the assurance that however far she might modify her existence she could not now change it utterly. Not necessity, however hard, but the manifold circumstances in our own hands embitter existence, and Zoë, like the rest of us, soon reconciled herself to the unalterable law, the dread *Must Be*.

To-day she felt that such reconciliation with untoward fate had begun. Everything filled her with rapture, and the exquisite delight she experienced in natural objects came as a reaction after suppressed yearning. The southern glow and softness of the little port, the deep tints of the sea, the brown sands, the emerald slopes of

garden and vineyard, all these things gave her interest, pleasure.

It was now low tide, and to reach the little mail-boat starting for the largest of the islands opposite they had to wade for nearly a mile across the wet sands, and in company of a score of passengers, they made their way to the place of embarkation. Then a sail was put up, a favouring wind sent them merrily between azure and azure, and in an hour's time they had arrived at the so-called Druidesses' Island, a rocky little kingdom in the ocean, tenanted by rude fisher-folks only, with lawny spaces shelving down to the sands, and mellow-tinted walls covered with fig and vine.

They did not go on shore then, although they had heard much of this strange population, said to be descended from a pure-blooded Phœnician colony settled there in Roman times, but hiring a boat, set off



for the open sea. Then the best part of the day began. The boatman, unfurling his sail, let the wind do with them as it would, and soon they were far away from receding coasts and islets on the broad bright surface of the sparkling waves. Their little bark glided swiftly and smoothly as if on wheels, whilst the air freshened more and more, growing intoxicatingly briny and fresh as they went on. Soon the distant outlines of promontory and rock faded into purple and gold cloudland. No ships were in sight. They seemed alone upon an enchanted summer sea.

They had talked gaily for a while, but both were now silent, Gabriel enjoying the scene and the hour as much as his companion, but in quite a different way. To him the deliciousness of sky and sea was so vivid because she was by his side to share and heighten his impressions, but with Zoë it could not be so. When she closed her eyes



one moment to open them with fresh raptures the next, Gabriel had no part in her transports. There was a vein of poetry in the girl's nature which he had no power to reach, and she would have enjoyed the heavenly beauty around them all the more had she been quite alone. But how could he divine this? How could he suppose, after the enormous sacrifices she had made for him, that he was so little to her?

"You are very happy now?" he asked, as he watched her changing face; but she only smiled by way of answer, and again closed her eyes, as if blinded by the sight of so much loveliness.

On looking up, it was not the glorious sky that she saw, nor the sea-birds flashing on silvery wing, nor the multitudinous little purple waves laughing in the sun; instead of all these, a pair of grave eyes fixed on her own.



“Zoë,” he said, “answer me one question. Were you happier when keeping holiday with Delmar than you are with me?”

Nothing could have been unluckier than this question. Zoë turned from red to white.

“You have no right to ask such a question. You must never ask it again, otherwise, life will be impossible——”

It was on her lips to add—“with you,” but leaving the sentence unfinished, she turned away from him suddenly, and leaning over the boat’s edge, gazed down into the clear, purple water.

There was no more enchantment for Zoë then. The glory of the hour had vanished as if by magic. This second of November, that had opened so goldenly, wore all at once the aspect of a *Fête des Morts*—a feast in honour of the dead, given up to mourning and retrospect only. Do what he would,

he could not bring back her happy mood. They interchanged mechanical phrases only for the rest of the day, and when they reached home, Zoë retired to her room to throw herself on her bed and weep.

Why had he awakened such memories? Oh, it was cruel ! she said, again and again. The harm was done unintentionally, but done, nevertheless. For a time her peace of mind was gone.

CHAPTER XV.

SURPRISES.

AFTER that holiday came no more reminders of the summer. Winter set in suddenly, with floods of rain and hurricanes of wind, only occasional bursts of sunshine relieving the gloom. For a minute then the clouds would part, the sun gleam out, and a glorious rainbow span the pale-green hills. There was no sleet or snow, instead, alternations of beating rain and April-like softness, soon to be exchanged for brilliant days and clear, starry nights. A touch of frost was sometimes in



the air, but nothing that could be called wintriness after northern fashion.

It was a pleasant time, and the pair by their bright wood fire seemed to make more of a home together every day. Toil mutually shared, and the thousand and one little circumstances of daily life, were bringing them nearer and nearer. Events did not happen, yet there were milestones to mark the way.

“A month ago we did this, last week we read such a book, to-morrow we will go thither,” seem meaningless little phrases in themselves, but how closely do such trifles bind human beings to one another! There is no act of the oft-despised domestic life that may not look like a sacrament under certain aspects; and so it was with these two.

Zoë's piano seemed almost a third personality, an ethereal presence in the house, with-



out which existence would have been prosaic and cold. She had tried to teach Gabriel to play, but it must be confessed that the brilliant young rhetorician was in some respects a little dull. He was almost as skilled in dialectics as the celebrated Pico of Mirandola, who, at twenty years of age, could propose nine hundred subjects of disputation. He was thoroughly versed in Patristic learning, in the Sentences of the Lombard, and the Summa of the Great Angelical. His memory had been so well trained that, if he could not repeat the Psalms of David backwards, like the monk cited by Matthew Paris, he was equal to feats almost as astounding. But his intellect had been encumbered by excess of method and system. He found it almost impossible to put himself into a new mental attitude.

Zoë's playing was, however, quite as much of a refreshment to him as to herself. It

seemed to say what neither of the two could say in words, and to make up for her reserve and his occasional shyness. Whenever they vexed each other, music reconciled them. Whenever they were pensive, music cheered. Sometimes it came as the naïve utterances of childhood, at others like the solemn admonitions of age, most of all, as a passionate awakening to richer, fuller life and deeper unutterable sympathy.

The holiday of New Year brought a little break in this quiet life. The projected journey to Les Ponts was given up on account of the expense, but they were drawn against their will into the modest gaieties of the place. An invitation to the house of their employer could not well be refused, and for the first time they spent an evening away from home. There was music, dancing, lively provincial talk, and much unaffected cordiality. Zoë, dressed



in white, and wearing flowers in her hair, danced with real enjoyment. He looked on pleased at the admiration bestowed upon her, and talked much and well. It was evident both had created a very favourable impression.

After this introduction to the little world of St. Yves came other sociabilities—calls, offerings of flowers and confectionery, visiting cards by the post, and a second invitation from the timber merchant, this time to attend midnight mass with his family, on New Year's Eve, and afterwards to partake of the accustomed Réveillon or collation. Zoë was delighted with the notion.

"We shall go, of course," she said, animatedly. "I have always wished to attend midnight mass and a Réveillon, but have never yet done it. And Pergolesi's music too! I would not miss it on any account."

She had stayed at home that holiday afternoon in order to finish some embroidery for Huberte's wedding, and read the letter to Gabriel on his return from a walk alone.

"What has happened?" she asked, suddenly, noticing his clouded look. He sat down by the fire, his face turned from her, and answered in brief, almost bitter tones,

"We must accept no more invitations. It was very imprudent of us to go to Monsieur Hervé's at all."

"Were you recognised? Was anyone present who knew our history?" she asked, aghast.

"Something more unexpected than these things. But you would never guess, so I must tell you. Our employer wishes me to marry his daughter!"

"My little friend Berthe, with the pretty

brown eyes? And what answer did you make?"

He turned round with an astounded look.

"There could be but one answer, of course, though out of courtesy I was obliged to accept time for a week's reflection. I shall see Monsieur Hervé again privately in a week."

"I am glad you did not say No at once, Gabriel. You are bound to reflect."

"Zoë, why do you jest on such a subject? You cannot suppose for a moment that I should ever leave you."

She had been busying herself with the tea-things, but quitted them now, and sat down beside him, evidently ready for an explanation. Many and many a time it had been on her mind to say what she felt was opportune now.

"Dear brother," she began, in the quietest,

most sisterly manner, "are we quite reasonable when we regard this compact between us as made for once and for all? I promised that I would stay with you as long as you needed me, but I exacted no such promise in return. I do not think I foresaw such a probability as your marriage, but I knew that a thousand things might possibly divide us, and it must also have occurred to you from time to time that our relations might change——"

"Never, never," he said, still vehement and bitter.

"We are happy together," she went on, with a slight hesitation in her voice. "We love each other dearly. But I am older than you"—again she hesitated—"I am older," she went on, "and have had more experience of life. Sometimes I feel weary of it, but all your future lies before you. Perhaps, as time goes on, you will find the life we lead together unsatisfactory, and my

sisterly affection narrow and cold." Then she blushed and looked down.

"Do not talk of such a possibility," he cried, growing more and more impatient. "We are sufficient for each other now. Why contemplate change?"

"But," she continued, still striving to speak as naturally as if they were indeed brother and sister, "you forget the difference that even a few years make between a man and a woman, and I have lived in the world—I have—" it was on her lips to say "lost what was dearest to me," but she checked herself in time, and said—"experienced joys and sorrows of a different kind. We two, therefore, cannot look upon things exactly from the same point of view. When I said to you just now that you should reflect upon Monsieur Hervé's proposition, I was looking far into the future, and thinking of your own happiness only. Is it not likely

that our existence may become just a little tame, a little selfish, as time wears on? What is there, indeed, to lift us out of ourselves?"

She looked straight into his eyes with an honest smile, and putting her hand upon his arm, added,

"My brother, I feel already as if this monotonous, hand-to-mouth life were spoiling us. I think, if we go on in the same way for years, we shall either detest or despise each other. Do not frown at me. I was never more serious."

"And you were never so perplexing," said the young man, greatly vexed and irritated. "Pray explain yourself. We are both working for our bread. . We are doing our duty as citizens. Why should you suddenly hold up to contempt the very standard of existence you have always admired hitherto? Was I more estimable in the old days?



You used to be bitter on the subject of monastic indolence. You used to say that the humblest workman who supported a family conscientiously was far above the best of us, and how much else to the same point!"

"Is it not consistent with all this that I should desire a wider, more useful life for you," she again hesitated, then got out the words as best she could, "and contemplate—perhaps in some far distant day—your marriage?"

He seemed so completely taken aback that she felt constrained to modify her words. She could not in the least understand his dismay.

"We are both content with things as they are at present, and I, for one, do not desire to change them. But the home we have made together is a home without a future, and as you grow older you will need that. Let me speak still more openly to

you—as if I were, indeed, an elder sister. I want you to be quite happy some day, and who is that without domestic affections and family life? Do not, therefore, take it unkindly of me when I spoke to you as I did just now about this proposed French marriage. The Hervés are good people; the girl is gentle and intelligent. You would at least be secured by such an alliance against disappointments and worldly anxieties. And you are free to marry; no vows are longer binding on you.”

Glancing up, she discovered such consternation in his face that she stopped short.

“Forgive me, if I have pained you. I could say much more, but I will wait,” she said, moving to the tea-table. “I feel that on this point we do not at all understand each other.”

“Yes,” he said, with some bitterness, “I think I understand you very well. You

seem to consider that I have no instinct of gratitude or devotion. Can you suppose that every vestige of feeling was crushed out of me by the system you so much despise? Should I consider my own worldly interests before my duty to you? What do I not owe you? And how would the debt be paid if I broke with you now for the sake," he added, with great scorn, "of advantageous worldly prospects? You speak of domestic happiness—is not your friendship enough? And if, indeed, it were otherwise, and I could selfishly sacrifice your prospects for my own, the case were no better. I should still be an egotist wholly unworthy of your consideration. Understand me for once and for all, I will never leave you, not entirely because I have brought you into dire straits, and feel in duty bound to cherish and protect—not because I would bind you to the promise you

gave me in my forlornness—but because life without you were not life at all, and I feel the affection that has grown up between us to be dearer and more solemn than any other we could ever know. You must surely feel this now,” he said, with a look of appeal.

She had not a word to say. She was still sitting where he left her by the table, leaning her face on her hands, looking down meekly. How could she tell him the truth? How could she conceal it? His vehemence reproached her.

“We have been brought together not once, but many times,” he continued, and in the strangest manner. “There is a finger of Providence in these things. You gave me my life on that May Day when you rescued me from the mob; it is but fair that I give you mine in return—not only the toil of it, and all the commonness, but



its innermost joy and sorrow, its good, if good there be."

He paused, evidently awaiting her reply, but she had none to give.

"There is nothing you would not do for me, I am sure, and I want your life to be very good and very happy," she said, at last. "What else is there to say?"

"Ah! you are never impatient, except when I speak of myself and my dependence upon you."

"Because I know it already. Why should we discuss what is quite clear to us both, dear Gabriel?" she answered, in a quiet, almost resigned manner.

"But it is not so clear that you depend upon me," the young man added, sadly, "otherwise, would you approve of this French marriage?"

"Marriage need not divide brother and sister," she said. "I should never feel less

interested in you or less affectionate towards you on that account. There is no room for jealousy that I can see."

He sat down to read with a dejected air; Zoë resumed her embroidery, looking somewhat crestfallen. Both felt glad when the day was over.



CHAPTER XVI.

RÉVEILLON.

NEXT day they set out for the Midnight Mass alone. It was a night of superlative splendour, even in these favoured western regions. The deep purple heavens were blazed with stars; hardly a breeze ruffled the pure air; the glorious cluster of spires stood out distinctly outlined as in noonday sunshine. There is something pathetic and sublime in these annual celebrations when, upon one occasion, put even the irreverent and the luxurious on a par with the ascetic and the devotee. No



matter what obstacles the weather may offer—snow, rain, wind, people are praying at that particular moment throughout the length and breadth of France, many of whom, perhaps, never feel in a prayerful mood at any other time. The mere act of foregoing downy pillows and self-exposure to inclement weather, may, indeed, be an act of worship in ease-loving worldlings, and it may be affirmed that, for once during the twelve months, Frenchwomen show themselves in public without heed to their toilette.

A crowd of worshippers, mostly peasants trudging in from the country, filled the streets, and, on entering, they found the cathedral thronged in every part.

Then rich and poor kneel side by side, the general with his stars, the beggar with his rags, the fisherwoman in her seaweed-scented garments, the delicate lady in



You used to be bitter on the subject of monastic indolence. You used to say that the humblest workman who supported a family conscientiously was far above the best of us, and how much else to the same point!"

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Then rich and poor kneel side by side, the general with his stars, the beggar with his rags, the fisherwoman in her seaweed-scented garments, the delicate lady in



velvet, only the black and white-robed nuns sit apart.

Long before the first magnificent diapason of the organ rolled throughout the length and breadth of the building, standing room by the door was at a premium, whilst it seemed problematic whether the crowds outside the doors would gain admittance at all. These isolated fishing-populations are devout, in a sense difficult for outsiders to understand. Zoë felt, as she gazed upon the rough, ecstatic faces around her, that, for the first time in her life, she realised what religion meant.

She sat by Gabriel, who, from the moment the service began, never once looked up. The strangely beautiful music of Pergolesi affected him as music had never done before. Whilst Zoë was enjoying it quite as rapturously, but from a different point of view, her sensations being chiefly sympa-

thetic and artistic, to him a whole world of new emotions seemed unfolding with every phrase. Zoë had taught him the meaning of music, and, as he sat beside her, her presence seemed a part of the wondrous fascination cast about him. He did not so much as glance at her, but he knew she was there, and that was enough. The ethereal transports, the inexpressibly moving appeals, the profound pensiveness, the ringing triumph of these grandiose compositions, seemed, in some inexpressible way, to interpret his own life. As one melody after another was borne hither and thither from the key-note, now straying in one direction, now in another, finally closing with the perfect cadence, he seemed to see a symbolisation of his straying purpose and will, which, after many a dissonance and deviation from its natural course, would, in the end, find harmony and repose.



It dawned upon him too, whilst he listened, that Life, like music, had something to teach him far beyond his hitherto narrow experiences, that its real meaning must be sought for high above the needs and aspirations of the day, and that it might mean suffering rather than joy, renunciation rather than fulfilment. After all, might not a spirit of sacrifice far higher than that of monastic life be called forth by the exigences of the world? Was it not now rather than in former days that he realized the meaning of the word to renounce?

The pair quitted the church as they had come, arm-in-arm, alone amid the little crowds of friends and neighbours thronging the streets. Zoë had never before so distinctly recognized their isolation from the rest of their fellows. What, indeed, were they to this little world, and what was it to them? She instinctively shrank from such



a contemplation, yet it would not go. Gabriel's utter dependence upon her, humiliated, disquieted. Every day, nay, every hour, seemed but to intensify his craving for her sympathy in small things as well as great.

Without a word, they threaded their way through the starlit, silvery streets, usually so hushed at this time, now so populous and cheerful. The congregation having emerged from the cathedral, laughed and chatted as usual, perhaps at heart a little relieved that the eeriness and emotional part of the ceremony were over, and that the hilarity was to begin. Lights were burning in every window, and, as they passed by, they saw that the house of their employer was brilliantly illuminated. Zoë heartily wished that they could enter the hospitable door with the rest, instead of returning to their silent,

solitary home. The intense exclusiveness of their existence began to disquiet her. She saw clearly enough that some new element in it was needed.

On entering, they found a bright little wood fire blazing on the hearth, and quite a banquet prepared as a surprise by their hostess, the national New Year's cakes, confectionery, hot wine, and so on. A few days before she would have hailed the sight with almost childish naïveté and enjoyment, making the most of the little feast, sparkling with animation. Now hardly a word was said, and they ate and drank mechanically, casting furtive glances at each other's pale face.

At last she could bear it no longer, and, leaving her supper unfinished, bade him good night, smiling faintly at him across the table.

"I am too tired to eat," she said. "We will talk of the music to-morrow."

"You are ill?" he asked, anxiously. He had never known her so absent and embarrassed before.

"My brain reels with the music, and it is three o'clock in the morning! I am not used to such hours. That is all."

Then they separated—she to sleep brokenly, and with all kinds of disturbed dreams, he to toss upon his pillow without any sleep in him at all. What should he say next day to Zoë? What would she say to him? Would things go on felicitously as usual? And if not, how? Her pale looks awed, humiliated him, and the growing reserve on her part irritated and perplexed. He examined himself rigidly to see what he could have said or done amiss. No matter at what cost to himself, her life must be made smooth and pleasant.

Then he fretted away the hours hitherto spent in sound, refreshing slumber, and when

day came, looked naturally white and haggard. Zoë took comfort in the thought that their holidays would soon be over.

“It is quite clear,” she said, with an attempt at playfulness, as they sat over their taciturn New Year’s breakfast, “that we are not of well-regulated minds enough to profit by idleness. Everything comes amiss to us, now that we have nothing to do.”

For the first time he detected in that sweet voice a faint yet clearly discernible touch of positive ill-humour. She added with less accentuation, she was already upbraiding herself for injustice towards him.

“Perhaps the life we are leading here is not quite the best for us. It is just a little mechanical, a little monotonous. Do you not feel it so?”

“I confess that I have yearned for a more congenial occupation,” said the young man, eagerly. “It is—at least, to me—a

very happy life; but, as far as our energies go, it has certainly no future. We are mere machines in that counting house."

Zoë laughed aloud.

"Think of us growing old and pinched and grey-haired at our desks at St. Yves en Finistère! No, Gabriel, it will never do. The place is exquisitely lovely, and the life in certain respects easy. But we are both too young and too active-minded to be thus satisfied for long. But what shall we turn to next?"

"I could preach—I could write——" said Gabriel, confidently.

"But could you make money by preaching and writing? We must think of the practical first, and of the certainty we have here. It will perhaps be wisest to stay on a little longer."

"I will tell you what I have often wished to do," he resumed, after a pause. "You

remember the long talks we used to have together, you and Delmar and I, about America, and the wonderful scope open to all kinds of talents there? Many and many a time I have felt fired with a desire to settle in the Far West as a schoolmaster, a professor, or even a lay-preacher. In those capacities I could make use of my long scholastic training, and I should feel to be in some measure beginning the ideal life of my boyhood."

America! The very word set Zoë trembling. Did not America mean Delmar to her mind? and would they not be sure to meet there, no matter how rivers and mountains might separate them? She sat pale and still whilst the young man went on, moved to a strange enthusiasm.

"I have seen in fancy such a picture as this: some fair valley, parted by a winding stream, some as yet unpolluted Eden, where a teacher, not of creeds, but of

Christianity, might form a little community. There are thousands of choice spots in the wilderness, hundreds of thousands of men and women like ourselves who seek such a refuge. You should be the mother by adoption, I the father of these pioneers of civilization, and every day would be more productive and blessed than the last. Oh ! why should we delay !”

Zoë, who had heard this enthusiastic outburst with a smile, looked up, saying simply,

“Only because we have not money enough ! My poor little two thousand francs would hardly cover the expenses of a start.”

“But Delmar’s offer of help ? Have you forgotten it ? He made me a direct offer of money if ever I should need it. We should afterwards repay the loan, of course.”

“Of course,” Zoë answered. “We can think of it. I believe a settler’s life is

exactly what would make me happy. It kills me to be wound up like a bit of machinery, and kept going for the rest of the day. I would much rather keep a cow, look after some poultry, and, if need be, cook and scrub, with a little leisure sometimes for the piano, and time for reading on Sundays! Yes," she added, with increased animation, "it is exactly the kind of life for us. We would start a little school, and a place of public prayer for you to preach in, and a garden for the enjoyment of all. I would teach the boys and girls to dance, and you should instruct them in serious things. But why in the Far West? Australia seems to me the place to choose."

"No," he replied, speaking slowly and deliberately. "It is in America only that the leaven of future civilization is working for all time. There, if anywhere, can the spirit of a new Christianity quicken social



organizations. Mankind cannot attain perfection without religion, that is to say, without some kind of creed and church. I feel now more than ever that I am a born priest, a religious teacher by nature and instinct, and I *must* give utterance to the spiritual promptings within me. How can I do that in France, much less in England? Here Catholicism is but a rag covering the nakedness of infidelity—there a refined materialism is decently veiled by a state religion. It is only in young worlds and virgin societies that the voice of Faith is listened to, and echoed back again. Yes, Zoë, I may yet fulfil the ideal of my youth, and follow humbly in the steps of my great exemplars, the mighty Jerome, the divine Augustine, the holy Thomas. And—who knows?—even you, so much wiser than I in most things, may gather wisdom from my lips! Poor as I am, and abject

and helpless, I may yet divinely repay your love and devotion."

As he said this, Zoë saw for a moment the Gabriel she first knew. His eyes dilated, his cheeks glowed, his face was raised ecstatically, he seemed no longer her daily companion and fellow-clerk, but once more transformed into the rapt recluse, the ardent Franciscan friar. A little later and the illusion vanished. He spoke calmly now, almost sadly.

"In what other way, indeed, can matters ever be made even between us? You are all in this compact, I nothing. I feel more clearly and painfully every day my utter, my uncompromising dependence on you."

"That is an unwise confession. Two people who are obliged to live together should not make comparisons," Zoë said, colouring with vexation. "Besides," she

added, in a playful voice, "it is in the nature of things that men should depend upon women. They cannot cook their food, mend their clothes, or keep the house in order."

"I was thinking of quite another kind of dependence," he began.

"But why think of any at all? I cannot help being older than you," Zoë replied, quickly. "Least of all can I help being a woman. You accepted these conditions when you asked me to live with you as your sister, and they are not to be changed——"

She checked herself, and moving to the side table, began to arrange the little heaps of New Year's gifts that had arrived that morning. There were pretty knick-knacks from Huberte, from former pupils, and Aunt Félicité, besides flowers and boxes of

confectionery from neighbours, the whole lending unwonted sparkle and glitter to the room.

Gabriel watched her anxiously. A bright blush burned on each cheek, the brows were knit, the usually calm lips compressed. As she re-assorted her treasures, placing a bouquet here, a basket of fruit there, he could see that the slender figure trembled. It was a painful state of things for both, and which of the two could mend it?

Whilst Gabriel sat looking at her, he was bitterly blaming himself for his indiscretion, making a dozen vows of circumspection for the future. She, in her turn, was beginning to feel a little self-reproach. Perhaps he had meant less than he said, and, at any rate, she was the oldest, and should set the example of prudence and calm.

“What irrational beings we are!” she

said at last. "Come, Gabriel, the sun is shining; we have the whole day to ourselves. Let us go somewhere, and see something. The diligence starts for Morlaix in half an hour, and from Morlaix we can take the rail to Brest. Brest is said to be as beautiful as Naples. Oh! we must go!"

There was no resisting such an appeal, and Zoë had reason to congratulate herself on the scheme. They had a long drive across country, then a bit of railway journey, finally three glowing hours in what seemed a corner of Italy. Everything was new to them—the dazzling white city, the green terraces above, the warm blue bay, and as they were hurried from the first moment of their excursion to the last, little time was afforded for conversation. It was late when they arrived home, both weary,

drowsy, and in the best possible humour with each other. Zoë took it as a happy augury for the new year.

CHAPTER XVII.

FRENCH OFFERS OF MARRIAGE.

BUT the next day a still more perplexing and untoward incident happened. Hardly had Zoë taken her accustomed place in the counting-house, when she was requested to go into M. Hervé's private room, he having something private to communicate. It was the first time such a thing had occurred, and though she stood in no awe of her employer, she trembled inwardly.

M. Hervé was a typical Frenchman of



the mercantile world, never too hurried to be courteous, never for a moment losing sight of the business aspect of life, whilst all the time keenly alive to its more graceful side. Thus, before beginning their conversation, he took great pains to assure himself that his fair visitor was comfortably placed, with a foot-warmer at her feet, and a cushion at her back.

“Mademoiselle,” he began, with marked deference; and had his visitor been the great lady of the place instead of his humble junior clerk, he could not have treated her with more politeness, “I trust that you find yourself comfortably placed?”

“Quite, I assure you,” Zoë answered, unable to resist a smile, though inwardly ill at ease; and then she looked up inquiringly.

“Mademoiselle, I presume that your brother informed you of a conversation

that took place between us some few days ago?" Zoë bowed assent, and he went on, gradually warming into an animated mood. "The issue of that conversation, Mademoiselle, was extremely disappointing, I may say painful, to me. Since your arrival here, I have had every reason to be pleased with the two assistants my good friends Monsieur and Madame Pitache recommended to me. Your work has been well done, you have never wanted in punctuality. You have both given extreme satisfaction alike with regard to your duties and your behaviour generally. An admirable circumspection of conduct, I regret to say very rare among young people of both sexes in the present day here, has characterised your daily conduct, and though there was many a grave objection to the alliance I projected, there was much in its favour."

Again Zoë bowed acquiescingly. She began to feel comparatively re-assured, but the next sentence undeceived her.

“You are both portionless—a thousand apologies, Mademoiselle, for thus intruding on your privacy, but I was bound to put the question to your brother,—you are Protestants, you are, moreover, foreigners. On the other hand, you are both well educated, you are circumspect, and you especially, Mademoiselle, apt at business, and therefore very useful, I may say essential, to the interests of such a house as this. Weighing all these circumstances, therefore, I was prepared to waive the worldly prospects of my daughter in consideration of securing for her a model husband, as your countrymen are represented to be, and what was hardly less important, a respectable and reliable partner in the concern.”



"You are very good," Zoë answered, heartily, "and Gabriel—" she never used the word brother unless absolutely obliged—"Gabriel felt deeply grateful."

"Of course, of course. That is undoubtedly, Mademoiselle. And I must say the young man's sentiments do him honour. The reason he put forth for refusing my proposals was, as you doubtless know, his reluctance to abandon his sister."

And, saying this, the timber merchant eyed his interlocutor somewhat keenly. Zoë, in spite of herself, coloured slightly under the scrutiny.

"I know," she said, not able to speak with her usual openness, and her eyes seeking the ground. "I understand his motives very well. But I opposed myself to them, Monsieur Hervé. I argued with Gabriel on the other side. I do not wish to stand in

the way of his happiness and advancement, and it is an error to suppose that I am dependent on him. I can earn my own livelihood as I did before——” she stopped short, greatly embarrassed, and Monsieur Hervé went on, taking her blushes as part of her English temperament and education—

“The sentiment is creditable to you also, Mademoiselle. I admire a spirit of noble independence among your sex, and, I must say, as far as I am able to judge, you are quite as capable of making your way in the world as your brother. But, permit me. Since that conversation with him, another project has suggested itself as a solution of the difficulty. I have a son, Mademoiselle.”

Zoë waited for further enlightenment, without showing much inquisitiveness, and

Monsieur Hervé went on impressively, stopping between his sentences to watch their effect upon his listener.

“A son, Mademoiselle, who, I may say, with mingled pride and concern, possesses, if more than the foibles, certainly more than the accomplishments of most young men—a son whom, ere it is too late, his mother and I would fain reclaim from the seductions of Paris, and place under our own eyes as head of the business. For that son, Mademoiselle, we wish to secure a wife, and in yourself we believe we have found exactly the right person——”

At this juncture Zoë uttered an ejaculation, and started from her chair; but taking her surprise as natural and becoming, he motioned her to be seated, and went on,

“If not fortune, we find here thrift and business capacities; if not social advantage,

beauty, talents, and rectitude of conduct." Here he bowed low, and put his hand on his heart. "Mademoiselle, in the name of my wife and myself, I have the honour to offer you my son's hand."

What could Zoë say? Her quick mind foresaw at a glance all the probable results of these unlucky advances. She should be driven into explanations which she could not expect the worthy timber merchant to take calmly.

Attributing her embarrassment to quite other motives, he added, kindly,

"Your country-people are said to be proud, and you, perhaps, feel honourable scruples about entering a well-to-do family without a dowry. But, Mademoiselle, these are points, as I say, to be sometimes waived in consideration of greater advantages. We seek for our son, above all, a wife who will

curb his extravagances, who will influence him wisely in all things, and be a real stay to us in our old age. Our acquaintance, limited though it is, inclines us to place the most entire confidence in you——”

“You do me great honour,” Zoë began, and then she stopped short.

“Dear young lady, say no more on the subject. Accept our offer, as it is intended, in the kindest spirit. We are not rich; we are an honest, well-to-do family of the petite bourgeoisie. That is all. Do not magnify our self-sacrifice.”

“I am extremely grateful,” again began Zoë.

“Of course, of course; we understand!” exclaimed her employer, patronisingly, “but the obligation will not be all on our side. You will repay us in recalling our son to the paths of virtue. You will set an

example of simple devotion and filial duty. Mademoiselle, say no more. Permit me to embrace my future daughter-in-law, and to conduct you to my wife."

And saying this he rose, and would have kissed her on the forehead, but Zoë drew back, with a sad little shake of the head.

"You are very generous and very kind," she said, summoning all her powers of self-control. "I feel deeply our indebtedness to you. But it pains me much to have to say that I also, like—like Gabriel—must refuse."

"You refuse?" asked Monsieur Hervé, looking astounded. "You absolutely refuse?"

"I know that we shall both appear sadly wanting in gratitude and appreciation," she continued, now speaking calmly, "but,

believe me, it is not so. I am fully sensible of the friendliness and confidence implied in your offer to us both. All the more reluctantly, I repeat, that I can no more accept than—my brother——”

Such a contingency had never for an instant crossed the mind of the worthy merchant, but there was such painful hesitation about Zoë's manner in getting out the last two words that his thoughts were directed into another channel.

“Your brother!” he repeated, fixing his eyes upon her keenly, making the quick blushes come and go. “You are, then, deeply attached to him, Mademoiselle. You cannot abandon him for the sake of an advantageous marriage?”

“No,” Zoë said, suddenly overcome with an irresistible impulse to speak the truth for once and for all, feeling, under the scrutiny

of those penetrating though not unkindly eyes, that her secret was already half betrayed, and that it was better both for Gabriel and herself no longer to be living as brother and sister under false pretences. "No, Monsieur Hervé. I cannot marry your son. It is not that I should feel it wrong to leave Gabriel. I felt, on the contrary, anxious for him to re-consider your kind proposals made in the first instance. But there is one thing more I am bound to tell you now," and saying this, she rose and put her hand on the door ready to go. "We are not brother and sister at all. Madame Pitache will explain all. I would have told you from the beginning, but she prevented me."

He tried to hold her back, but in vain. With flushed cheeks and glistening eyes, she hurried to her desk, keeping her back

turned to Gabriel, and so dusk was the little office, and so persistently did she absorb herself in her work, that he had no inkling of her agitation.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.



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