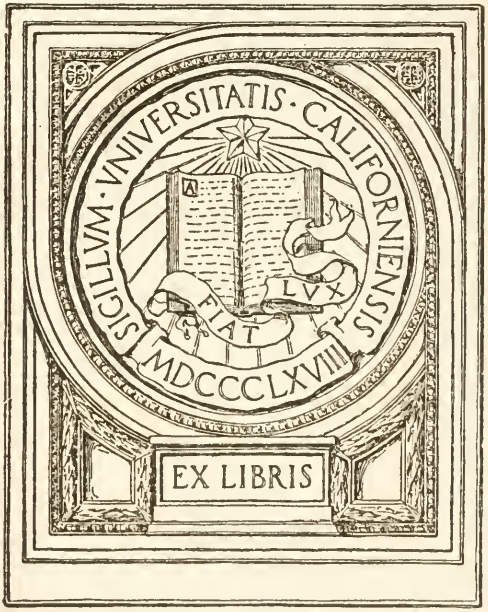

A WILL AND A WAY.

BY

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'TOO STRANGE NOT TO BE TRUE,'
'A STORMY LIFE,' ETC.

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THE HANDKERCHIEF AT THE WINDOW.

THE LILIES OF THE VALLEY

A WILL AND A WAY.

CHAPTER I.

ALINE IN PARIS.

ON the 16th of July Aline left Castel St. Guy, accompanied by Vaubon. They travelled by the diligence, and during the long days and many hours of the night, during which she did not sleep, her thoughts ran on all the strange vicissitudes she had gone through since the days when, filled with joy and excitement, she was looking forward to seeing Paris and going to the school of the Dames Anglaises. How well she remembered Aunt Félicie's

announcing it to her, and all the day-dreams of that time of expectation, and the bitter disappointment when that plan was given up. Had she then foreseen that, five years afterwards, she would be travelling to Paris in the coupé of a diligence, little occupied with anything but the business which was taking her there, indifferent to the first sight of the great city, averse even to beholding the scene of so many horrors, how incredible it would have seemed.

The last day of her journey was an oppressively hot one, as hot as a July day in France often is. The sky was cloudless; not a breath of air stirred the dusty poplars on each side of the road. It was getting dusk when the diligence passed the Barrière d'Italie. She had kept her eyes closed for some time, but the rattling on the rough pavement roused her. There was a great deal of noise and excitement in the streets, and crying of news, like what she remembered at Lyons. The reaction against the Reign of Terror was tumultuous, and in some places it was

difficult for carriages to pass, so great was the crowd. At last the diligence reached the Place des Victoires. Vaubon procured a hackney-carriage, and they drove to the hotel where he had ordered rooms.

Aline could hardly realise where she was. The atmosphere was stifling, for at Paris in the dog-days it is almost as hot at midnight as at noon. Sitting at the window of the dingy entresol looking into a narrow street, she tried to catch a breath of air. It was not long before the chambermaid brought her a letter. It was from Mdlle. de Marconnay, and contained a very kind and pressing invitation to come at once if possible, or at any rate the following morning, to a house she had taken at Auteuil, and to make it her home during her stay in Paris. This seemed like a moist wind blowing in the physical and moral furnace that the great city seemed to her. It was too late to go there that evening, but she asked Vaubon to order a carriage for her early the next day, and

would have got through the night better than she expected, but for the cries in the street, which woke her up when she began to doze.

Driving from the hotel to Auteuil, she caught sight of the Place de la Révolution, as the Place Louis XV. was then called. The driver, who guessed that she was a stranger in Paris, pointed it out.

'Ah,' he added, 'plenty of heads have fallen there!' and he made an expressive sign with his hand across his throat. 'Sanson has had plenty of business, but people are tired of it now, and, for my part, I think we have had enough of it.'

To hear a man of that class expressing this sentiment was common enough at that moment. In every rank of society persons were recoiling from further bloodshed, except as regarded the leaders of the Reign of Terror; their lives were clamoured for on every side.

Aline lifted up her heart in prayer as she thought of those who had expired on that

spot—the King, the Queen, Mdme. Elisabeth, whose sublime prayer, composed in prison, she had been given a copy of, and ever since had said every day. She was glad to leave Paris behind for a while. The suburb of Auteuil, with its magnificent trees, and gardens intersecting the houses, afforded repose to her eyes and her heart. The vehicle stopped before a pavilion standing between a court and a small parterre, and she was shown into a sitting-room looking on the latter. A very old gentleman was sitting in an arm-chair, dressed in the costume of Louis XV.'s reign. This was the Chevalier de Marconnay, great-uncle of the mistress of the house. One of Elisabeth's successful achievements had been the protection of this aged relative. In the midst of Paris, at the height of the Revolution, she had contrived to secrete him, almost as much as Vaubon had concealed Mdlle. de Marsoulier in the country. It was only since the death of Robespierre that she had moved him to this little abode at Auteuil, which she had taken

chiefly for the sake of two ladies who had sought refuge with her.

The chevalier rose, and bowed to Aline with dignified politeness, addressing her as Mdlle. des Elmes. His niece had told him her story. He absolutely refused to believe that her marriage to a monster of the name of Parcin could be a valid one, and declared he would never consent to call a noble young lady by that name. He paid Aline many compliments, which, at that moment especially, were unacceptable, and she was glad when Mdlle. de Marconnay's entrance put an end to the conversation, if conversation it could be called where the talking was entirely on one side.

She was carried off by her hostess to her own little room, and with her she felt perfectly at her ease. She perceived at once that Elisabeth de Marconnay, though very different from them in many respects, belonged to the same race of women as Madeleine and Louise d'Herbelay. In manner she was a little abrupt, but at that moment this suited

Aline. She did not want to be pitied and sympathised with, and, above all, to speak of herself and her own feelings. She had a task to perform on which her whole soul was bent; in what spirit it was pursued, what inward combats she had to sustain, she wished no one but herself to know. Elisabeth felt that this was the case, and immediately went into the practical part of the question. She drew up a list of the members of the Convention whom Aline would have to solicit; but the way had to be prepared for her, and she said she would go herself into Paris to do this, and to procure for her young friend an order of admission to see her husband.

'I must start at once,' Mdlle. de Marconnay added, 'or I shall not find my friends at home. A queer set they are, these friends of mine. I have some in every section of the Chamber, and I know now the assailable points in their hearts, for I maintain that most of them have hearts, if one only goes the right way to get at them. But what shall you do in my absence?'

'I like to be alone,' Aline replied.

'It is not good for you. Solitude is trying during hours of suspense, unless to great saints, who can pray all the time. I will not consign you to the care of my poor old uncle, but there are persons in this house well worth knowing. I will introduce you to them when they come down to dinner. It will soon be ready, for it is twelve o'clock. I may tell you their names. They are the Marquise de Serlon and her young daughter Alexia, and Christine de St. Vincent, her sister, a Sœur Hospitalière. The poor marquise's husband was executed three weeks ago, and she narrowly escaped the same fate. The history of those sisters has been most extraordinary. No romance ever contained stranger incidents. I will tell you more about them some other time.'

In the dining-room Aline was presented to those two ladies and young Alexia. The likeness between the two sisters was striking, but the expression of their faces was very different. The nun looked like one

into whose soul the iron had entered, but in whom strength and peace had established a long-standing victory. The marquise was evidently crushed, worn out with suffering. There was something haggard—almost wild—in her countenance. Alexia, a pretty, pleasing girl of fifteen, immediately took a great fancy to Aline. They were an interesting trio, and, as Mdlle. de Marconnay expected, the thoughts of her new guest were somewhat diverted from herself by the desire to know something more of these strangers.

Before her arrival, Elisabeth had told Sœur Christine all about her young guest, and now, drawing her aside, she begged her, during the hours which must elapse before her return, to take charge of her, and added :

'I have half promised that you will tell her your and your sister's history. Depend upon it, this will be a good deed. This poor little woman has a terrible ordeal in prospect, whether she succeeds or not in

saving her wretched husband. Our object must be to keep up her strength and courage. But do not be afraid of relating what may affect her even to tears; to weep over the griefs of others would do her more good than harm, if it makes her for a moment forget her own.'

Sœur Christine said: 'She looks scarcely older than Alexia; she would find her, perhaps, a more suitable companion than my old self.'

'Oh no; we cannot be young again at will. Besides, Christine, you are one of those who will be young in heart and mind at seventy or eighty, if you live as long.'

It was, as Mdlle. de Marconnay had said, less hot than the day before, though exceedingly sultry. Clouds were gathering and announcing an approaching storm. After dinner, Sœur Christine and Aline strolled from the garden of the pavilion into that beautiful part of the Bois de Boulogne which the ill-fated fortifications of Paris swept away some forty years ago. The

Mare d'Auteuil was then a clear transparent pool, surrounded by a picturesque variety of magnificent trees. On Sundays it used to be crowded with people, but on other days it was a quiet spot, where one could have fancied one's self at a great distance from a city. Aline wondered that that huge fearful Paris she had left in the morning could be so close to them, as she sat with Sœur Christine on the banks of the pretty pond with its water-lilies and green banks.

After a little conversation on subjects which led up to the request she wished to make, Aline said to her companion :

'Ma sœur, Mdlle. de Marconnay tells me that your and your sister's histories are, even in these times, most extraordinary. I wonder if you would mind relating them to me ?'

Sœur Christine answered :

'Our good Elisabeth asked me to do so, and, as you wish it, I will. God's mercies to us in the midst of great sorrows have been so signal, that I cannot speak of the past, and especially of one recent event, without a feel-

ing of overpowering gratitude. Well, I must first tell you my name, which is Christine de St. Vincent.'

There was a light footfall on the grass which made the speaker stop. Alexia had followed her and Aline into the wood. She had heard what Mdlle. de Marconnay had said to her aunt in the dining-room, and felt a great desire to hear her relate her history. It was so seldom that Sister Christine spoke of herself that this was an opportunity not to be lost, so she obtained her mother's leave to join her, and sitting down on the turf at her feet, she said :

'Do let me stay with you and hear what you are telling, madame.'

'You must behave well then,' Sister Christine answered with a smile, and began again.*

'I was born at the Château de Maillé in 1752. Four years before, my parents had lost their first-born child, a little girl, in a strangely mysterious manner. They had brought her with them to Paris a few months

* The whole of Sœur Christine's story is historical.

after her birth. My father had a lawsuit which obliged them to remain there some time. The baby used to be taken every afternoon by its nurse into the Tuileries Gardens. One day both nurse and child disappeared : they had gone out at the usual time, and never came home.'

'That baby was my mother,' Alexia said to Aline.

'My parents exhausted every means of search ; but no trace of them could be discovered. After lingering for months in Paris, they gave up all hope and returned to Maillé, and, until I was born, refused to be comforted. I happened to be wonderfully like my eldest sister.'

'And so you are now,' Aline observed. 'I was thinking, during dinner, that I had never seen two persons so alike, especially in the light blue colour of your eyes, which contrasts with your black hair.'

'My mother insisted on giving me my sister's name, and thus we have both been called Christine. But she never got over

her grief. She died when I was twelve years old.'

'And you remained alone with your father?'

'And two sisters, quite little things. We were very poor. The lawsuit, which was the cause of that fatal journey to Paris, had ruined us, and nothing remained to my father but his château and a few acres of land. Still, the life we led there for five years was a happy one.'

Alexia again profited by a little pause her aunt made to turn to Aline and say:

'*She* made everyone happy then, as she has done ever since. I heard it from dear Mother Louise. She worked hard — she taught her sisters—she nursed her father, who was often ill—she helped the poor——'

'Wonderful merits indeed!' Christine replied. 'There was no one else to do these things, so of course I did them. But at the age of seventeen I married, and soon afterwards my father died.'

'Aunt Christine, is that the way you are

going to tell madame your story? You make it very dull indeed. Let me go on with this part of it. Mother Louise gave mamma the whole account of how you came to marry. Madame, a young nobleman, called M. de Valombray, came and lived at his château, which was very near Maillé. He had been one of Louis XV.'s courtiers, and always lived before in Paris, but he fought a duel and killed his adversary, so he was obliged to retire into the country. He made acquaintance with grandpapa and Aunt Christine, and one day, when he had been dining at Maillé, he fell down some steep steps and cut his head open. Aunt Christine dressed his wound so cleverly that the doctor said she deserved a *brevet* from the Faculty of Medicine. I suppose this pleased him very much, for soon afterwards he proposed to her.'

'Now, my dear Alexia, that is enough.'

'No, no, aunt. Madame, don't you want to know why she married him?'

'Yes, I do; but I suppose it was because she liked him.'

'No. She did like him in a kind of way —she thought him very agreeable, and all that sort of thing—but she had always wanted to be a nun, and so she did not want to be married.'

'Then why did she marry him?' Aline eagerly asked, taking hold of Alexia's hand, and looking towards Sœur Christine. 'Do let her tell me.'

'Because her father was very ill, and he had set his heart on her accepting M. de Valombray. He had an apoplectic fit just at that time, and the doctors told Aunt Christine that a vexation, or an anxiety, would perhaps kill him, so she knelt by his bedside, and said, "Father dear, make haste and get well, so that you may be present at my wedding." Grandpapa did get better for a time, and Aunt Christine became Countess de Valombray.'

'Now Alexia, my love, no more of this. Dear lady, we will not speak of my married life. It was not a happy one.'

'It was a miserable, dreadful, cruel one!'

Alexia exclaimed, throwing her arms round her aunt's neck; 'and aunt bore all her terrible sufferings like an angel. She does not want me to speak of it; but, madame, it made me cry to hear all she had to endure, and she was so good to her sisters——'

Sœur Christine disengaged herself from Alexia's arms, and quietly said:

'Now, go home, my dear.'

'Aunt Christine, you said I might remain with you!'

'If you behaved well, my dear; but you keep talking nonsense. Go your ways.'

'Oh, you cruel aunt!' Alexia cried, kissing her again. And with a funny, good-humoured frown, she walked away.

'I could not say before that child what I can speak of to you, young as you are.'

'You cannot think how it helps me to hear how people have felt and acted in trying situations. If it is not too painful to you, do speak to me of your married life.'

'My dear young friend, I know what you have suffered, and are suffering. This makes

it easier to me to speak of my own fate. The unfortunate man whom, for my father's sake, I married, was utterly devoid of all religious and moral principles, and given up to gambling and dissipation—though this had not appeared before our marriage. After I became his wife, my poor father received a letter from a friend, warning him that such was the case. This terrible blow hastened his end; he died soon afterwards.'

'To have made a great sacrifice in vain must be terrible!' Aline ejaculated.

'My little sisters, Marie and Susanne, came to live with me. There was no difficulty in this, for M. de Valombray was hardly ever at home. The violent fancy he had taken to me had passed away, and changed to aversion. He never came to his Château de Breilhac, except to negotiate the sale of one portion after another of his estates, in order to risk the proceeds at play. When King Louis XVI. came to the throne, he hoped to resume his place at court through the favour of the young Queen, to whose

parties at Trianon he had formerly been admitted. But he was disappointed; the doors of the palace were closed to him. He plunged more deeply than ever into excesses of all sorts. Soon, all his fortune was lost except my dowry, which consisted of a few farms, and the little that might be realised on the Breilhac estate. He had been absent for a whole year. One day, as I was sitting in the garden, where my sisters were playing with my little Julie—who was three years old—I saw him riding up the avenue, followed by his Italian servant, a man to whom I had always felt an unconquerable dislike, there was something so repulsive in his countenance and so fawning in his manner. M. de Valombray sent to request me to come into the house. I found him in the drawing-room. Almost immediately, as he had often done before, he asked me whether I now would consent to the sale of the farms which formed my dowry. I replied that this was all that was left for my child, and that on no account would I do so. I expected, as on

other occasions, a burst of rage; but he only said, "Very well," and left me. He remained some time in conversation with his valet, and then ordered a horse to be saddled, and rode out. It was supper-time when he returned, and in the evening he asked my sisters to sing duets, and I had to accompany them. This went on till very late. When I retired to my room it was nearly twelve o'clock. As usual, I went into my Julie's nursery to give her a kiss. She was not in her bed. I looked round the room. Her nurse was asleep in an arm-chair; I shook her arm, and with a horrible, vague alarm, I said, "Where is Julie?" She moaned, and opened her eyes, but looked stupefied. I rushed wildly down the stairs, at the foot of which stood M. de Valombray. Oh, never, never, shall I forget the look of his face! He took hold of my arm and dragged me into the dining-room, on the table of which was paper and pen and ink. "Madame," he said, "the nurse has been given a narcotic in a glass of eau sucrée; and as to the child, my

valet has taken her away. Unless you sign this paper, authorising the sale of the farms, you will never see her again. According to a signal agreed upon, he will bring her back or leave France with her."'

'Not so terrible a choice to make as I had,' Aline thought.

'Of course, I signed; but my anguish was, that in doing so I had a horrible misgiving as to Julie's return. I remembered my elder sister's disappearance, and a superstitious fear seized me that there was perhaps a curse attending us—that there might be some object to be attained by her removal from me. The time which elapsed before she arrived was one of agony. I walked up and down the terrace till faintness overcame me, but only for a moment. Oh, how I listened to each sound! I seemed to become deaf with straining my ears. At last I heard the sound of a horse's feet, and started up with outstretched arms. It was M. de Valombray riding away. I never saw him again. May God forgive me that I was not able

to forgive him till Julie arrived. Oh, when she was in my arms, then I prayed for him—then I asked our Lord to convert and pardon him. He joined the revolutionary army in America, and died in battle. I have, and do, offer up many prayers for him.'

Aline was deeply interested. This was what Mdlle. de Marconnay expected. She knew it would be good for her. Both wept in silence for a few moments.

'Do go on, Sœur Christine. If you knew how I long to hear about the rest of your life.'

'Well, the crash of our fortune soon came. Breilhac was sold, and we all went back to our old home at Maillé, and lived there in a few rooms. The good villagers were very kind, they volunteered to keep the garden in order, and we lived chiefly on its produce. After we had been there nearly a year, and my sisters were begging me to let them go out as governesses, in order to support themselves and help me, I received a letter from Mdme. de Mareuil — an aged

lady, living at Poitiers—who was Susanne's godmother. She offered a home to both the girls, and said she would leave them her little fortune. This was a real godsend, and led the way to future blessings. Two young men, Germans and good Catholics, who were on a visit in that neighbourhood, fell in love with my dear sisters, and six months before Mdme. de Mareuil's death married them. They have led quiet and happy lives since then. I have not had a care or an anxiety on their account. The dear old lady had also what I call a happy fate: she died in the church, just after having heard Mass and received communion.'

Here Sœur Christine paused.

'Then came the greatest, deepest grief I have known. I was almost going to say, may you never know it. But, no; that is best left to God.'

'Did you lose your child?'

'She died of croup. She was just seven years old. My only one—my all in all! I can now look back, and think and speak

calmly of my Julie. There are sorrows that divide our lives in two, so to speak. The bloom of earthly joy—the possibility of one kind of happiness—passes for ever away from us ; but not that of another, of a wider and higher sort—a freedom of soul, a union with God—which scatters clouds which have blinded us, which breaks chains which have bound us. Perhaps it is only those to whom a religious vocation has, or is, to be given, who feel a sense of deliverance even in the midst of the most acute affliction. I did so on that day when, after hours of prayer at my parents' and my little daughter's grave, I rose, saying to myself, "Now, my God, there is nothing on earth I desire beside Thee." And yet this detachment does not destroy our affections ; it softens, rather than hardens, the heart. At that very moment I experienced it. As I turned round to leave the little grave, a peasant woman, who had been kneeling behind me without my knowing it, said, "Madame, I know you have given the sacristan money to keep these graves in

order, and I know he will do it faithfully; but as long as one of my name is living at Mazières, there will be a prayer and a flower here every day." I wept on the neck of that poor friend, with a gratitude no words could have expressed.

'In my girlhood I had wished to join the Hospitalières of Poitiers. I went there as soon as I had sold my few possessions, and was received as a postulant. Two letters I received from my sisters caused me intense emotion. They had a charming house in Hanover. In the first, Marie invited me, in Susanne's name, as well as in her own, and those of their husbands, to come and share what they called their paradise, and to bring with me their little goddaughter, my Julie. They spoke of what would be their rapture at our arrival. They sent messages to her. The one from Susanne, written after they had heard of my darling's death, was full of passionate regrets, heart-breaking lamentations, and vehement reproaches, that instead of coming to them to be comforted, I

was going to be a nun. Poor, dear children, they came to my profession, and their grief during the ceremony painfully affected me. They could not understand me. They were too happy themselves to do so. It is only those acquainted with grief who can conceive that life in a bright home like theirs would have been unbearable—that spent in prayer, work, and labour for the poor, it could still be full of peace and consolation.

'I will not lose time in describing to you the two years of my noviceship. I was professed at the end of that time, and sent to the Mother-house in Paris. Mère Louise, the Superioress of that convent, was a most holy religious, and a true friend to me. Under her I began my work, and led a peaceful and what soon became a happy existence. But it is not of those years I mean to speak; they were blessedly uneventful. I saw nothing, and hardly heard anything, of the world outside the hospital where I worked. Once, however, I was much agitated by a letter from our Superior-

General, who was at Toulouse, visiting one of our houses there. She had been called to the bedside of an old woman dying in an asylum for the insane. During what seemed a lucid interval, this person related a strange story which had struck her as possibly throwing light on the disappearance of my elder sister, which I had mentioned to her at our convent. Amidst many ramblings and occasional incoherences, the poor creature gave an account of which this was pretty nearly the substance:

'She had lived, a great many years ago, as nurse with a family of rank, whom she accompanied to Paris. Every day she took her charge, a little girl of two or three years of age, for a walk in a public garden. There she made acquaintance with a smart valet, who, after a time, made her an offer of marriage, on one condition; and that was, that she should sell the young child to his master and mistress, Russians of high birth, who were travelling, so it was said, to distract their minds from the loss of

an only daughter, and had taken a fancy to the pretty little girl whom they had seen in the gardens. They desired their French servant to negotiate the matter, and to spare no expense. Interest had something to do with their scheme. A large fortune they expected from an uncle depended on their having a child, and as he did not know their own had died, they thought of substituting this one in her stead. The valet bribed largely the wretched woman who was in love with him, and she and the child left Paris with those people. In Italy, where they all went, a sum of money was given to her, and she was left behind to shift for herself. She fell, it seems, into great poverty, wandered back to France, and was found in a field near Toulouse, quite out of her mind.

'You may imagine how anxious I felt to ascertain whether this tale was simply the raving of a mad woman, or the real explanation of my sister's disappearance. I begged the Mother-General to try and get the woman to recollect the names of the persons in ques-

tion, but she never spoke coherently again, and died shortly afterwards. This was a great disappointment, but I tried to think no more of it. Time went by more rapidly than ever, till, seven years after I had been at Paris, the Convention decreed the abolition of religious houses, and nuns were forbidden to enter a school or a hospital. But in secular dresses, some of us contrived to carry on our work. Those that were not so fortunate lived in the garrets and cellars of the poor, and nursed the sick. Sister Marie Augustine begged in the streets, and carried to them at night the alms she received. Sister Victoire, who had been for years Superior at the Hôtel Dieu, worked as a charwoman at the house of the Minister of War, and thus supported a poor family.'

'And what did you do, Sister Christine?'

'Mdlle. de Marconnay took a lodging for Mother Louise and me near Notre Dame des Victoires—then shut up, like all the other churches. The Rue du Mail was full of artisans and their families, and we had

plenty to do, but the hardest task I had was not with them. The Chevalier de Marconnay fell dangerously ill, and his niece sent for me to nurse him. He was a hardened old philosopher who worshipped Voltaire. Even the good Elisabeth did not venture to speak to him of religion. She was more afraid of him than of the Terrorists. He was, however, converted, and has become a good Christian.'

'That was your doing, I am sure.'

'No, my dear; it was God's doing. But I had forgot to tell you that on the day we were dispersed, Mdlle. de Marconnay and her faithful Véronique arrived at our house laden with dresses, shawls, and caps, bringing with her assistants safe-conducts, and the names of houses where our sisters and our orphans would be received. I can see her now, settling it all with her bright, cheering manner, and then looking at her watch, and exclaiming, "I must be off. I have a rendezvous at twelve with Camille Desmoulins." She always thought there was a

thread of goodness in the wild heart of that man. She cried very much the day before he was executed. How they did all respect her! Danton used to pull off his hat when he met Elisabeth in the street; and Robespierre said that if all the ci-devants were like her, Sanson would have an easy time of it. Now comes the curious part of this long story. Are you not almost tired of it?'

Aline shook her head.

'I will make it as short as I can, but I must begin by telling you that we visited and nursed a poor man, a mason, who had fallen from a scaffolding in the Rue de Mail, and thus made great friends with his wife, Françoise Martin, an excellent woman. This was just at the time when the Reign of Terror was at its height. The blood of the Girondins was reddening the scaffolds, and domiciliary visits were becoming incessant. A priest, who had been vicar of Notre Dame des Victoires, had resided for six months unmolested in Mdlle. de Marconnay's hotel; but it was thought prudent

then to remove him to a tiny attic at the top of a house, where he passed for a journeyman watchmaker. We used to go there at four in the morning to hear his Mass. One morning, there was a knock at the door, and Françoise Martin appeared. "I guessed you would be here," she said. "I came in a hurry to tell you to put away these things, and M. l'Abbé had better come away with me. I can take him to my sister, who lives in a quiet part of the town, and will gladly shelter him."

'"I might get her into trouble," the abbé said.

'"Never you mind, M. l'Abbé. Justine is connected by marriage with Robespierre, and has such a character for *Civisme*, that no lodger of hers is looked at twice. They all think her capable of giving up her own father if he were a Royalist. She is glad enough to keep up this farce, for it enables her to help hundreds of suspects. Only yesterday, she took in a lady and her daughter, after registering them by the first

names that came into her head. They are the wife and child of the Marquis de Serlon, who has just been guillotined."'

'Your sister and Alexia?' Aline exclaimed.

Sister Christine smiled.

'I should have kept up the interest of the story by not naming them. Well, Françoise had her way.

'"Allons, M. l'Abbé, let us be off," she urged, and off they went.

'Mdlle. de Marconnay arrived a moment afterwards, full of anxiety about the priest.

'"Mademoiselle, you need not be alarmed," Martin said. He had followed his wife to see that the coast was clear. "Justine—Veuve Bastro I mean—is all right. She has set up a little wine and liqueur shop, so that her lodgers may go in and out unquestioned; and then the Citoyenne Bastro is such a famous Republican, you know." We all laughed.

'The domiciliary visit took place, and passed off safely. Everything went on as usual. I paid my round of visits to my sick people. When I came home I found a

letter from the abbé. "Come at once," he wrote. "The lady whom Françoise mentioned is in a state of great nervous excitement since I accidentally pronounced your family name. Besides, she is as like you as if you were twins. Who can she be? Not one of your German sisters, for, judging by her looks, she must be older than you."

'I need not describe to you with what a beating heart I went to that house. The moment I set eyes on my sister's pale, haggard face, I felt sure she was our lost Christine—the first-born child of my parents. Alexia looked at me with wonder, and all those who saw us together said it was impossible to doubt our relationship. We withdrew into an inner room, and when we were alone she told me all the events of her life. Her account tallied exactly with that of the woman at Toulouse. She had believed herself to be the child of the people who had brought her up till after their death, when she found amongst their papers letters which revealed to her the truth. She had married

a Frenchman, the Marquis de Serlon. They at once left Russia, abandoning the fortune she did not feel justified in retaining, and returned to France, where her husband had property. She made inquiries at Maillé about her family, but all she could hear was that two of the daughters were in Germany, and that the one who had become a nun was supposed to be in Paris—where, was not known. They came here to try and find me out, not expecting that one so little known in this country as the Marquis de Serlon would run any danger. They had, of course, adopted feigned names, but he was recognised by a man who had known him in Russia, denounced as an aristocrat, arrested and executed. My sister went almost out of her mind, and was hanging about the conciergerie with Alexia when the good Justine met them. You may imagine our emotion and the agitation which this discovery created amongst us. But there was no time to spend in talk; the pressing thing was to get them out of France, for she was on the list of the

suspects. It so happened that a servant of our German sisters was in Paris, and that they had written, entreating me to come to them under his escort, which I never thought of doing. But I went at once to look for old Franz, and found him preparing to depart. I arranged with him that Mdme. de Serlon and her daughter should meet him at a village outside Paris, whence they would make their way, on foot if necessary, to the frontier. We dressed them as peasants, and filled a cart with linen for the wash. They were to start in it at break of day. Mdlle. de Marconnay provided a pass for the barrier for "Brutus, Cornélie, et Porcia Bernier, blanchisseurs à Belleville," and furnished assignats for the journey. So far, all was promising, and I remained to see them off. I did not go to sleep; they did, and I was grateful for it. Towards three o'clock there was a loud knocking at the door. Had I been alone, I think I should not have minded it; but that mother and child—my lost sister just restored to me! It was dreadful.'

Aline said in a low voice, 'I know what those moments are.'

'The soldiers entered with a warrant. We were hurried off to the Luxembourg. In the cart we found Mère Louise. It was now broad daylight. Françoise passed us. She gave me a look which I knew meant she was on her way to Mdlle. de Marconnay. I had hoped to be taken to the same cell as my sister and niece, but it was not so. I and Mère Louise were left in a dark room, and informed that in the morning we should be examined. Next day, however, we were not summoned as early as was expected, and at noon went into a court with the other prisoners for exercise. There I found my sister and Alexia. One of the turnkeys—a relative of Françoise Martin—slipped into my hand a note, from which I learnt that Mdlle. de Marconnay had gone straight to the Jacobin Club, but that this time she had not obtained much. Robespierre told her that she must be thankful that he had prevented her own arrest, but that for the ci-devants in Fouquier-

Tinville's clutches there was no hope. The only promise he would give was that Alexia should be safely delivered into her hands. I had just time to swallow this note before the summons came to appear before the tribunal. One by one we stood before that man who had proposed the erection of a scaffold in the Hall of Judgment, that there might be no time lost between the sentence and execution.'

Aline thought, 'And my husband was that man's friend and tool.'

'I was able to whisper to my sister what I had heard about Alexia. I shall never forget the expression of her face. It seemed to say, "The bitterness of death is past." Mère Louise, my sister and I, were all, of course, condemned to death. It was too late that day for more executions. We passed another night in the Luxembourg. Elisabeth obtained us the favour to spend it together. Alexia slept in her mother's arms —I sat looking through the grated window at the stars. What wonderful hours those

are when, in the full strength of life, in the full possession of our faculties, we think that in a few minutes we shall be dead. I could not help saying to Mère Louise, "To-morrow we shall know all the mysteries of the world beyond the grave! We shall see . . . . God . . . . face to face! We shall pray then for all those we love; and also for those poor men who are sending us to the scaffold." Her face brightened, and she answered:

'"Let us pray for them now; a fervent prayer from their victims may yet avail them."

'We did pray long and earnestly; the time went by quickly. The terrible thing was the parting with Alexia; that over, I think we were all perfectly calm. In the Salle des Morts, as it was called, we had our hands tied behind our backs; and I remember feeling sufficiently composed to look with interest at poor André Chénier, the poet, whom I knew a little. He was the first summoned, about twenty more followed, and then Mère Louise and my sister were called; the batch was then complete; the rest had to

wait till the next day. I was taken back to the prison, and found my niece still there. I took her in my arms, and told her to pray for her mother's soul; that day was the eve of the 10th Thermidor. In the early dawn of the next, I was sitting by the pallet where Alexia was sleeping, when I was startled by the noise in the street. I looked out and saw the Rue de Vaugirard crowded, and a number of excited people hurrying along. A stone crashed through the upper part of the window, which was ungrated, and fell at my feet; a paper was tied round it, on which a few words were written, signed "E. M.": "Robespierre is outlawed by the Convention; the Terror is over." My first feeling was a pang. The deliverance had come too late to save Mère Louise and my sister. It seemed to make it almost more difficult than before to be resigned. There were then about twenty captives in the Luxembourg, all condemned to die on the morrow — but a reprieve arrived. The gaolers were bewildered, and supervision was

relaxed. We all met in the hall. The greatest excitement prevailed: the prisoners refused to withdraw to their cells, and the night passed in hope and fear. At length morning came; and the voices of the criers in the street told us that Robespierre, St. Just, and Henriot had lost their heads on the scaffold. I cannot help trembling when I think of the wild cry of triumph which rang through the hall. It was fearful to hear the execrations poured forth on those miserable men. There was an old priest amongst the prisoners. He and I tried to stem this torrent of curses. We fell on our knees, and many others followed our example; some thanking God for their deliverance, and others praying with us for their miserable souls. Alexia was conducted that day to Mdlle. de Marconnay's house. I was not released till some days afterwards.'

'And how did your sister escape?'

'In a marvellous manner. As the tumbril conveying her to execution entered

the Rue St. Honoré, the mob, who were beginning to rebel against any further shedding of blood, tried to stop its progress; but Henriot and his band, with drawn swords, dispersed the liberators; not, however, before Françoise Martin's husband—who had kept close to the cart, and took my sister for me—with the help of another man, seized her in his arms. The crowd favoured the rescuers, and she was carried into a shop more dead than alive; but, by dint of care and tenderness, she slowly recovered. And now that we are no longer trembling for our lives, I look back with awe and gratitude on this extraordinary rescue. It would not have been a singular event on the following days: in every large town in France the news of Robespierre's death saved a number of lives.'

'Yes; many in Lyons. What a time this is we live in, Sister Christine! Do you think there has ever been so terrible a one?'

'I don't know. It is difficult to say. There

seems to me a change coming over the world. What it will end in, God only knows.'

'What an extraordinary man Robespierre must have been!' Aline observed. 'I have heard that he has a cousin who, although she is a good woman herself, would never admit that he was wicked.'

'I can easily believe it,' Sœur Christine answered. 'That angel, Mdlle. de Marconnay, had a sort of strange regard for him. "It is aberration of mind," she used to say, "more than deliberate wickedness, which urges him on. There is some good in the man." He so often granted her what she asked, that she could not defend herself from a feeling of gratitude towards him. Some days after his death I found her crying. I pressed her to say what grieved her. "Oh, that man's end—that man's end, for whom I prayed so much! It must seem to you very unaccountable," she added, "that I should feel at all for him; but I knew him so well, and he was always kind to me."'

'It is right, is it not, never to despair of anyone's salvation before, or even after, death?' Aline asked, in a tremulous voice.

'More than right,' Sister Christine exclaimed. 'The contrary would be very wrong. I did not despair of the Mère Féroce.'

'Who is the Mère Féroce?' Aline eagerly asked.

'She is dead now. She was one of those women who went mad with a thirst for blood, who denounced and tracked their victims with relentless rage, and gloated over their deaths.'

'I knew such a woman as that,' Aline said, 'the wife of our gardien at Lyons. She might have been called Mère Féroce.'

'The one I speak of was abhorred in Auteuil, where she had lived for years, even by the Republicans, and since the death of Robespierre was often in danger of her life. She fell ill just after we came here, and no one would go near her. When I approached her wretched bed she received me with

curses and imprecations—it seemed almost hopeless to soften her.'

'And was she softened?'

'She died in my arms, asking God to forgive her.'

'Oh, how did you do this?' Aline eagerly asked.

'Humanly speaking, it was by drawing from her the secret of her intense hatred of the aristocracy. She had lost an only daughter who died young. The orphan children of that daughter remained under her care—a boy and a girl whom she passionately loved. Just on the eve of the Revolution the young man, Jean, shot a hare in the grounds of a nobleman in whose neighbourhood they lived. He was arrested, tried, and sent to the galleys. His sister—a delicate girl—died of grief. From that moment this woman had but one object or thought in life—to be revenged on the man who had broken her heart. When the Reign of Terror began, she denounced him as an aristocrat, and brought him and his wife to the scaffold.

From that moment she was seized by the horrible malady—for I firmly believe it to be a sort of madness, that thirst for blood which I spoke of—and God only knows how numerous were her victims. But kindness gradually wrought a change in that unfortunate creature. Since the death of her granddaughter she had never seen a friend —never spoken to a priest. She had lived on hatred and revenge, and her soul was poisoned. Gradually—like the drop of cold water that the rich man in the parable craved for in his thirst—words of pity fell on her burning heart like dew from heaven. She shed tears one day, and then I felt the work was half done. She did repent. She died a true penitent. By a strange coincidence, a few days before her end, a young officer arrived at her poor lodging and asked for Mdme. Michaud—that was her name. When the convicts were set free at Toulon, and he had thus regained his liberty, he enlisted, and had rapidly gained his epaulettes. Poor woman! she said to me, when I had

carefully prepared her for his visit: "Do not tell Etienne what they call me. Let him think kindly of his old grandmother." We did hide from the young man what her life had been, and she died with one hand in his and the other in mine.'

'I am so glad you have told me this,' Aline said; and then she remained plunged in thought, till her companion exclaimed:

'There is Mdlle. de Marconnay.'

They went to meet her, and then Sister Christine left Aline alone with her friend.

'I have obtained what you wanted,' Elisabeth said. 'You can go to-morrow to the conciergerie.'

She had seen some of the deputies, but they had not given her much hope about the Lyons Terrorist—the feeling against those men was so strong.

The next day she took Aline to Paris and to the conciergerie. She was conducted to her husband's cell. Ever since his arrest he had sunk into a state of apparent apathy. When she entered, he lifted up his head, which had

been resting on his hands, and stared at her with a scared and melancholy expression. His looks were strangely altered. She knelt by his side and said:

'Did not you expect me, Hypolite; did not my notes reach you?'

'No. I never thought I should see you again—I did not think you would come to me.' Again his head sank on his hands. She could not get him to speak. At last he roused himself, and complained of being very ill. 'I cannot sleep. If I close my eyes I have horrible nightmares. It makes me shudder only to think of the sights which haunt me at night. I see bloody heads and faces grinning at me, headless corpses pursuing me. Some one keeps always singing "Ça ira." It goes on and on and on! I stop my ears, but still I hear it. Oh, the darkness in which they leave me! This cell is peopled with fiends. I believe in nothing except the devil. I believe in him, for I am always seeing him now.'

Aline said, 'I have obtained leave to re-

main with you to-night. See, Hypolite, I have brought with me a rug and a pillow. I am not afraid of the devil, for I believe in God. You will be more composed when I am near you.'

'No, no; you have been tormented enough. Such a young thing as you are—a child—a poor child—tortured into marrying a wretch like me; and after so much previous suffering! Why did we not take pity on you?'

Aline could not restrain her tears. She was indeed very young to have gone through such a succession of sorrows. But it was not the thought of what she had suffered that made her weep; it was the indication of a softening change in the heart of her unfortunate husband that made her tears flow.

'Have pity on me now,' she said. 'Give me the consolation of knowing that I can comfort you, Hypolite. You cannot imagine how happy I shall be, if I can help you to drive away these horrible visions.'

'But if they return I shall rave like a madman, and you will be frightened.'

She knelt down beside him, and drew a little crucifix from her breast. Mdlle. de Marconnay had given it to her. The subsiding of the Terror had made it less dangerous to wear such things, though not openly, of course. She held the cross tightly in her hands, and before speaking breathed an ardent prayer. She knew from Vaubon that Hypolite's mother had been a good Christian. She had never named her to him. She had instinctively abstained from it, with the thought that a day might come when with greater effect she might appeal to her memory. That day was perhaps arrived. Her whole soul was in her eyes, as, gazing on his haggard and wild face, she said :

'Hypolite, I have never spoken to you of your mother. I wish I had known her. If she had lived, you would not have been——'

She hesitated ; he burst into tears.

'The wretch I am !' he murmured. 'She *was* good.'

'And she wished you to be good ?'

He made a gesture of assent, and continued to weep convulsively.

'I think that it is she who obtained that the little wife you so unexpectedly married should be given to you to speak in her name, and bring you back to what you used to feel and to think when you were a child.'

'Do not go on in that way, Aline. This is more cruel than anything else. Do you think I can bear to think of that time?'

'Yes; she is reminding you of it; she is watching us. God enables her to see us. I am sure she is praying for you.'

He did not answer, but she saw the big tears running down his cheeks and his breast heaving. At last he said:

'Aline, it is not since I have been in prison only that I have begun to have a horror of myself. Do you know when it was that a change first came over me? It was at Fontaine, when I looked at the grey-headed priest who married us. I thought of all those I had hunted to death, denouncing them to Collot d'Herbois. I knew more

about them than many others, because they had been my mother's friends. I felt that it was a wicked act to make you my wife, but it was true that my father had most to do with it. Since we have been married I have not been very unkind to you, have I ?'

'I am sure you never wished to be so.'

'Shortly after we were married I heard of what were called the energetic measures of Carrier at Nantes, and Lebon at Arras, more appalling even than the executions we ordered and witnessed at Lyons. Then a doubt arose in my mind about all this terror. I could not have admitted it to you or anyone, but it grew and increased. My hands are always burning or icy-cold. In the day all is bearable ; it is the night I dread.'

He looked about him with fear. Aline went and bought candles from the gaoler. She lighted one, and placed it near the corner where they were sitting. Supper, which she had ordered, was also brought in. She made him eat. He was so exhausted that he began mechanically to obey her.

Then she got him to lie down on his mattress; she cooled his forehead with her soft little hand; she placed the pillow she had brought with her under his head, then seated herself by his side, and sung, in a low voice, the hymn, 'Ave, Maris Stella.' The weary eyelids drooped, the contracted features became tranquil—he fell asleep.

But this repose was soon interrupted by fearful dreams. He started and sat up, glaring at her and at the walls of the cell.

'There they are again!' he screamed, in a voice of agony. 'Do you see those heads hovering over us? Do you feel the blood falling on your face? "Blood, blood, more blood!" Couthon used to say. Oh, it is horrible! See, there is my own head flying about!'

He hid his face against the wall, and groaned.

Aline felt that she had to wrestle for his soul. She was so bent on saving him that it took from her all fear. She went close to him, and put her arms round his neck.

'They will disappear. I know they will—I answer for it—if you will say, "My Jesus, mercy!"'

'I can't,' he hoarsely whispered; 'something prevents me.'

'Try; look up, look at me. I love you, Hypolite. I love your soul, and God loves it. For my sake, say those words. I can almost hear your mother praying for you.'

Then she joined her own hands, and with that intensity of faith in prayer which removes mountains, she said again the words:

'My Jesus, mercy!'

He repeated them after her, and when he had once uttered them the spell was broken. Over and over again they were said, until fatigue overpowered his worn-out and overwrought frame. Again he fell asleep—she watched by him all night. Whenever he began to cry out and tremble she put her lips to his ear, and said those or other words of prayer:

'God be merciful to me, a sinner!' or, 'Mary, pray for me!'

Towards morning she, in her turn, became exhausted, and when he awoke he saw her lying on the floor, her head supported by the folded rug, and in her hand her little crucifix. There were tears on her cheeks, but almost a smile on her lips. He had never seen anything so beautiful. A fear seized him, she looked so white—was she dead? No, her bosom heaved gently. He knelt down reverently and gazed on her in silence.

The work for which she had asked strength was begun that night, the grace she had prayed for was granted; the husband who had been forced upon her, the Terrorist whom she had been constrained to wed, had been gradually prepared for the change which now came over him.

She pursued her task with courage and perseverance. Day by day she spent hours in his cell, supporting and instructing Hypolite. She succeeded in bringing several times a priest in disguise to visit him. He returned not only to the faith of his earlier years, but to the practice of his Christian

duties. A strange and terrible confession he had to make. The priest must have listened with horror and pity to the fearful tale, and with great wonder at what grace had wrought in that soul returning to God from afar off. His repentance was deep and sincere. His love for his wife was now a worship, more than a passion. As the sense of his terrible guilt deepened, he felt himself unworthy of kissing even her feet. There was no familiarity, but a profound reverence in the way in which he spoke to her; that young girl of sixteen inspired him with a sort of awe. He felt that to have married her as he did had been a crime.

Meanwhile the day arrived on which his father and himself were to be tried. Public opinion was completely roused against the Terrorists. Lebon, Carrier, Collot d'Herbois, had been executed. The two Parcins were condemned to death. Hypolite heard his sentence with resignation, almost with joy. When he saw Aline after it had been announced to him, he knelt at her feet, and said:

'With all my heart, I thank God that I am to die. You and the priest said I was not to kill myself and set you free. Now you *will* be free; and if the prayers of a guilty but dying man can be heard, you will be happy, patient and sweet angel, faithful unto death to a vile husband.'

Aline gave him no hope of a reprieve. She maintained in him the sentiments of acceptance of his fate, of humble hope of mercy from God, which filled his soul, but she left no means untried to obtain the repeal of his sentence. With Mdlle. de Marconnay's assistance, she went to plead for him with all the most influential members of the Convention. If he had been the object of her youthful affection, the chosen of her heart, she could not have besought more earnestly, more ardently, for his life. She had not followed his father with more intense supplications when her aunt was doomed to die, or her brothers to be tried, than now she pleaded for him.

Her youth, her beauty, even her story,

which became known, influenced her judges: he was reprieved, and soon afterwards pardoned.

She had ventured to sue for Parcin himself, but utterly in vain. She asked leave to visit him. He received her coldly, but when he heard that she had obtained Hypolite's pardon, his lips quivered, and he said:

'You are good.'

Then he made a sign she should leave him. He died the next day with stoical indifference.

Aline was grateful, deeply grateful, that she had succeeded in saving Hypolite. He owed his life entirely to her. She blessed God that he had repented, and was to live, and hoped he would keep his resolutions; but when the strain of the last week was over, when there were no more efforts to be made, an extraordinary depression ensued. She could not look forward without an intense dread to a life spent as the wife of Hypolite Parcin. For the sake of his soul, and when death was hanging over him, she

had shown him affection, and really felt it; but, nevertheless, he was the husband who had been forced upon her, and with whom, even changed for the better as he was, she could not have any sympathy. His name would be abhorred by her brothers and all her relatives. The past could never be forgotten. In the first days of her marriage, and under the Reign of Terror, there had been the stimulus of doing good to others, and of being herself daily, more or less, in danger. What she had to endure in Parcin's house was, in a certain sense, a martyrdom, and she had borne it with the spirit of a martyr; but now people breathed freely, returned to their homes, began to lead ordinary lives: so must she, and with her husband by her side. She reproached herself for the terrible repugnance with which this thought inspired her, but could not overcome it. Her energy seemed expended—body and soul were utterly worn out.

On the day of Parcin's execution, she felt unable to go to the prison from which

Hypolite was to be released in two days. She begged Mdlle. de Marconnay and Sister Christine to visit and console him. She remained herself, prostrated, silent, weeping over her blighted youth, reverting involuntarily to the thought of that man she had so little, yet so well, known. His name she uttered once or twice, with a sore, aching feeling in her heart, and a tenderness which frightened her. What if she were to fail in strength ; what if her burthen should prove too heavy for her to bear during the long vista of years which stretched before her ? What if she should meet M. Alexandre again, and not be able to help feeling glad to do so ? What if she should be tempted to hate Hypolite, now that he no longer deserved it, now that God had forgiven him ? She looked back with a sort of wonder at all she had endured and done. Had another effort been required of her, she must have broken down. It alarmed her to think of the past, and still more of the future. 'Oh thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou

doubt?' might have been said in that hour to that poor, weary child. She was not forsaken and uncared for. Her Heavenly Father was watching over her.

On the third day after the one on which she had begun to give way to this hopeless dejection, Mdlle. de Marconnay told her that Hypolite was released, and that she might expect to see him at any moment.

'I must not forestall what he has to say to you,' she added. 'But this much I can and will say, I have been deeply touched by his repentance and good feeling. I cannot imagine anyone behaving better under the circumstances than he seems determined to do.'

She had seen that Aline had turned pale when she heard he was coming, and sought thus to reassure her.

Soon afterwards, Hypolite arrived, and the husband and wife remained alone together. She was struck with the change in his looks, which was greater still than when she had last seen him in prison. He looked ten years

older than before his arrest. His hair had turned partly grey, his ruddy complexion had changed to a sallow hue. He sat down by her, and said:

'Aline, I have come to wish you good-bye. Ever since the night in which you said you loved my soul, and that you snatched me from despair and what was fast becoming madness, and still more when you obtained my release—you, who of all others ought to have wished me dead—I began to see the only way in which I can partially atone for the past and procure you as much happiness as, in your position, it can be possible for you to enjoy. Peace, at least, may be yours. I have enlisted in a regiment which, under the command of General Hoche, leaves Vincennes to-morrow. I join it this evening. I have, therefore, come to take leave of you, ... not for ever, perhaps. If I rise from the ranks—if I should earn an honoured name—if I remain faithful to God, whom you have taught me to fear and to love, and I atone for the past by doing as much good

as I can—then, Aline, you might perhaps, without too much suffering, let me come back to you. . . .'

He stopped, unable to say more.

Aline was weeping. She held out her hand to him ; he covered it with kisses.

Subduing his emotion, he continued :

'Now you will be free. You will go to Castel St. Guy. You will gather your friends around you. Some day or other your brothers will return to France, and when they find I have left you they will be satisfied. If you wish it, take another name. . . . You can do so.'

'No,' Aline answered ; 'no. I am your wife, Hypolite, and I shall not call myself by any other name than yours. You ran risks, and did violence to your prejudices, when you married me before God's altar. The tie then formed I neither can nor will repudiate. I believe that you have acted wisely and well in entering the army. I think that there is a better hope of happiness for both of us, in future days, if we part now. I shall lead

a retired life, and try to make it a useful one. It will be with the deepest interest that I shall watch your upward course. For such, in God's sight, I feel confident it will be, whether you rise in this world or not. When it is possible, you will let me hear from you; and I will write when you let me know how I can do so.'

'You forgive me, then?'

'I do not know that *I* have anything to forgive you. No; it is not against me you have sinned, Hypolite; it is your offences against God, who has showed you such wonderful mercy, you have to atone for. Oh, let their memory never forsake you! On the field of battle be a Christian soldier, and, especially if it should be civil war that you are engaged in, oh, be merciful, generous, compassionate!'

'I do not know where we shall be sent. I hope it may be against the English, or the Germans, Aline. I have a favour to ask of you before I go. Will you pray for my poor father, even though he was so cruel to you?

that is, if you think there is any hope for him.'

'There is always hope,' she answered. 'None can know what passes between God and a soul in the last instant of existence. Every night, before we lie down, let us always say for him those words——'

'I know what you are going to say, those words which saved me: "My Jesus, mercy." And now, one more request. Will you give me something, Aline?'

She thought a moment, and then, opening a box by her side, took out a medallion which contained some of her hair. It had belonged to her Aunt Félicie. There was a cross on one side of it, and on the other her name in letters of gold. He held it to his lips, then stood looking at her with wistful eyes. She guessed what he was waiting for, and said:

'Kiss me before you go.'

He pressed her to his heart, and rushed out of the room.

She cried a long time, but a mountain seemed removed from her breast.

CHAPTER II.

JOY COMETH IN THE MORNING.

ALINE remained some little time in Paris with Mdlle. de Marconnay, and then went to Castel St. Guy, where Madeleine met her. Vaubon was also there; he had heard of his brother-in-law's execution, and his nephew's reprieve, obtained through the efforts of his unfortunate wife. But the news of his enlistment had not yet reached him. He was much moved when Aline told him of it, and spoke with feeling of her generous exertions in behalf of Hypolite. He accepted her proposal that he should occupy a house at some little distance from the château, and, according

to the directions of Mdlle. de Marsoulier, manage the estate, at any rate for the time that would still intervene before she came of age. What had been Vaubon's share in the transaction which had made her his nephew's wife remained a mystery to Aline. That he had informed Parcin of the circumstances which had made her mistress of a large fortune she could not doubt; but whether he was actuated by the desire of securing her hand and her possessions for Hypolite, or wished to afford her the only chance of saving her brothers from death, she did not know. His conduct towards her was uniformly respectful and kind; and, on her side, she treated him with consideration, and never said a word against him to anyone.

It was very strange to her to begin an entirely new existence in a home of her own. Everything was so changed since she had lived there as a poor dependent on Mdlle. de Marsoulier. She was now, in one sense, free. She was rich—everything around her promised peace and tranquillity

as far as she was herself concerned. But, oh, how she longed to awaken and find that all had been a dream since the night of St. Leo's day—the eve of Mdlle. de Marsoulier's death! How glad she would have been to awake in the blue-curtained bed in the little pavilion, and then to hear the noise of the old lady's gold-headed cane and the shuffling of her slippers in the passage! For then, though poor and lonely, and full of anxieties and troubles, she was Aline des Elmes; and life was before her, and sweet, bright hopes were mingled with her musings, and one thought above all she could indulge without scruple, which she now was always striving to banish from her mind.

On the morning after her arrival, she went to her old room and looked for the bundle of letters she had hidden on the shelves behind the 'History of China.' There it was, where she had left it. A strong temptation came over her to read them once more; but she resisted it. She placed them in an envelope, and wrote upon it:

'For M. Alexandre, to Madeleine Choziere's care.'

'This is the last time,' she said to herself, 'I shall write that name; and for the last time I will speak of him to Madeleine.'

She did so that day. She gave the little packet into her hands, and said:

'I have reason to think that the writer of these letters was the uncle of M. Alexandre. A nephew of that name is often mentioned in them. I put them by, hoping some day to give them to him. Now you know, Madeleine, that I cannot—that I do not hope ever to see him again; and I will not even to you, dearest friend, again mention his name. But take this parcel, and if ever you are able to do so, let him have it; and this one thing more I will say: if you do see him, sooner or later—years and years hence, perhaps—tell him that Aline des Elmes was more grateful to him than he can ever know or imagine. And now there is an end to this, and you must help me to begin a life of active work which will stifle all other thoughts and regrets.'

Such a life, with the assistance of Madeleine and Louise d'Herbelay, she did now begin. It was fortunate for her that there could not have been a time calling more loudly for self-devotion, zeal, and ardour in doing good than the year which followed the fall of Robespierre. The Reign of Terror was virtually at an end. France was breathing again; it was no longer dangerous to be seen praying; the authorities were recalling the banished religious to the bedsides of the dying. The faithful priests were emerging from their hiding-places. Privately and quietly, altars were being again raised, and good works organised; but the whole country was covered with ruins, the churches were closed or deserted, for good Catholics abhorred the schismatical ministrations of the constitutional clergy, and in the towns the mass of the people had given up the practice of religion.

Since Mdlle. de Marsoulier's death, the Abbé Brimay had lost all support, and his scanty congregation vanished. He had left Castel St. Guy, and the parish church

was closed. In her house Aline sheltered two aged priests, and the largest room in it was turned into a chapel, another into a school for the village children. With Madeleine she began to visit the sick in the neighbourhood, and learnt to nurse and to attend them. When her friend was obliged to leave her, she went to Les Elmes, and obtained permission to remove Odille and La Melon to her home. Since the change in public affairs, there was no longer the same necessity for their remaining at the old château. The farmer, Alix, promised her to watch over the interests of her brothers. La Melon proved a most valuable assistant to Aline in all her good works, and it was fortunate that she was at hand to restrain her from ruining her health by an excess of zeal. She and the two old abbés combined to exact from her a little moderation in her acts of heroic self-devotion. When they failed, Louise d'Herbelay was appealed to.

In about three months' time Aline heard from her husband. His regiment had been

ordered to La Vendée, where an insurrection was expected. His letter was short, and did not contain much more than this announcement. But it ended with a few words which conveyed to her that he was steady to his resolutions, and trying to redeem the past. She had reason to believe that her brothers were in England, and as the impending rising was likely to be supported by English troops and a contingent of émigrés, she had little doubt that they would join the invading force.

Soon afterwards this was confirmed by a letter from Maurice, who wrote from London. It was addressed to Mdlle. des Elmes. This caused her a cruel pang. Her name was a constant source of suffering, and the sight of her maiden appellation brought bitter tears into her eyes. Soon afterwards her brothers wrote again. They had then heard of her marriage, and wrote with tenderness, grief, horror, and despair. They said it could be proved that the marriage was forced upon her, was the result of compulsion, and might be invalidated. She knew this was not the

case. She had herself proposed the religious marriage, and promised Hypolite that if he consented to it she would be bound to him for life, and she would not—even if she could—have abandoned him. That night in his prison, in which she had wrestled for his soul and obtained his return to God, had made her his wife in feeling as well as in reality. The hope which her brothers held out to her she utterly rejected.

The reaction which had set in after Robespierre's death in some places fell into excesses of retaliation which produced massacres. Besides those who, like Carrier, Lebon, Collot d'Herbois, Parcin, and others, had been judicially condemned for their horrible crimes against their fellow-citizens, private acts of revenge and lynch-law destroyed many of those implicated in those horrors, and even some innocent persons. At Lyons, where there had always been a strong party against the Reign of Terror, and one which had been crushed with unheard-of cruelty when the Republican army entered

the city and it was delivered up to the tender mercies of Challier and the Montagnards, this was sure to be the case.

With sorrow and pain Aline heard of these bloody reprisals. She determined to go there and see Mdme. de Vergy, the Soulignés, and some other friends. She had kept entirely aloof from them during the time that followed her marriage; she dreaded to appear in their sight bearing the name they so justly abhorred. But she conquered this feeling, for she had an object in view: she wished to enlist them in the cause of humanity, and to tell them that if they knew of any innocent person in danger, amidst the violence of public feeling, her house was open as a refuge to those they would send to her. They were most of them afraid of showing sympathy for the partizans, or those accused of partizanship with the Terrorists; but the step she took was not altogether in vain.

A few days after her visit to Lyons, the housekeeper at Parcin's house, who had been kind to her, was rescued from the hands of a

mob by a person well known to the Soulignés and conveyed by him to Castel St. Guy. A few days later, as she was busy in her pharmacy, dressing the wound of a peasant, she was told that a poor old man was at the door asking to see her. He was almost fainting from exhaustion, having walked from Lyons. She ordered refreshment to be given him. When she entered the room where the stranger had been ushered, she did not, for the first moment, recognise the miserable being who was tottering towards her with a book in his hand.

'Citoyenne,' he finally gasped, 'here are the "Heures de Noailles"—and the prayer for peace — but peace does not come.'

It was old Forêt, who had sought the shelter of her roof. In a popular tumult his wife, his son, and his daughter-in-law had been killed, and finding himself without a friend or a hope, and almost dying of hunger, he had bethought himself of the little citoyenne and her prayers. Someone

told him where she was, and he had begged his way to Castel St. Guy.

Aline thanked God for this unexpected guest; and during the short remainder of his life Forêt remained in her house. Every day she read to him the prayer for peace; and as she did so, the thought of the civil war in the Vendée was in her mind, with all the melancholy possibilities which it was fraught with. She continued to receive, at somewhat distant intervals, letters from her husband, who was with his regiment quartered at Vannes. After a few months' service in the ranks, he had been raised to the position of a sergeant, and afterwards of an officer. His good conduct and great bravery in several engagements with the Chouans had obtained this rapid advancement. He wrote more at length to Vaubon than to her. From her brothers she did not hear again, but the public prints were full of surmises as to the invasion of Brittany by the English and the émigrés. She had no doubt that Maurice and André would be with this

force, and never opened a newspaper without intense anxiety.

One day Louise d'Herbelay broke to her that very bad news had arrived, by private hand, from La Vendée. A descent had been made on the Presqu'-île of Quiberon, which had proved most disastrous. There had been endless misunderstandings between the French Royalist invaders, their English allies, and the armed Chouans in the interior. Many had perished in the act of disembarking, and more would have been swallowed up in the raging sea, but for the heroic exertions of Commodore Warren, who rescued a great number. A detachment succeeded in landing, and made its way into the country between Auray and Vannes, and joined a large party of Chouans. A bloody engagement between this force and a regiment of the Blues ensued, which ended in the all but total annihilation of the Royalist battalion. About a thousand émigrés had survived; but having been captured with arms in their hands, were shot at Vannes. A small party

which had taken refuge in a hut in the woods effected its escape.

Such were the tidings which filled with poignant anguish many a home in France, whilst it excited an exuberance of joy amongst the adherents of the Republic ; for the horrors of the Reign of Terror, now nearly at an end —in its sanguinary features, at least—had not changed the political feelings of the majority of the nation, and the connection between the émigrés and the foreigners heightened the French feeling in favour of the Revolution.

Anxiety about the fate of her brothers weighed cruelly on Aline. The suspense was likely to be long, for if they had escaped, it was not probable that they would be able soon to communicate with friends in France. So she had but to wait—that word which represents such an untold amount of suffering—that state which elicits more ardent prayers than any other. It is at such times that work is a blessing—work that calls for active exertion of mind and body. Her days were spent with the sick chiefly, and in

her school. She had likewise instituted veillées as at Fontaine. She also had to watch over the declining life of poor Odille. Like a flickering lamp, her clouded mind recovered towards the end some transient gleams of intelligence. She had grown fond of Aline, and sometimes seemed to understand what she said to her.

A few weeks after the bad news from La Vendée had arrived, she had been singing, and the invalid had fallen asleep. It was getting dusk, and the room was only lighted by the stars, which were shining brightly. She would not have the shutters shut, or a lamp brought in. La Melon and one of the maids carried Odille to her bedroom, and she remained alone, sitting on that sofa where her aged relative used to sit, looking at the sky, thinking that she was only eighteen, wondering if she would perhaps live as long as Mdlle. de Marsoulier—that would be seventy years more. It seemed very long, but yet she had heard her say that it was very short to look back to. She could

not fancy how that could be. But old people always think so.

The door-bell rang. It was an unusual hour for a visitor. Perhaps it was someone seeking protection. If so, she would be told in a moment. The thought crossed her, 'Suppose it was Hypolite!' Her feeling about that man was a strange one. She could think of him, when absent, with something at times almost like tenderness. If she had known that he was dying, she would have braved every danger to go to him. But his coming home—domestic life with him—she could hardly brook the thought of. The door opened, and a servant said :

'A gentleman, who has come from La Vendée, asks to see madame. He brings her a message from someone she is interested in.'

'Let him come in,' she said, in a trembling voice.

It was not Hypolite. She rose, but sat down again, her limbs could not support her. She pointed to a chair.

'Madame,' the stranger said, 'in these days there does not need much preparation for bad news. It is too common—too easily anticipated—and I bring you bad news. I am speaking, am I not, to Madame Parcin?' Aline bowed her head. 'I promised your husband to give you this letter, to see it myself placed in your hands. It was his last request.'

She took the letter, and said, in an almost inaudible voice:

'Is he dead?'

'Yes; he died like a Christian, and a brave man.'

'In battle?'

'No. He was shot.'

Aline sank down on the floor, hid her face in the cushions of the sofa, and wept. The stranger remained silent for a little while, and then asked gently:

'Shall I tell you why, and how, he died?'

'Yes;' she said, in a low voice.

'Your husband was in command of a detachment sent to attack a party of

émigrés who had taken refuge in a thatched house, surrounded by brushwood. Their resistance was certain to be desperate, and the soldiers he commanded proposed to set fire to the furze, and burn the vermin—as they expressed it—in their hole. Hypolite Parcin opposed this savage act, and the delay caused by this circumstance afforded time to the Royalists to effect a retreat, sword in hand. The Blues were furious at this check, and accused their commanding officer of connivance with the rebels. A court-martial was held at Vannes: he was condemned to be shot. I was in that town on the eve of his execution, and obtained permission to visit him in his prison. I never saw a man more resigned—I might almost say better pleased—to die. He dwelt with marked satisfaction on the fact that he had been permitted to be the means of saving a large number of men from a frightful death.'

'Hypolite — poor Hypolite — may God reward him!' Aline ejaculated. 'Did he see a priest?'

'No, that was impossible; but I firmly believe that he made a good preparation for death. His tears and prayers gave evidence of his sorrow for the past. He kept pressing to his lips a medallion on which there was a cross. When he heard I was going to this part of France, he asked me, madame, to take this letter to you. May its contents, and what I have told you, soften your grief! I will no longer intrude on so sacred a sorrow. Do not move, do not speak,' he added, as Aline raised her head with effort, and turned towards him. It was so dark that he could not see her face. 'I have far to go,' he added, 'and with every feeling of respect and sympathy permit me to take leave of you.'

He walked to the door. She stood up and said:

'M. Alexandre.'

He turned back surprised. 'Do you know me, madame?'

'Yes,' she said, 'I do, but I cannot speak to you now. Will you sleep

here to-night, and to-morrow let me see you ?'

'If it will be a comfort to you, I will,' he answered, quite at a loss to think where he could have known Hypolite Parcin's wife.

With faltering steps Aline went into an adjoining room, rang, and asked for la Melon, and one of the abbés. She sent lights into the drawing-room, and ordered refreshments to be carried there. Then she told her nurse and the priest of her husband's death, and that the stranger who had brought her the news was a friend of her father's, but that he had not recognised her. She asked the abbé to go and keep him company, but not to tell him who she was. La Melon went to prepare for him Aline's old bedchamber in the pavilion. Meanwhile she staggered to her own room, locked the door and threw herself on her bed ; then she opened Hypolite's letter. It was a short one.

'My dear Aline,

'You know that for your sake I would have killed myself when I began to see what

a wretch I was, and to repent of my sins against God and against you. The good God has had pity on me. I could not have desired anything better than what has happened. I am condemned to death on a false accusation, for I did not betray my country, or my comrades. I only refused to commit an act of inhumanity, beyond the laws of legitimate warfare. That *I* should die for being humane—that is grand—that is just, and too good for Hypolite Parcin. The details of that event will be given you by the virtuous man who has visited and consoled me in my last hours. Farewell, Aline—most sweet, most dear, most brave of women! To-morrow you will be free; that is a comforting thought to your unworthy husband. I cannot see a priest, but the words you taught me, "My Jesus, mercy," are constantly on my lips. Pray for me. Aline, with my last breath, I will bless you.'

She pressed her hands on her brow and tried to think—to pray. It was almost more

than she could do—such a variety of thoughts were crowding on her brain, filling her soul with such strange emotions. Hypolite was dead—she was free. That page in the story of her life was at an end, with all its horror and pain and its strange consolations. His absence had awakened more affectionate feelings towards him than she had ever expected could be the case. And now that the great absence of all—the final one on earth—had for ever separated them, there was in her heart a regret, a pity, a tenderness, an admiration for his last act in this world which she would fain have indulged in undisturbed by other thoughts. But this was not possible. Others forced themselves irresistibly on that long and deeply tried heart. Joy seemed horrible at that moment. She thrust it away with all the strength of her will—she hated herself for the gladness which, like sunshine in the chamber of death, was forcing its way amidst all those other feelings so at variance with it.

M. Alexandre! She had seen him: he

had been speaking to her! Oh, that of all men in the world he should have been appointed to console Hypolite in his last moments, and bring her the news of his death! He was in her house. On the morrow they would talk together: they might now be friends; there was no bar between them. To be able, henceforward, to think of him without fear of doing wrong, that seemed happiness enough for a lifetime. And yet fancy would glance beyond, and then remorse followed; and she took up again her husband's letter, in order to exclude ideas so out of keeping with the first hours of widowhood.

Towards morning she slept a little, and then went to the chapel, where the two priests said Mass for the repose of Hypolite's soul. After praying there some time, she went to the drawing-room, and sent word to the stranger that she was ready to see him. Yes; he was still a stranger in one sense—that friend whose name she did not even know.

When he came in and saw her, his countenance changed. At the first moment it expressed a sort of bewilderment. Two years, and all she had gone through, had made a great difference in her. The doubt, however, was but for an instant.

'Aline!' he exclaimed. She held out her hand to him.

'Yes; Aline des Elmes. Poor Hypolite did not tell you who I was, and how I became his wife?'

'No; he did not,' M. Alexandre answered slowly, as if he were trying to collect his thoughts and to recover from his astonishment. 'For God's sake, explain to me this mystery!'

'Sit down, and I will tell you my history.'

She did so, as simply, as briefly as she could. Once or twice she had to pause and gather strength to go on, for the effort was great; but she was determined to tell him herself the whole of her sad story.

And what were the thoughts of the man

who listened to it? What had been his feelings about the young girl who had involuntarily, unconsciously, become attached to him during their brief sojourn under the same roof, and who, on the night when he had appeared before her as a deliverer, and carried her away to a place of safety, like a poor little bird rescued from the snare of the fowler, had irrevocably given him her heart, with little hope of being ever repaid for that priceless gift? If, on that night, he had been asked if he cared, in any sense but that of a strong friendly interest, for the daughter of M. des Elmes, he would have probably denied it, and thought he was speaking the truth; but still it would scarcely have been, at any rate it would soon have ceased to be, the truth; for the memory of those days, and of that night, had remained with him, in a way in which no memories abide that are not connected with feelings of a strong and peculiar kind.

It was a remarkable fact that two persons who had met under such peculiar circum-

stances, and parted so abruptly, should both have dated, from that moment, a change in their souls, which each of them associated with the thought of the other; that the veillées at Fontaine should have been, to each of them, the starting-point of a higher spiritual life —a realisation of what is involved in the Gospel precept, 'Be ye, therefore, perfect.'

Aline did not know what she was doing when she placed in the hands of one who had hitherto been contented with a very moderate amount of religious practice the 'Lives of the Saints.' The soil had indeed been prepared for such seed by sorrows of no common kind—a narrow escape from death, the loss of a sister expiring in the arms that could not save her, crimes witnessed with anguish, suffering patiently endured, and a sense of weakness humiliating to a proud nature. Aline had pressed him to read at the veillées. He had answered:

'Well, I suppose there is no resisting what a woman wills;' and she had replied:

'I suppose this is God's will, as it would be an act of charity.'

Those simple words made an impression she never could have supposed. It seemed to flash upon him that to live to do God's will is, after all, the only thing worth living for, and that His will is that charity which, like the peace it gives, passes all understanding. He had been, up to that moment, suffering without a purpose. In the book placed in his hands he found examples of what a strong will united to a strong faith can effect. What he read at night he meditated on during the day, and a great change was wrought in him.

The word 'conversion' is often applied to this new perception of great truths for the first time brought home to an individual conscience, but it is scarcely appropriate. It may come to the guilty, but it does also to the innocent. The past has not necessarily been sinful or defective, because suddenly the soul discerns the mountain-top which has to be reached

by labours and efforts it had never even thought of.

That Aline's friend during those days at Fontaine had conceived quite a new idea of life there is no doubt, and it was true also that she remained associated with it in his mind; unconsciously she had kindled a spark which was rapidly becoming a fire. As he read and she listened night after night in the barn of the Chozières, there arose a growing sympathy of feeling between them, which was to influence their future lives, though neither of them had at that time distinct thoughts on the subject.

When they parted there was not, perhaps, in their regard for one another, more than a girlish fancy on her side, and on his an admiring and affectionate interest in one whom he looked upon as a beautiful and gifted child. It was at Lyons, and on the road to Fontaine, on the night of her deliverance, that Aline discovered the true nature of her feelings. As to his sentiments towards her, they had remained, as far as his consciousness

of them went, much the same up to the hour in their history which we have reached.

He often thought of her tenderly, and longed to know where she was, and what she was doing. There was no day that the image of Aline des Elmes did not rise before him, and that, when he thanked God that life was no longer to him the hopeless thing it had been, he did not see her in his mind's eye holding out to him, with a smile unlike any he had ever seen on any other face, the volume of the 'Lives of the Saints.' But the discovery she had made a year before it was now his turn to make. Feelings of horror, of indescribable pain, of burning indignation, filled his soul and paled his brow when it was suddenly revealed to him that Parcin's widow was Aline des Elmes, when he looked at her in her sad loneliness and listened to her story simply related, but with accents which stirred his heart to its very depths. He found out that he loved her by his keen suffering, his immense pity, his won-

dering admiration, when he learnt what she had done and suffered, and that he read in her still so youthful, so childlike face the traces of what that anguish had been.

When she had finished her tale, Aline gave him Hypolite's letter, and said :

'Read this. He was not much to blame. It was his father's doing. He has done all he could to atone for what he could scarcely help, and for his former crimes.'

'God forgive me,' M. Alexandre said, 'If I find it more difficult to think kindly of him now than when I knew him only as the Terrorist and priest-hunter, and not as your —husband. But I do believe he repented of his iniquities, and his last act was heroic. But I cannot speak of him, I cannot speak to you, at this moment.'

He covered his face with his hands. She remained silent. At last he said :

'And your good father died before all this happened—happily for him! And your brothers ?'

'I think they must have been with the

defeated army in Brittany; but whether they are alive or dead, I know not.'

'And you live here alone?'

'I have faithful servants. Odille, my infirm sister, is here. Kind friends are near me. Madeleine sometimes comes.'

'Dear, good Madeleine!' M. Alexandre absently said. He could not overcome his emotion. He could not put in words what he felt. He could not bear to go, yet he felt he ought not to stay. After a long pause, Aline said:

'M. Alexandre, who are you?'

He started.

'Do you not know? Courtelance is my name—the Comte de Courtelance. I thought you knew it.'

'No, but I guessed as much. I found, in this house, a parcel of letters from your uncle to my aunt, Mdlle. de Marsoulier. I will give them to you.'

She went to fetch them.

He was glad to be alone, if only for a few minutes, to collect his thoughts.

She returned, and placed the letters in his hands.

He glanced at them, and said :

'My poor uncle! how little he foresaw what was going to happen to us all!'

'M. Alexandre, or I ought to say——'

'Never call me anything but Alexandre.'

'Will you tell me what you were doing in Brittany?'

It was a good thing that she asked him this question ; to have to answer it calmed his agitation.

'It must seem strange to you that I was there, and not with the Royal army. After I left Fontaine, I went to join my friends in the Bocage, who were organising a fresh insurrection, and reckoning on the assistance of the English. I grieved over an attempt which it was well known some of the wisest amongst them considered all but hopeless. My own feelings were averse to an alliance with our hereditary foes, even against the Republic ; but I would not forsake the cause for which I would willingly have laid

down my life, or the flag which had led us to victory with Lescure and La Rochejaquelein. At the outset of the insurrection, during an engagement between our brave peasants and the Blues, I was taken prisoner. My fate seemed certain, and I prepared myself to meet it. But it so happened that I was taken before General Hoche, between whom and myself, when we were youths, a great friendship had existed. We had been at college together. I had rendered him in those days a service such as boys can sometimes render to one another, which he had never forgotten. The moment he heard my name, he determined to save me. The fact that I had not been an émigré made it easier to spare my life. Hoche knew and trusted me, and I was released from prison on giving him my parole not to bear arms against the French Republic at home or abroad. I did this without hesitation, for, as I said just now, great as was my desire for the triumph of monarchy, I approved neither of the time nor the means then employed for its restora-

tion. The spirit of the Vendean struggle was no longer the same as when our brave and religious peasantry rose two years ago. I neither liked nor trusted our English allies. But the question was where to go, what to do, how to utilise a life so miraculously spared. A sudden impulse made me resolve, before I left the friend who had saved it, to ask him a favour, which he could only have granted to one he absolutely trusted: this was the permission to work as an infirmarian in the military hospital at Vannes. It was crowded with sick soldiers of the Republican army and Vendean prisoners. The small-pox, moreover, was decimating its inmates. He had been obliged to recall to it some of the dispersed Sisters of Charity, dressed, of course, as Seculars. My request surprised him. He hesitated a little, but then he said: "Henri, I know I can trust you as I would my own self. Give me your word of honour to forward no interests but those of humanity, and I accede to your request."'

'How good of him!' Aline exclaimed. 'How glad you must have been!'

'Yes; I had obtained what we do not pray for enough, a great opportunity of doing good. There was suffering to be relieved, consolation to be given to the souls as well as the bodies of dying men. I have been able to suggest thoughts to those in their last agony, and hopes which God has, I trust, in His mercy, blest. In some cases I procured the assistance of a priest, who entered disguised. In short, God has been wonderfully good to me. The pestilential state of the hospital did not affect my health, though several infirmarians, and some of the Sisters, fell victims to the infection. *You* can understand, I am sure, that I was happy there.'

Aline rose, and held out both her hands to him. They sat down again, side by side, on the sofa.

'I now perceive,' she said, 'how it was that you were able to see poor Hypolite before his death.'

'As soon as I heard his name, I obtained permission to visit him. I remembered it as that of one of the worst Terrorists at Lyons. There was no merit in my affording him every consolation I could. . . . It was not hard at all. . . . Had I known—yes, if I had known all, I should have found it harder. But there is nothing too hard when once . . . .'

He paused, and she said :

'I know what you mean, when once we do all for God. We have both discovered that. The thing will be never to forget it. Are you going back to Vannes ?'

'Yes ; I am on my way to Lyons, on some business entrusted to me—before his death—by one of my poor patients, whose wife and children are there. I shall get back to Vannes as soon as I can, and stay there, I hope, till this dreadful war is over. It cannot last long now. You live here, Aline ?'

'Yes ; there is much to be done. All my duties are here.'

He rose, and then said :

'Aline, may I write to you?'

'Yes.'

'And when the war is over, may I come and see you again?'

'Yes.'

She could not say more. She was afraid of saying too much. He kissed her hand. She looked at him with eyes brim-full of tears.

'M. Alexandre, I have grieved long and deeply since we parted that I had not thanked you as I wished for all you did for me, and now that we have met, I have not thanked you at all.'

'No thanks would equal the permission to return,' he answered, in a voice which betrayed great emotion. Then he once more kissed her hand, and went away.

Aline saw him drive off, and sat long at the window, motionless and absorbed in thought. All in her destiny was so suddenly altered. Little could she have thought or imagined twenty-four hours before that the whole aspect of her future life would so soon

entirely change. In truth, though Hypolite's death was in itself an awful and sad event, she could not but feel, even putting herself out of the question, that it had been a merciful end, a noble compensation for the crimes of his past life. His mother, as well as the wife whose fate had been so miserably linked with his, might have found consolation in the thought that he had died forgiven by God and not unblest by man.

This was what she dwelt upon, when later that day, after one of the abbés had broken to Vaubon the news of his nephew's death, she sat with him and witnessed his profound grief. The poor man was overwhelmed by this blow. It required all her delicacy and uprightness of heart to say to him all that she could do with truth of her own feelings, and to meet with the most womanly and patient tenderness the various phases of his sorrow.

He sometimes turned away from her, exclaiming :

'*You* cannot regret him. *You* must rejoice that he is dead. Oh yes, though you cry, you are glad in your heart. It must be so, and yet he loved you so much. Oh that he had let those wretched rebels die as they deserved! He would now be alive.'

And other things of this sort he said, which gave her great pain. She was not able to console him as she would fain have done. Rising to leave him, she pressed his hand, and said she would return later, and moved towards the door. When he saw her going, he stopped her.

'Stay, stay and hear me. I want to tell you the truth. If it had not been for me you would not have been forced to marry that poor boy. I told Parcin of your rich inheritance. I told him Hypolite was in love with you. When once he knew all this, the rest was his doing, but *I* put it into his head. Forgive me, forgive me! I am broken-hearted. I never cared for anyone but my sister and her son.'

The poor old man threw himself at Aline's

feet, weeping bitterly. She raised him. She led him back to his chair, and sat beside him. Then courageously she spoke of the past :

'Do not reproach yourself, do not regret that God made you the means of saving my two brothers, who would have died but for the offer then made to me. What do pain and anguish signify, when they lead to good ? A great change came over Hypolite whilst awaiting the execution of his sentence in Paris. The faith of his childhood returned—his heart was softened. He repented of his share of what you yourself lamented. And I have seen one who was with him on the eve of his death. He was resigned, and full of faith and hope that he was going to be reunited with his mother. Is she not now glad in heaven that her child died as he did for humanity's sake ?'

'I thought of her,' Vaubon answered, 'when I so much wished Hypolite to marry you. It was not all for the sake of this estate. I knew you would end by making

him a good Christian, and though I am neither good nor pious myself—indeed I hardly know if I believe in anything—I knew what she would have wished.'

On this chord Aline did not cease to touch in her future intercourse with one in whom affection for a good woman had always been a redeeming feature. It proved the means of his gradual conversion to Christian belief and practice.

La Melon said to herself one day: 'God knew what He was about when he allowed my dove to wed a vulture. He knew what would come of it. More shame for me, who had not faith to trust Him.'

About three months after her husband's death, Aline received letters from her brothers dated from London, relating the events of their short and disastrous campaign in La Vendée, after the ill-fated landing at Quiberon. With wonder and emotion she discovered that Maurice and André were amongst the party of émigrés who had escaped from a barn near Vannes, which she could not doubt

was the one where, but for Hypolite, they would have met with a dreadful death. It was an extraordinary coincidence that twice, under such different circumstances, he should have been the means of saving them. If the first was connected with anguish, even in the recollection of it, the second she could think upon with tearful gratitude; and there was comfort too in what Maurice and André wrote. When the fugitive party dissolved, and the rout of the Royalist forces left no hope but of personal escape, they had separately made their way to the coast. Maurice was taken on board an English ship still cruising in sight of land. About the same time André had crossed the Channel in an open boat.

With joy and surprise they met at the little French Chapel, opened three or four years before in a mews adjoining George Street, Hanover Square, a poor and humble sanctuary where the exiles assembled to worship; where holy bishops and priests ministered; where some of the best and

noblest sons of France knelt to pray for better days. Maurice wrote as follows :

'You may imagine how pleased I was to see André at Mass. I have reason to think that your sacrifice — poor little suffering angel !—has had blessed results. He never says much to me—that is an old habit of his ; but there is someone else who gives a good report of him. The Soulignés are here. They were denounced just about the time we left Lyons, and fled to London. He, poor man, died soon after his arrival. His wife and daughter fell into great poverty, but little Sophie has turned out to have that in her which we should never have suspected. André discovered them living in one room in a dingy street ; the mother so delicate that she could do little for their support; the girl working hard, giving lessons by day, and embroidering half the night ; singing, moreover, over her work, and as merry as ever. Nothing will make her grave, and that is what André likes. They are now openly

engaged to each other. I do not object: how can I? She has a good influence over him, and all the more so that she is in appearance such a madcap. But in essentials Sophie is all right, and has confided to me that André has been to his Easter duty. He has obtained employment as a copyist and translator, and I am at my old trade again—a French teacher in a school at Hampstead. I long to hear from you, my sweet victim, for I cannot look on you in any other light. I assure you that it is well for me that I have to work hard, for the idea of your fate and your self-sacrifice is often more than I can bear.

'P.S.—It will interest you to know that Pauline d'Apchier and her parents are likewise in London. She was married a few weeks ago to M. de Longivalle.'

What was Aline's answer to this letter can be easily imagined. It was a blessed task, that of softening the feelings of her brothers towards the man they were tempted so bitterly to hate, that man who had unconsciously saved their

lives at the expense of his own. She wished them to think kindly of him. That he was dead, that she was free, that this episode of her life could now be buried in silence, if not oblivion, would, she knew, make it easier for them to do so. She shed many tears over this letter, but they were not bitter. She had one joy which, to a nature like hers, was full of sweetness. She could help those she loved with the means God had given her, cheer their exile, and facilitate André's marriage, which she wished to take place immediately.

Meanwhile she worked harder than ever amongst the poor, and led an extraordinary life for so young a woman, a very holy and very active one. She received letters from M. Alexandre, which deepened into reverence her admiration of him ; but when she wrote in answer, a great reserve, a sort of embarrassment, checked the free expression of her thoughts. She began to consider herself unworthy of him, and to be ashamed of the hopes and expectations which had risen in her heart after that meeting, so unlooked

for, so quickly over. She said to herself that to be his friend was happiness enough. Was it not much more than she had once looked for? If after he had left Fontaine she could have been told that at no distant future she would see him again, know his name, be at liberty to correspond with him, would it not have seemed enough to content her yearning heart? The worst was that she could not distinctly recollect how much, or how little, he had said during that agitating interview, which had warranted her—she thought so at the time—in believing he cared for her. Now it seemed all uncertain. She had been so afraid, just as she had heard of Hypolite's tragical fate, of saying anything which might have implied a desire that he should remain withher longer —that perhaps she had been cold to him.

Time went by, the war was over, the pacification of the Vendée, as it was called, accomplished; but in M. Alexandre's letters nothing was said of his return to Castel St. Guy. He spoke of the works he was en-

gaged in, of the reopening of churches and schools, which was by degrees taking place. He seemed to be travelling from place to place on errands of charity, carrying consolation to widows and orphans, visiting the hospitals and prisons. Each word he wrote was precious to her, but sometimes she envied the sick, the prisoners, the poor, whom he comforted.

'I, too, am sick at heart,' she felt, 'and he does not comfort me; I, too, am an orphan, and he does not visit me. I am more lonely than I can bear. Why does he not come to me? Month after month goes by, and not a word does he say on which I can build an expectation.'

In the course of the summer she fell ill, no serious malady, but still enough for her to feel a great wish to see Madeleine, who, as soon as she heard such was the case, left everything else to come to her. It was not long before she guessed that there was something on Aline's mind which was increasing her bodily indisposition. She was the only

person in the world who knew of her attachment to her deliverer, and she quickly discerned that it was suspense and the sickness of hope deferred which was undermining her health, so she determined that this should not go on. His letters, which Aline showed her, made Madeleine suspect that either he had a religious vocation or that some other obstacle stood in the way of his thinking of marriage; or perhaps she had been mistaken all along in supposing that he cared for her except as the daughter of one who had been his friend, and a young girl in whom he took an interest; who was, moreover, engaged in the same works, and inspired with the same feelings, as himself.

'This must be cleared up,' she said to herself. 'Aline is not one who will languish in despondency if she sees her way clearly before her. One more trial, one more sorrow, and then she will be herself again, a brave and faithful servant of our suffering Lord. But this loneliness, this uncertainty, this correspondence, this watching and ex-

pecting from day to day, are bad both for mind and body; there must be an end of it.'

But she would not act on her own sole responsibility. She consulted Louise d'Herbelay, and both agreed that something must be done. Louise left it to Madeleine, whose excellent good sense she trusted, and who was acquainted with the Comte de Courtelance, to act as she thought best. Madeleine wrote to him:

'M. Alexandre,—Our Aline is not well. The sufferings of so many years are telling upon her, and she works too hard. She has but few friends—why do you not come to her? It would be a greater act of charity than any of those you are doing. At any rate, come and see us. My parents are getting old. Father never goes now to the Croix Rousse; mother still reads at the veillée. The church is re-opened. Let me hear from you soon.'

In due time, for the post was slow in those days, came the answer:

'My dear Madeleine,—I, too, long to see you. I shall arrive at Fontaine a very few days after you receive this letter.'

Madeleine went home to prepare for his reception. His readiness to obey her summons gave her hope all would be right, but to Aline she said nothing of his coming. She only asked her if she would be inclined for a little change of scene and air, and whether she would condescend, now that she was such a rich lady, to stay a few days at the old house, and gladden her father and mother with the sight of her face—'pale and thin as it is,' she added, kissing her. Meanwhile she thought :

'Whether M. Alexandre is with us when she comes will depend on circumstances ; but anyhow, it will be good for her to get away a little from home.'

Aline hesitated. Fontaine was connected with the deepest emotions of her life. It seemed too much almost for her strength to go there. Still, anything would be better

than the vague uneasiness she was enduring. She told Madeleine that she accepted her invitation, and they parted.

About a fortnight afterwards M. de Courtelance, not in such rags as when he first came to Fontaine, nor in the uniform of a Republican official, but in no very smart attire, arrived at the Chozières' farm, and was received like a son and a brother. After supper he and Madeleine went into the garden.

'Now tell me about Aline,' he said at once. 'She is never out of my thoughts. How is she?'

'Better, but not yet well. If she is never out of your thoughts, is it that you care for her?'

'She is the only being I care for in the world. Poor darling, how this garden puts me in mind of her! Such a child as she then was, and yet so wise, so brave, so good!'

'She expected a visit from you after the war was over. You never came.'

'How could I, loving her as I do?'

'You do love her?'

'I have loved her ever since we met here, but I did not know I was in love with her till the day I brought her the news of Hypolite Parcin's death.'

'But why should you stay away because you love her?' Madeleine said anxiously, for this was the turning-point of the whole matter.

'Why?' he answered impatiently, 'why? Why, because she is rich and I am poor, for the present at least; because she has none at hand to advise and direct her on the subject of marriage; because I saved her life, and if I was to let her see, and I should not be able to help it, how wrapt up I am in her, she might marry me out of gratitude—she might again sacrifice herself, poor angel! . . .'

Madeleine could not help laughing. 'What strange creatures men are!' she thought to herself. 'How they keep poor women in suspense, without dreaming of the suffering they inflict.'

'I thought you were perhaps thinking of being a priest or a religious,' she said.

'Such thoughts have crossed my mind, but I am not called — I feel convinced of it now—to such a vocation. Still, at one moment I doubted if marriage would not be an obstacle to the mode of life, to the work for the poor, to which I do believe I am called. From Aline's letters I thought that she was perhaps thinking of becoming a nun, and that, also, made me dread to place myself in the way of what might be the secret leanings of her soul. Her letters at first gave me this impression — less so lately. What is your idea about it? I ask in fear and trembling.'

'You may rest assured,' Madeleine said, 'that Aline has no vocation for the religious life. I know it from herself and those she respects and consults; that she has the same drawing you yourself feel for a more than ordinary holy one in this world, I do not doubt. As to your poverty, M. Alexandre, it is but temporary. You have never emigrated. You will soon recover your property. Her brothers can be communicated with. Why

should you remain apart when you could do so much good together ?'

'I wonder if this can be God's will for us !' Alexandre exclaimed.

His whole countenance changed. He walked once or twice backward and forward along the narrow gravel walk, scarcely feeling as if his feet touched the ground.

'But how can I go to Castel St. Guy ?' he said to Madeleine, who was watching him with delighted eyes. 'She is alone there, with the servants and that old Vaubon.'

'She will come to us. She has promised to do so, not knowing, of course, that you would be here. We shall lodge you in poor M. des Elmes' room downstairs. She will sleep in your old closet. I shall fetch her to-morrow.'

'Madeleine,' Alexandre said with emotion, 'during the Reign of Terror we used to call you "Auxilium Christianorum." You will always deserve that name. But, after all, perhaps Aline does not care for me.'

'Perhaps not,' Madeleine answered, but her face belied her words.

Three days afterwards Aline arrived. It was only half-way between Castel St. Guy and Fontaine that Madeleine broke to her—great joys have to be broken as well as sorrows—that M. Alexandre was at their cottage. She could hardly believe it. After the first greeting she left him. She wanted to be alone, in order to kneel down and thank God. She did not think then of the future. She had seen him; she was going to see him again. That was enough. There are times when the full heart feels 'Sufficient for the day is the joy thereof.'

On the morrow, the meals in the kitchen—so different from the solitary repasts at Castel St. Guy—the strolls in the garden, Mother Chozière's kind care of her, the old farmer's civilities, Driette's caresses, Pierre's antics, Madeleine's hints that there was happiness in store for her—all helped to make the hours pass in a kind of vague expectation of something which would decide her fate.

By a sort of tacit consent she and M. Alexandre avoided being alone, though they hardly lost sight of one another. He felt that he had that to say and to hear which might dispel a dream of hope, and so did she.

'Are you coming to the veillée?' Madeleine inquired, as they all stood before the door looking at the peasant women on their way to the barn.

Aline said:

'I would not miss it on any account.'

'May I read something I have brought with me?' M. Alexandre asked.

'Oh yes, if it is edifying,' Madeleine answered with a smile.

He followed them into the barn. It was still broad daylight, but there was now a crucifix where the lamp used to stand. Aline thought of the night when she had stood in that place with a breaking heart, Hypolite Parcin's bride. M. Alexandre did not know that she had been married there, or it would have affected him too.

It was a small thin book he drew out of his pocket, one he had met with at a book-seller's shop at Vannes. It contained the history of two young wedded lovers of noble birth and great wealth, who lived in the seventeenth century, and was written in old-fashioned French, which rather added than took away from its pathos. Their story was this :

On a fine autumnal morning they had rode out of their castle-gate to join the chase. The sky was as cloudless as their happiness. Nature smiled, and so did they as their eyes met. Side by side they galloped across the park, and into a wood, where a deer had been started.

The lady's horse took fright and ran away. It fell into a ravine. There she was found, not dead, but having received an injury which changed the whole aspect of her life.

From that moment the blooming bride became a crushed and blighted being, confined to her couch, or at best only able to walk a few steps leaning on a friendly arm.

Further recovery was hopeless, her doom was fixed. Never could she know a mother's joy. Despair seized upon her. Her misery seemed greater than she could bear. But the husband she loved came to her one day; he sat by her couch and spoke of a happy life they might lead, one he had thought of, and sighed for, in the midst of pomp and pleasure—one in which a foretaste of heaven might be theirs. He opened the Bible, and he read to her these words:

'"Deal thy bread to the hungry, and bring the needy and harbourless into thy house. When thou shalt see one naked, cover him, and despise not thine own flesh. Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thy health shall speedily arise; and thy justice shall go before thy face, and the glory of the Lord shall gather thee up. Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall hear. Thou shalt cry out, and He shall say, Here I am; for I the Lord thy God am merciful."'

And the Lord was merciful to them. From that time forward the Count and Countess

de la Garraye began to lead what the world called a strange existence. She had taken especial heed of the words, 'Bring the needy and the harbourless into thy house;' and as she could not go to the poor, she asked her husband to let them dwell beneath her roof. Their château was converted into a vast hospital. Every suffering creature within their reach became to the servants of God substitutes for the children that were denied to them. Her fragile form was seen slowly moving from bed to bed, and her lips speaking words of comfort to each sufferer in turn. And the while, on the horses with which he no longer hunted, her husband rode from town to town, from village to village, and to lonely huts amongst the mountains, in search of the sick, the infirm, the afflicted, and had them conveyed to his and their home.

Truly did light break forth as the morning to this wedded pair. Truly did the glory of the Lord take them up; a joy not of this earth gilded their noon and their decline.

She died before him. He laboured some years longer. Their works survived them, and their memory is still in benediction.

When M. Alexandre had finished reading this narrative, and the prayers had been said, he went out first ; and when Aline passed by him, he asked her to come and sit on the bench near the archway.

She hesitated.

'With this warm shawl on,' Madeleine said, throwing one round her shoulders.

It was a beautiful evening, the moon slowly rising. They remained silent for a little while, then he said :

'What do you think of the story of the Lord and Lady of La Garraye ?'

Aline answered that 'Their example would be a good one to follow.'

With a beating heart he said, for he felt as if her reply to his next words would be decisive :

'Even if the starting-point of such a life should be happiness and gratitude, instead of disappointment and despair ?'

'Even so,' she murmured.

'And would you lead that sort of life with me?'

'I could not lead it without you.'

For some instants his emotion was too great for utterance, then he said:

'I should be frightened, Aline, at this immense happiness, had we not both drunk deeply of the cup of sorrow, or if we were at this moment thinking only of ourselves.'

'That we never will do,' she answered.

Tears of joy were streaming down her cheeks.

Long and earnestly they talked together whilst the shades of evening fell, and the lights began to glimmer in the cottage windows. They laid plans for the future, which, had they been overheard, would have surprised most people, for they were modelled on the lives of the Count and Countess de la Garraye, with only so much difference as the manners of their own times involved; but in spirit they were alike.

The resolutions made that night were

fulfilled. They lent each other a helping hand. Neither of them drew back from the path of perfection both had entered on. At Castel St. Guy, and later on in Brittany, when the Comte de Courtelance recovered his inheritance, close to their own simply-furnished habitations rose hospitals and schools and homes for the poor, whose friends and servants they made themselves. Their children trod in their footsteps, and carried on their works.

It might be said of them, in the words of the Bible, that they were lovely and comely in their lives, and in death were not divided; for, by a singular privilege, vouchsafed to few married persons, Alexandre and Aline died within a few hours of each other.

THE END.

THE HANDKERCHIEF AT THE WINDOW.

THE

HANDKERCHIEF AT THE WINDOW.

CHAPTER I.

CASTEL BARCO.

ABOUT the middle of the seventeenth century, amidst the hills which surround the ancient city of Taggia, stood one of those feudal abodes—at once fortresses and country-seats—in which the provincial nobility of Italy used to dwell, in a half-warlike, half-rural manner.

In those days, on the coasts of the Mediterranean from the French frontier to the great commercial city of Genoa, the head of such a family united in his person the position of a chieftain with the avocations of a land-owner and a merchant.

The brisk trade carried on along the whole Riviera in olives, lemons, and oranges, connected the lords of the soil with all the great maritime towns of Spain, France, Italy, and even of the Levant.

Vessels from various parts of the world often sought refuge in the port of San Remo, one of the principal harbours on that coast.

Until the end of the last century, the towns lining the shore, or perched on the hills about it, were almost inaccessible except by sea ; mule-paths across the mountains, or following the sinuosities of the cliffs, being the only mode of communication by land.

Count Adelbarchi, the head of the family of Montenegro, was the owner of a grim mansion situated in the midst of the most smiling and lovely scenery. It stood on an elevation at the mouth of a gorge, on each side of which rose nearly perpendicular rocks, above whose jagged outline towered a range of beautiful purple hills, surmounted again by the snowy heights of the Maritime Alps. On one side it looked on Taggia, with its

quaint battlements and glorious churches, and on the other it commanded the whole of the fair valley extending from the foot of the mountains to the sea.

This count was a wealthy man in his way, but his fortune was subject to continual fluctuations. It consisted of the staple produce of the country, and varied according to the abundance or scarcity of the autumnal rains, which influence the fate of the whole population on a coast often visited by long, parching drought.

The nobleman in his castle and the peasant in his hut watch for those beneficial rains with the same intense anxiety. If they fail to fall at the right time every heart sinks throughout the land, for there is then little hope for the rest of the year.

Count Adelbarchi had two defects—a violent temper and a great love of money. He was not a wicked man. He had a conscience, so that these evil tendencies were kept to a certain degree in check. He generally repented of his fits of passion—of one of them

indeed bitterly, silently, and long. With regard to money, he knew, that almsgiving was a duty, and when things went well with him he was not remiss in performing it. He also made offerings of propitiation and thanksgiving in the neighbouring churches and chapels when he was uneasy about any of his cargoes or rejoicing over some piece of more than ordinary good fortune. He once hung up an *ex-voto*—a silver ship—in the sanctuary of Our Lady of Lampedusa, a famous place of pilgrimage in that neighbourhood. But in his alms and in his devotions there was nothing generous or disinterested. It began very strictly at home—and, when times were hard, did not go beyond it.

The begging Brother of the Franciscan Convent high up amongst the mountains would have often made a mistake in knocking at the wrong moment at the huge door of Castel Barco, had it not been for a little arrangement between him and Geltruda, the eldest of the count's daughters.

One day Fra Mauro walked up the deep

ascent leading to the gateway at a moment when it happened that bad news of his crop of olives had reached the chieftain, and, moreover, of the loss of one of his vessels, and when he met the old man, with his well-known sack on his shoulders, just as he was going down towards the shore in a towering passion, he swore at him and called him a lazy beggar.

Geltruda happened to be with him. She sighed when the oath passed her father's lips. Making a sign to Fra Mauro that he was to wait for her, she stood still whilst her father was in sight, but when his tall form vanished amidst a grove of ilexes she turned back, and, drawing near to the brother, gave him a small coin and said:

'You came at an unlucky moment, good Fra Mauro. My father—he cannot help it—is subject to fits of *rabbia*.'

We may here remark that there is nothing in the temperament or the habits of northern races at all resembling the sudden storms of rage which are called *rabbia* in

Italy. They are more violent and more transient than those who have not witnessed them can well conceive. Under their influence a person sometimes curses and blasphemes, who at other times would not utter an impious word or do an unkind act to save his life.

'Ah, it is a sad malady,' Fra Mauro ejaculated, shaking his head, 'which nothing but a great grace from God can cure. May He have pity on those who are subject to it!'

'I will tell you what I will do,' Geltruda said. 'It is always on Saturday morning that you make your quest in this valley. I will watch for you. I can see you from a great distance descending the path down the opposite hill. When my father is in a good humour I will hang at my window—look, there it is, that narrow window in the turret—a white handkerchief; but when he is in an angry mood I will put a black one instead; then you will know whether to come up to the house or not.'

For years this custom was observed, and it was only one of the many ingenious ways in which Geltruda spared her father the guilt of passionate outbursts, and obtained for the poor the alms he would not otherwise have bestowed. Her calm, earnest glance had a strange power over him. It was connected with a remembrance which often wrung with anguish the heart of that proud man.

He had been devotedly attached to his wife, who died when Geltruda was twelve years of age. She had suffered from his temper—not that it was often or offensively shown towards her; but the scenes she witnessed in his dealings with his servants and tenants had frequently given her great pain. Sensitive and delicate as she was, the sight of his angry countenance, the sound of his loud voice, made her quiver like an aspen leaf. She became very ill after they had been married about thirteen years, and the doctor said her heart was affected.

One day, whilst she was sitting on the terrace of the castle with little Geltruda by

her side, the count was thrown into one of his fits of rage by a gardener's stupid mistake. His orders had been misunderstood, and a favourite ilex tree cut down which he would have given almost anything to preserve. In his anger he snatched up a spade, and dealt the man so violent a blow on the head that he staggered and fell.

The countess gave a piercing cry, sprung up from her seat with extended arms, and dropped down dead.

Little Geltruda's eyes met her father's at that terrible moment, and neither of them ever forgot the expression of the other's face.

She never said it to anyone, but the count felt she knew what had killed her mother, and this knowledge gave birth to a resentment which seemed at times to subside completely, but now and then to revive in an unexpected manner.

Geltruda's brothers and sisters were much greater favourites with their father than she was.

Uberto, Enrico, Maddalena, and Rosa knew how to curry favour with him; the girls by coaxing ways and little cunning devices, the boys by flattering his weaknesses, and joining—when there was an opportunity for it—in his violent abuse of his neighbours and his dependents.

These children were badly brought up—spoiled and indulged when their father was in a good humour, bullied and roughly treated when he was out of temper.

Geltruda had been under her mother's care long enough to acquire strong religious principles, which, joined to a naturally good and thoughtful disposition, had preserved her from the faults which were very conspicuous in the rest of the family.

The others laughed at their eldest sister, and called her a *Santarella.* If they were ill or in trouble, however, the sympathy and good offices of the 'Saint' were habitually called for and appreciated. Rosa, the youngest of the set, would be seen flying down a flight of steps. 'The Signor Count

is in a *rabbia!* I am going to hide myself.'

'What a goose you are!' one of the brothers would cry out; 'you have only to storm and rage louder than his excellency himself, and to follow his lead by swearing a good oath or two, and then you need not be afraid of him.'

'Girls can't swear,' Rosa would answer, with a sigh, as if she regretted the want of that masculine accomplishment.

To Geltruda was committed the government of the servants and the domestic economy of the paternal house. Her singular aptitude and vigilance—and it may be, also, the blessing which rests on those who 'understand about the poor and needy'—made her a very successful manager; she was so cleverly economical, so unweariedly industrious, so self-denying in her own regard, so generous to others, that means seemed to multiply in her hands.

The count, with all his love of money, never complained that she did not turn to

good account whatever was entrusted to her care.

This patient young housekeeper — this motherless girl, who met with little affection in her home, who since her mother's death had seldom heard loving words addressed to her, nursed in her heart a pure and devoted attachment to a youth whom the late countess, perhaps imprudently considering her age, had taught her to look upon as her future husband.

Carlo dei Ubaldi was the only son of the Countess di Castel Barco's greatest friend, a widow lady, who lived at Taggia. There had been an agreement between them that if the count consented to it, and he had made no objection when the subject was broached, the two children, who were always with their mothers when they visited each other—who played together under the fig-trees in the garden of the quaint old house at Taggia — or on the terrace of the grim castle of Castel Barco—should be one day united.

This was spoken of before them since their earliest childhood, and they could not remember the time when Carlo did not think of Geltruda as his *sposina*, and Geltruda of Carlo as her little *sposo*.

After her mother's death they did not meet so often ; but sometimes Carlo came to see her brothers, sometimes she went to see his mother, and their feeling towards one another continued unchanged. As time went on, however, Geltruda wondered whether her father did really intend her to marry Carlo, and the Marchesa Ubaldi felt the same doubt. She spoke to the count on the subject, but obtained no satisfactory answer ; either he wished to take the chance of a more wealthy marriage presenting itself, or he was reluctant to part with a daughter who was of great use to him.

In the meantime the young people hoped on, and met now and then. These accidental interviews were joyful events in their lives. The *festas* in the neighbouring villages generally afforded such opportunities.

Always, since they were carried there in their nurse's arms, they had been to the one at Castellaro and visited the sanctuary of Our Lady of Lampedusa. Both remembered how their mothers used to make them kneel before the balustrade which separates the altar from the body of the pretty little church, and say an *Ave Maria* together. And they had never omitted doing this each successive year of their lives, and performing other little devotions in concert, such as lighting two candles at the Madonna's shrine at exactly the same moment, so that one did not burn out sooner than the other, and mixing together in one bunch the flowers they had brought from their respective homes to lay at the feet of Mary's image.

Whilst Geltruda's brothers and sisters were amusing themselves amongst the crowd, she and Carlo sat together under the immense evergreen oaks in front of the chapel, or wandered on to the ledge of rock covered with wild roses which overlooks one of the most beautiful landscapes of that enchanting

country. They were pleasant hours spent thus—in remembrances of the past, in anticipations of a happy future, and many a speculation as to what might happen between that *festa* and the one of the following year.

On the last occasion of the Feast of Our Lady of Lampedusa there had been misgivings in the hearts of Carlo and Geltruda. They were beginning to fear that the course of their true love was not going to run smooth, and they made a vow that if they did obtain the count's permission to marry before the next *festa* they would hang up as an *ex-voto* two silver hearts joined together.

The ensuing autumn, though the days were shortening apace and the heat abating, not a cloud was to be seen in the sky. The last three seasons had been bad and the crops deficient. If that year the much-desired rains did not fall, famine was likely to ensue, and also the ruin of many a landowner on the coast of the Mediterranean. The count was full of apprehension and care. He kept watching the heavens with feverish

anxiety; but no! not a cloud big as a man's hand was to be seen in the boundless expanse of blue. Not a wavelet rippled the surface of the tideless, lake-like sea. Not even at the hours when usually a breeze fans the branches of the olive-trees did a leaf move.

Dire grew the sufferings of the peasantry. Their little patches of land amidst the ledges of the rocks and on the side of the hills yielded so small an amount of corn that before the winter was far advanced bread grew very scarce, and in many places none was to be had. The provision of roots and dried fruits threatened exhaustion, and it was a question how even those who had money in their coffers would get through the winter months.

Geltruda's duties as housekeeper in her home became very trying. She had to calculate narrowly every expense, to measure the food of the family and the servants, and to endure her father's ebullitions of anger at the large sums she had to pay for the necessaries of

life. Then arose the question of alms. It is a difficult one to deal with under such circumstances, and one regarding which it is easier to act for one's self than to advise others. Geltruda resolved that at any rate no day should pass in which she did not relieve at least some of the poor creatures who crowded to Castel Barco to beg for their starving families.

This was what she bravely stipulated with her father that she would do. They dared not approach by the front gate, but used to come stealthily to the back door and stand in a place where Geltruda could see them; a portion was set apart at the daily meals for the poor of Christ. She assured the count that as long as he suffered this to be done, God would bless their stores. He believed her. He had faith enough for that; but he could not help feeling irritated at the sight of beggars, and could hardly have brought himself to bestow a coin on any one whilst his coffers were so empty and the future so threatening; but he was content that Geltruda should shield his house from the curse

which he knew hangs over the home of those who harden their hearts against the poor. Meanwhile, she stinted her own food, and parted with every article of her wardrobe that was not absolutely necessary, gave away her trinkets, and prayed ardently to the Heart of our Lord. One day that she had walked barefooted to the shrine of Lampedusa, the count's daughter made a resolution not to relieve only a few, but every famished creature that came to her.

She thought of all the saints most devoted to the work of feeding the hungry—of the granary at the Ponziano Palace, at Rome, miraculously replenished with corn when St. Frances had given away all it contained—of the miracle of the roses turned into bread in St. Elizabeth of Hungary's vesture—of the many stories of the sort her mother had told her in her childhood, and a strong hope and confidence filled her heart that she would be able to keep her pledge. As she came out of the little chapel she gathered some of the roses which blossom all the year in these

sunny climes, and show their pink heads even amongst the snow, which sometimes for a day or two whitens the hedgerows of myrtle and the groves of orange-trees. As she made a bunch of them, her lips uttered this little prayer: 'O my God, who didst turn St. Elizabeth's loaves into flowers, vouchsafe to turn these roses into food.'

Descending the hill, some pilgrims met her who were going to pay their devotions at the sanctuary. They seemed foreigners, and from the liveries of their attendants and the caparisoned mules they rode, she guessed them to be wealthy. Geltruda did not hesitate. Blushing, she approached them and said:

'Signori, the people of these hamlets are starving. Will you accept these roses—you will lay them at our Lady's feet—and give me gold to buy food for the famished?'

One of the pilgrims murmured: 'An angel in disguise!' The other drew from his pouch five gold pieces and placed them in Geltruda's hand.

'Pray for us,' he said, and they passed on.

That gold bought food for many a day for the starving poor, and the answer to her prayers made her bold in almsgiving. Whether miraculous supplies replenished her stores, who can tell? That resources seemed to multiply in her hands, could not be denied. Sometimes her faith for an instant wavered when she looked at the bare kitchen, the empty store-room, the desolate garden; when she thought of the provisions hardly sufficient for the meals of the family, and then saw feeble and gaunt figures descending the mountain-paths, crossing the adjacent valleys, and approaching Castel Barco. She was wont to look at the crucifix with the feeling which made St. Peter cry out as the wind grew boisterous, 'Save us, or we perish.' But she never lost confidence. She never loosed her hold of the Hand stretched out to her from above, and as a matter of fact it did always turn out that there was something to give; the last bit of food was never quite the last. Unexpected supplies ever justified

her unlimited reliance on Providence. She came to be looked upon throughout that afflicted neighbourhood as an unfailing protectress, and the name of Geltruda dei Montenegri was a household word in the homes of the starving poor.

CHAPTER II.

A NIGHT IN THE SANCTUARY.

ONE day, in the afternoon, Geltruda was sitting with her work in her hand, on a seat at the end of a gallery which extended from one side of the house to the other, and observed that the sky was darkening with clouds. This would have been a great cause of joy some time before, and rain was welcome at all seasons on that parched and sunburnt coast; but it was too late now for the crops to recover. She sighed, and her eyes turned wistfully in the direction of Taggia, where she could see Carlo's home like a speck in the distance.

It was very long since they had met, and

she felt a yearning desire to do so. The last time he had called at Castel Barco, the count had received him very coldly. He had never allowed her to absent herself from home, even for a few hours, since things had gone badly with him, and made her drudge at household labours from morning to night. Her brothers and sisters went out as usual, and if, in the midst of the common distress, there was a wedding or a merry-making, they contrived to attend it. But whether the count was afraid of Geltruda's meeting the young man whom he had now determined she should not marry — for the Marchesa Ubaldi had undergone severe losses, and he was more bent than ever on a rich marriage for his eldest and most beautiful daughter — or whether he grudged even a few hours of her laborious industry at home, he never permitted her to go out.

Did she feel a little heart-sick that day at this long separation from Carlo and his mother, and cast down at the sights of misery she daily witnessed? or was it a presentiment

of coming sorrow, greater and deeper than she had yet known? Was it the shadow of some strange and great trial hanging over her, which made the young girl lean her head on her hands in an attitude of unusual dejection?

She was roused from this abstraction by a servant whispering in her ear that Jacobino was in the kitchen, and asked to speak to her.

'O signorina, he looks like death!' Caterina ejaculated; and Geltruda rose and followed her with a sinking heart.

She knew this man well. He lived in a hut many miles up the mountain, with a wife and children whom in the best of times it was hard to support. And now she guessed what he had to tell her. He fell at her feet sobbing, and with all the wild eloquence of the Italian race he described the agonies of hunger of the helpless ones he had left crying for food — dying of starvation — and, 'O signorina!' he exclaimed, 'if you had seen Mariana's face! She has eaten hardly

a morsel for many days. She looks like the white image of Castellaro. I could not look at her. I could not bear the cries of the creatures. I ran down the mountain like a hunted animal, and here I am, with no hope but in the Madonna and you. Give me food to take to them. Save them, for the love of God! In three days the Capuchins will come our way with the relief they distribute —but in three days we shall all be dead.'

And then he said it would be better to die at once; and he began to rave as the Italians too often do under the influence of despair; to blaspheme, as those only blaspheme who have a faith as strong as their wild passions; to accuse Almighty God, and utter dreadful words which made Geltruda put her hands on his lips and command him to kneel down before the crucifix, near which they were standing.

'Look at Jesus the Saviour,' she said, 'and pray to be forgiven. Pray, whilst I go and see what I can give you.'

Soon the poor peasant was beating his

breast, and crying out, with torrents of tears, 'My Jesus, forgive me!' And whilst he prayed Geltruda mused. The weekly supply of provisions was only to arrive the next day; there was nothing in the house but the evening and the next morning's meal. She gave a glance of anguish at the scanty store, then deducted from it her share of the family supper, enough to give Jacobino himself something to eat. But support for three days for his family—where was it to come from? She went up to the granary; there was a sack of corn in the corner, saved for the sowing of the patch of ground on the south side of the ridge. The thought of her father's anger if she gave a part of it away made her tremble; but lives were at stake, and she did not hesitate.

'He can but kill me,' she said to herself; 'and if he did he would repent and be ever after good to the poor. They must not die, these our brethren, when we can save them.'

She went back to the man, still on his knees in the gallery. She gave him the food

she had brought; she ordered him to eat it.

'No, no!' he cried; 'for the children! for the children and Mariana!'

'You will not have strength to carry a load of corn I am going to give you,' she said, 'unless you eat now.'

The poor man could hardly rise from his knees; he wanted to kiss the hem of her gown, but she hurried him, first into the kitchen, and then on his long and wearisome way home. But with a lightened heart and brisker step he ascended the mountain, rejoicing at the load he was carrying.

It was soon the hour when the family gathered together in the hall for supper. The count came in with so cheerful a countenance that Enrico whispered to Uberto: 'The Signor Count looks to-day as if a child might play with him.'

And then the boys related how they had been shooting over the hills, and had brought home a hare and a few little birds, a welcome piece of intelligence duly appreciated by the

whole family, and a great deal of laughing and joking went on amongst them. They had not had so cheerful a meal for a long time.

Geltruda was the only one who found it difficult to smile at the fun that was going on. The terror a violent parent inspires is one of the most paralysing fears that can be felt by a sensitive nature. It is so much worse to be scared by the fierce words and looks of anger of one we love and would fain respect, than by the most severe treatment on the part of strangers. And there was something peculiarly trying in Geltruda's feelings at that moment. Her conscience could not but tell her that she had done right in saving from starvation her famishing fellow-creatures, and yet she had a sense of something like guilt towards her father, in having disposed of a portion of his property not specially committed to her management; yet, had she awaited his return and asked his permission, he would, she was almost certain of it, have refused to give the corn, and de-

clared he did not believe in the urgency of the need. She knew well how real and urgent it was. She knew that her father had money wherewith to replace what had been given. She had spared him the guilt of refusing what was to save the lives of a whole family. She could not blame herself, but she was afraid.

'I cannot let the night pass,' she thought, 'with this fear hanging over me. Better to tell him at once, and get over it.'

So when the meal was ended, and, as was the custom with them, her brothers and sisters walked out of the dining-room, leaving the count to drink an extra glass of wine and to doze a little before he went out and paced up and down the terrace, she lingered behind, and then approaching him said, in a voice that shook a little, and with a pale though steadfast face :

'Father, Jacobino, the goatherd, whose flock have died, one by one, in the mountains, was here to-day to beg for food for his starving wife and children. They were

dying of hunger, and could get no relief for three days. I had nothing to give him except a part of the corn set aside for the sowing, and I let him have a bag of it.'

The count turned livid with rage. The produce of the field on the south ridge was to have proved, that year, worth its weight in gold. Avarice stimulating his rage, he lost all command over himself. The Italian *rabbia* seized him. He uttered curses and imprecations which his daughter listened to in silence, and then he commanded her to leave his house. She had beggared him, and she should herself become a beggar. She had been the ruin of her family, and she should be banished from it. She should wander on the face of the earth, and associate with the wretches who had imposed on her idiotic credulity.

'Go!' he cried; 'go to the hut where you sent my corn, and feed on it there.' And he pushed her into the hall, and then towards the door of the castle.

Her spirit was roused. Geltruda was

good and pious, but she was not a saint. Indignation swelled her heart and flushed her cheeks. She wrapped her black mantilla round her head, and walked out of her father's house with a firm step and head erect. Into the darkness of the night she went forth. There was no moon; but the stars, here and there, glimmered in the stormy sky, across which large clouds were drifting. Quickly she descended the hill, and did not slacken her pace till she reached the road in the valley and arrived at the spot where it branched in opposite directions, one leading to the town of Taggia, the other to the mountain sanctuary of Lampedusa.

There she stopped and hesitated. Should she go to the house of Carlo's mother and seek a refuge there? Nature and inclination prompted this step. It was an immense temptation. Her heart had long been aching with a sense of desolate loneliness. She was neither cared for nor thought of in her home, but for the use she could be to any of its inmates. No fond caress, no endearing

words ever came to fill the void in her soul which had existed in it ever since her mother's death.

Perhaps it might have been otherwise had she been herself less tender, less keenly sensitive, or, possibly, less proud; for, meek and humble in many respects as was her character, unassuming and self-forgetting in its devotedness, there was pride in her profound reluctance to court affection not spontaneously bestowed, in her tacit acquiescence in an estrangement which she made no effort to dispel, simply from the intense fear of failure.

Now the sword had run deep into her bruised heart, and it longed for the relief which could only be found in the indignant sympathy she would meet with from Carlo and her mother's old friend.

She looked towards Taggia, towards the house where they lived, as a starving person towards the food in sight, as a thirsty traveller at the flowing stream at hand. But delicacy and womanly reserve raised at

once doubts and misgivings as to the advisability of going to the house where every feeling of her heart prompted her to rush.

First, she did not know for sure that the Marchesa might not be absent and Carlo alone at home. In this uncertainty she could not knock at the door of the Ubaldi Palace at that hour of the night. And then, she was now an outcast—a beggar her father had said she was to be. Should she thrust herself on the hospitality of those who had grown poor of late, who might by this time be reduced to distress? Should she assume that her engagement to Carlo still existed, when he had been repulsed by her wealthy father, and she was now herself a portionless, destitute wanderer on the face of the earth; for never, no, never again—there spoke the latent pride of a sorely wounded heart—would she return to the home whence she had been so cruelly thrust that night. She would isolate herself, and never let any one of her family know where she was. God alone was her Father now.

Like an angel's whisper came that softening thought to her soul. It brought tears into her burning eyes, relief to her tight-bound heart. She turned her back on the road to Taggia, and walked quickly along the one which led to Castellaro. Through the window of the little chapel she could see the lamp of the sanctuary of Lampedusa burning before the altar, and she fixed her eyes upon it as she ascended the hill with the feeling that after all she was not quite homeless.

After her mother's death she had done what St. Teresa had done at her age, asked Christ's Mother to be a parent to her in the place of the one she had lost; and as long as she could rest on the heart of Mary she did not despair.

When she reached the terrace with the two evergreen oaks, the scene of her happy meetings once a year with Carlo on the days of the *festa*, they rose vividly before her as the only very happy moments she had ever known; and through the shades of night,

which were becoming thicker, she looked down on the valley and wondered if she was dreaming.

All was still. Had the chapel been open she would have remained in it all night without knocking at the door of Fra Romualdo, the old Franciscan lay-brother who had charge of the sanctuary, but it was locked, and she was afraid of spending the night in the porch. So with a trembling hand she knocked at the door of the tenement where he dwelt, and soon, with a lanthorn in his hand, the white-haired old man appeared. He started back when he saw the young girl standing before him, her face looking very white by the faint light of the stars, for she had thrown back her mezzaro to show him who she was.

In a nervous, hurried manner Geltruda related her tale of sorrow. It was short and sad. Thrust out of her father's house, because, out of his store, she had fed the famished.

'And is it so?' the old man said. 'Well, my child, our great Father, St. Francis, said

the highest happiness he could conceive was to come to a convent door on a snowy night, and be mistaken for an impostor, and that the porter should beat him and drive him out into the dark. I can't make you as happy as that, *figlia mia*, but I will light a faggot and share with you a piece of bread and a drop of wine some good folks gave me to-day. Come into the little parlour; we shall soon have a blaze.'

'I would rather go into the church, if you will allow me, good Brother; I would fain spend the night at the foot of our Lady's altar.'

'First warm yourself, and eat and drink a bit, and then you shall go and pray as long as you like; for I have not even a pillow for your head to rest on, poor child.'

Geltruda submitted to be warmed and then fed out of the scanty contents of the good friar's bag, because she saw resistance was vain; and then she persuaded him to let her into the chapel. She knelt there some time, and then sat down on the step of

the altar and fell asleep. Many and strange were her dreams during those few hours of half-repose.

Towards dawn a sudden noise awoke her. She saw Fra Romualdo standing near the door of the chapel and beckoning to her to rise and follow him. As she came out, the first object which met her eyes was her eldest brother on horseback, and by his side one of her father's servants holding the bridle of a mule saddled with a pillion.

'Oh, there you are, Signora Geltruda!' Uberto exclaimed, when she appeared. 'We have been looking for you all night. A saint is really a very troublesome element in a family. What business had you to run away and hide yourself in this manner?'

'I neither ran away nor hid myself, Uberto. Our father turned me out of doors, and I came straight to the Madonna for protection.'

'What an idiot you were! Why did you not go out at one door, and, after a short walk on the terrace, step in by the back way? I went at once to the Palazzo Ubaldi and

frightened the old marchesa out of her wits. The Signor Conte raved at the thought that you had gone to Taggia. I had to swear that I should bring you back, dead or alive. So, as you *are* alive, please to get upon your mule as fast as you can. I do not promise you a pleasant reception, even though you were found in the sanctuary.'

Geltruda's heart sank within her. She looked at the good old friar, whose worn and pallid face was full of compassion, and said, 'Must I go back?'

'What else can you do, *poverina?*' he answered, with a sigh. And it was true that she had no choice.

The grey light of morning was giving way to the rosy hues of opening day. One glance she gave in the direction of Taggia, which Uberto perceiving, he exclaimed, with a loud laugh:

'We are not going that way, signora; you need not think any more of the Ubaldis. The Signor Conte is going to marry you to the old Baron Vitelleschi. He told me

so last night, and you are to be shut up till the day of the wedding, that we may not all be ruined by your mad prodigality.'

'God help you, poor child! God help you!' Fra Romualdo whispered, as he saw the despairing expression of Geltruda's face whilst she was placed on the saddle.

'Pray for me,' she faintly said, and then rode away in silence, without answering by a single word the ill-natured jokes and mocking questions of her pitiless brother.

CHAPTER III.

THE TURRET PRISON.

THE Count of Castel Barco was standing at the entrance-door of the castle when his daughter arrived. Though the fury had subsided, not so his anger. He deeply resented not only Geltruda's act in giving away part of his corn, but all the trouble she had caused him, and especially the bitter anxiety he had felt after the idea had occurred to him that she had taken refuge at the Ubaldi Palace. He did not rave as on the preceding night, but his brow was dark, and his attitude rigid.

'Was she there?' he asked of his son, in a whisper.

'No: at Castellaro,' Uberto replied.

Geltruda raised her eyes to her father's face, and in those eyes he saw or fancied he saw the same expression, the eloquent silent reproach he had read in them when, six years before, she had stood with him by the side of her mother's corpse. It had stamped itself on his brain, and now wrought in it madness—the madness produced by remorse and pride. He felt as if he could not endure to meet it again, and fiercely resolved to banish from his sight the child who in his hour of sharpest woe had tacitly reproached him for her mother's death, and who now protested by her holy life and silent virtues against his hard-hearted avarice. Turning his back upon her, but commanding her to follow him, he led the way to the turret, the single room of which she had long inhabited, ascended the winding staircase, opened the door, and then said, without looking at her:

'You shall remain here as long as the temptation lasts to rob your relatives in

favour of the first beggar who presents himself. Your meals shall be brought to you, and you can take the air on the balcony. The length of your seclusion will depend on the arrangements for your marriage with Baron Vitelleschi.'

The door was shut upon the young girl, and locked by her father. She listened to the sound of his retreating footsteps. The sound died away, and was followed by a profound silence, which remained unbroken till a servant-maid brought her some food, which she placed on the table and said :

'Il Signor Conte forbids that anyone should speak to the signorina, but I——'

'Be silent! Obey your orders,' Geltruda replied ; and she went to the window, and stood there with her back turned to the girl till she had left the room. She heard her lock the door, and each time her meals were brought to her the same humiliating proceeding took place.

Geltruda's struggle against anger, burning indignation, and passionate sorrow was

severe. It lasted for three days. The fourth was a Sunday. A friar always said Mass in the chapel of the castle. It was only on great festivals that the family went to the parish church. Geltruda was told by the attendant who waited upon her that she was to go into a tribune at the foot of the turret stairs, which looked into the chapel, and there hear Mass.

During the Holy Sacrifice a feeling of peace stole over her, a wonderful subsiding of the inward storm, a lightening of the burthen on her soul, as if it were uplifted by an invisible power, and at the same time a vague, mysterious sense of strength to endure anything which the will of God might appoint.

When she returned to the room which had become her prison, it seemed to bear a totally different aspect. 'Alone with God—alone,' she said to herself, and with a thrill of joy thought of all that those words imply. Falling on her knees before the crucifix, she began to understand the love of suffering

which saints feel, the supernatural thirst for it awakened by meditation on the Passion. The life which she was leading could not leave a soul in a tepid state. It must have had either a hardening and embittering effect, or else a purifying and softening one. As it was, it proved a preparation for an extraordinary trial.

She applied herself with an earnest heart and a strong will to turn her captivity to good purpose. The lessons of holiness she had learnt from her mother as a child, the exhortations of her pious Franciscan confessor, came back to her recollection. She had heard of the lives of the Poor Clares. More than once the countess had taken her to the Convent of Santa Chiara at Oneglia, the prioress of which was one of her great friends. She resolved to try and model her life on what she knew of those nuns. From her meals she took little, and only what would not keep. The rest was reserved in the hope that some poor person might pass under the turret window, on whom it could be bestowed.

This often happened, and the half-famished creatures did not feel more joy than she did when they clutched the little parcels dropped at their feet. Long hours were spent in prayer and in acts of penance offered up for her cruel father and her thoughtless brothers and sisters. Some books which had belonged to her mother, a worn-out illuminated missal full of quaint pictures, and a volume of 'Lives of the Saints,' furnished her with recreation. Her days were sweet, and her nights calm. The threatened marriage disturbed her mind but little. She had a firm trust that God would protect her from it. Of Carlo she thought more tenderly than ever. She prayed more ardently for him than for herself, but without agitation, with as little hope as fear for the future. Life seemed at a standstill.

Thus passed days and weeks. It was not often that the sound of voices reached her. Now and then, some of the family passed under the window, or a servant called out to another. One day the weather had become

suddenly hot. She had opened the casement, and was reading, when the voices of Uberto and her sisters talking in an animated manner caught her ear. She listened, and heard him say :

'Premonte has been here, and he says it is the most wonderful opportunity for buying costly gear ever known on this coast. Marvellous bargains to be had, and no one knows of it yet.'

'Where do they come from? Where is the ship? what is it called?' the girls asked in the same breath.

'The *Fior di Mare*,' Uberto answered. 'It comes from Smyrna, and is anchored in the Bay of Spedaletti. He says it is full of the most magnificent brocades, the richest silks, the finest velvets, to be had for a mere nothing. Premonte heard of it first, and, as a good friend that he is, ran to tell me, that we might have the first chance, before others rush there to buy. Enrico and I are going to ride to the shore and row Orlando's boat to Spedaletti. It will be fine fun to make a lot

of purchases. It is a pity you girls cannot come!'

'You are a lucky fellow,' Rosa said, with a deep sigh. 'But how come you to have money to spend?'

'We have got some from the Signor Padre, who is in high good-humour this morning.'

'Oh yes!' exclaimed Maddalena; 'he has had a letter this morning from old Vitelleschi, who has at last made up his mind to marry Geltruda.'

'Oh dear! how glad I am!' Rosa cried; 'I am sure she has been long enough in disgrace. I find it a great bore to have to do the housekeeping and look after the maids. I shall be very glad when she is let out.'

'But it will only be to marry the old baron, you goose. You do not suppose they will live here. He will take her to Ventimiglia, of course. But in the meantime clothes must be bought for her, and the Signor Padre is delighted at this opportunity of providing cheaply a handsome trousseau.'

'But we must have some,' the girls exclaimed. 'It will be too bad if we don't.'

'Well, go and coax some money out of the Signor Padre, as we have done, and when we bring back the things you shall have the first choice.'

'It is perfect nonsense,' Rosa observed, 'to give Geltruda fine clothes, whether she is going to be married or not. She never cares a bit how she is dressed.'

This remark was assented to by the whole party, and then they all walked away.

Geltruda wondered that what she had heard of the marriage about to be forced upon her gave her so little uneasiness. She could not account for the strong conviction she felt that on that point she had nothing to fear.

Late that evening her two brothers returned from their expedition to the Bay of Spedaletti in a light cart, a large trunk on the seat behind them. They were in high spirits, and announced to the count that they had succeeded in securing a wonderful bargain. They had been shown a number of articles, more or less

magnificent, and wonderfully cheap. They found it difficult to make a selection, and whilst they were debating and hesitating one of the sailors said that there was below in the hold of the ship a trunk containing beautiful articles of various sorts which had been bought at Aleppo. The purchase was a great bargain, and the captain could therefore afford to dispose of it to anyone who would purchase the whole lot, as it was, for a comparatively trifling sum. The brothers eagerly desired to see this box. It was brought on deck, and the lid raised. At a glance they saw such a mass of rich silks, gold and silver brocade, Persian shawls and costly gear of all sorts, that they hastily closed the lid and agreed at once to the terms proposed. They seemed to them so advantageous that their only fear was the captain's retracting. They paid the money in a great hurry, and carried off the prize.

The count expressed himself well satisfied with what they had done, and Rosa and Maddalena were in ecstasies. After supper

the trunk was brought into the saloon, and its contents spread out on the floor. Exclamations of pleasure and admiration burst from the lips of the whole family when they beheld the gorgeous display.

The opening of that box would have furnished a good subject for a painting. The grey-headed count standing with a paper and a pencil in his hand, making a list of the articles, his dark eyes gleaming with satisfaction as he mentally calculated their value; his handsome sons and daughters, full of eager desire, snatching from each other the magnificent garments, and trying them on, with bursts of merriment when the boys seized on some article of womanly attire, or the girls on something belonging to the male sex.

All the household, one by one, in their working but picturesque costumes, came into the saloon with the freedom which was consistent with the vassalage of those days, when servants were governed, chastised, and indulged as if they were children of the

family. Like his sons and daughters, they studied the count's face—when he was in good humour were familiar with him, or fled in terror when he frowned.

His countenance was very benign just at that moment, for he was quite elated with his acquisition. He was generous enough to allow Uberto to carry off a splendid dressing-gown, in which he instantly arrayed himself, and Enrico a velvet coat, which he too at once put on. Rosa got possession of an Eastern scarf, which she rolled into a turban highly becoming to her style of beauty; and Maddalena a Persian shawl, which enveloped the whole of her diminutive figure.

At last the count desired the servants to collect all the other articles, to fold them carefully, replace them in the box, and carry it to his own room. With this precious trunk under his bed, he laid his head on the pillow that night, very well contented with the occurrences of the day. The wealthy Vitelleschi was secured as a son-in-law, and his

eldest daughter provided with a magnificent trousseau at a trifling expense. What with the rich gear contained in the box from Aleppo, and what he hoped to realise by the sale of some of its contents at Genoa or Nice, he would dazzle the eyes of the old baron at a very small cost.

His children retired to rest, taking to their rooms the prizes they had secured. Over and over again, before getting into bed, the pieces of finery were examined and commended. The girls pinned theirs to the curtains that they might meet their eyes when they awoke.

At that moment Geltruda was on her knees in her turret-prison, with her beads in her hand, keeping vigil before the image of Christ crucified.

On the following day the sun rose bright and glorious. As the young prisoner, after saying her morning-prayers, opened the window and stood on the balcony, the breeze from the sea, laden with the perfume of the orange-blossoms, fanned her cheeks; the

birds chirped in the bushes beneath the turret—the whole scene bore an aspect of smiling brightness which can hardly be conceived by those who have not seen the first burst of spring in a southern climate. Amidst the wonderful beauty of nature, suffering and misery seem more incongruous than under cloudy skies, and amidst ruder scenes. As Geltruda's heart was expanding with the unconscious effect of all that loveliness, it was suddenly smitten by the thought of the poor, and the cruel destitution which she feared was still existing in the white hamlets dotting the sides of the purple hills; but it must be diminishing, she hoped. There had been rain, and the land—that fair land which had been so long hard and unyielding—would soon open its treasures to its children.

When she re-entered her room, her usual breakfast was on the table. The servant was gone. Geltruda had conformed strictly to the orders given by her father; and though Caterina, the maid who brought her meals, had often tried to infringe them, she

had always refused to speak with her. Now and then, feeling curious to know if she was shut up, she tried to open the door, but always found it locked. During the first days of her captivity, it had been hard to subdue an indignant throb at that humiliating treatment; but owing to the rapid advance in the spiritual life which she was daily making, and the constant study of the lives of St. Francis, St. Clare, and the saints most remarkable for humility, she began to understand and to taste the sweetness of enduring shame and ill-usage, and even to smile with a holy joy when she heard the sound of the key, which the attendant had to get twice a day from the hands of the count, who commanded it to be, each time, brought back to him.

In the course of the morning she went again to the balcony. She liked to say the 'Angelus' with her eyes turned to the sanctuary of the Madonna, and in union of heart with the monks on the mountain and with her friends in the Ubaldi Palace. The mid-

day chimes were ringing from many a tower on the heights, and in the valley, when she caught sight of a man on horseback rushing down the road as if flying from pursuit. She knew him by his figure and the colour of his horse. It was the physician who was always sent for from Taggia when anyone was ill at the castle. He was not often summoned there, and was not much acquainted with the family. It was only when anyone appeared to be dangerously ill that the count went to such an expense. Why was he riding away in such desperate haste? and what were the cries which she heard in the direction of the entrance-gate?

A sickening fear seized her heart. Something dreadful must have happened. Some accident, some sudden death, perhaps. She went to the door with a wild hope it would open. No; it was, as usual, locked. She rang the bell so nervously and violently that it broke. Again returning to the balcony, she saw some of the servants flying away with vociferations, which indistinctly reached

her ears without her being able to make out a single word. She watched them rushing down the hill, and when they reached the road saw them stop short, retrace their steps, and, as if a sudden madness had seized them, run in different directions; some towards the sea-shore, some towards the mountains. At that moment she perceived, along the other side of the bed of the torrent which divides the valley, but which is seldom filled with water except when the snow melts on the hills, a line of soldiers armed with muskets and carrying black flags.

The suspense, the bewilderment of that moment can hardly be described. A silence, deep as death, had succeeded the cries which had attended the departure of the fugitives. She strained her eyes in every direction. Beneath the walls of Taggia she could discern a great deal of movement, horses, men, and vehicles, going about, groups of persons forming; but on the side of the castle, and within reach of her voice, no human being appeared in sight.

The afternoon hours were passing away. She kept going backwards and forwards from her *prie-dieu* to the balcony, from the balcony to the locked door. At last, on the path from the mountains above the castle, she discerned a figure coming down the hill. She watched it with intense anxiety. As it came nearer she saw that it was one of the monks, and her heart beat with a strong hope. If it could but be Fra Mauro! and if he should glance at the turret-window where for so many years she had displayed the signal warding off or encouraging his approach!

Seizing a white handkerchief she waved it from the balcony, and for some time it seemed in vain. The monk went on his way through the valley, and her heart seemed to die within her as he passed the spot where the road to Castel Barco branched off. But just an instant afterwards she saw him look back, and then he stopped short and seemed to hesitate. Again she waved as high as she could her white signal, and then a wild cry of joy burst from her lips,

for the monk was turning back and coming up the road to the castle. It must be her old friend, Fra Mauro.

'Thank God, thank God!' she murmured, clasping her hands on her breast.

Just as the friar reached the steps leading to the terrace on which the gateway opened she lost sight of him, but not before she had made sure that it was indeed Fra Mauro. She tried to call out so as to convey to him her need of assistance, but he disappeared, apparently without noticing her imploring cry, and then, for a whole hour, she neither saw nor heard anything of him. What was taking place?—what was he doing? She knelt down in an agony. Suddenly the sound of a faltering voice reached her ears from the road under the balcony. She rushed out, and saw Fra Mauro looking up towards her with so ghastly and livid a face that he appeared like one rising from the grave.

'Signora,' he said, with a trembling voice, 'a fearful catastrophe has fallen on your

house. How you come to have been spared I know not. Are you alone in this house of death?'

'Oh, Father, what has happened? For weeks I have been locked up in this turret-room. Have you seen my father?'

'Alas, my child! I have just seen him die. I arrived in time to give him a last absolution. He knew me, I think; his lips moved.'

'O God! and my brothers and sisters?'

'They are all dead, my poor child!—some of the servants, too. There is not now a living soul left in the house.'

'Alas! I saw the others flying away! Who is it?—what is it has killed them?'

'God only knows! The angel of death has passed through the house. Did you say you were locked up?'

'Yes; I have been some weeks confined to this room. 'Tis too long a tale to tell. Oh my poor father!' and with that cry Geltruda fell on her knees and looked wildly up to Heaven.

The poor friar stood transfixed. The

horrible sight he had seen appeared to have bewildered him. He was afraid of remaining or of going away.

'What can I do for you?' he tremblingly asked. 'Where is the key of your room?'

'I know not,' she said; 'I cannot tell. Do not lose time—and your life, perhaps—searching for it, but go and get help. A ladder against this wall would enable me to escape. Oh do, good Father; do go at once to the Ubaldi Palace and tell Carlo and his mother to send me help.'

'I will,' Fra Mauro cried—'I will; and God be with you meanwhile, poor child!'

As fast as his aged limbs would carry him, the good monk walked towards Taggia, and Geltruda remained alone.

It was night by that time. A solemn silence reigned round the old house. The stars began to shine, one by one, in the dark-blue sky, and the pale moon clothed with its ghastly light the scene of fearful horror which its walls concealed. Geltruda, during the hours she remained in that lonely soli-

tude, sometimes felt inclined to believe the whole thing was a bad dream, or that Fra Mauro had lost his senses ; but she herself had seen the physician galloping away from the castle, and the servants fleeing from it.

At first, she felt almost afraid of going out of her mind during the time that she knew must elapse before help could reach her ; but she was never in danger of it. She made up her mind to die, if it was God's will, at the foot of her crucifix, and read calmly the prayers for the agonising which she had heard her mother say by many a death-bed. There was no wildness in her thoughts. After preparing in the best way she could for her own death, she prayed for her departed kindred. Her stern father, her thoughtless brothers and sisters, enveloped in one common doom, expiring close to her, and yet separated by the strange accident which had saved her own life. Her eyes sought the little chapel where she had spent a night of anguish and prayer. The lamp was burning as usual, and visible through

the window of the sanctuary. It seemed to speak to her like the voice of a friend.

When the morning dawned she happened to glance towards the sea, and by the rosy light of the eastern sky a lateen sail was to be seen; a vessel was swiftly sailing from the coast. It seemed to fly over the blue sparkling waves. She watched it disappearing in the distance with a sort of unconscious attention, little thinking it had been the messenger of death to her miserable home—of that terrible Black Death—that awful scourge, the very name of which froze the blood in the veins of the inhabitants of seaport towns and maddened them with terror.

CHAPTER IV.

THE QUARANTINE.

THE evening, spent in merriment and laughter by the count and his children, with the exception of the imprisoned eldest daughter, had been followed by a terrible night and day. The garments purchased from the owner of the *Fior di Mare* proved a fatal acquisition. They had been collected by a few surviving slaves in a palace near Aleppo, in which the plague had carried off almost all its inmates. Some seafaring men had bought the chest which contained them for a trifle, and brought it to Smyrna. There they disposed of it to the captain of the *Fior di Mare*, which was on the

point of sailing for the coast of Italy. One hasty glance at its contents satisfied him that the value of the articles greatly exceeded the small sum asked for them. He concluded they were the spoils of robbers, and did not think it necessary to make particular inquiries. With that idea in his mind, he was not sorry to get rid of the property by selling it to the sons of the Count di Castel Barco for something more than he had given for it, but still at a price far below its worth. He was quite guiltless of wilfully imparting the plague in its worst form to his unsuspecting customers; but such had nevertheless been the result of this ill-fated transaction.

The magnificent gear displayed with such glee, and spread all over the house, had communicated the terrible infection to the unhappy count, his sons and daughters, and several of the servants. Soon after the disease seized him he became delirious, and by the time the physician, who had been summoned when symptoms of severe illness showed themselves, arrived, the victims of

the pestilence were dead, or very near their end. It was too late to attempt anything for the dying—they were beyond the reach of human aid, or spiritual assistance; so the doctor declared, and took flight. The survivors, seized with a wild panic, soon followed his example; terror driving from their minds all thought but for their own safety. Geltruda was forgotten, or supposed to have died also.

Late in the day a sailor belonging to the crew of the *Fior di Mare* was passing through the piazza of Taggia. He heard rumours of the ghastly tale. Groups of agitated persons were relating it with gestures of horror, and pointing towards the gorge at the head of the valley.

When he reached the ship and told the tidings, the captain crossed himself; it suddenly occurred to him that the Aleppo chest might have contained poisoned effluvia, and he resolved to depart at once. But the wind was contrary. It only changed towards morning. Then it was that Geltruda

had seen the *Fior di Mare* skimming the waves like a bird, and disappearing in a track of shining foam.

Meanwhile the syndic of Taggia had hastily convened the municipal council, and an agitated sitting was going on at the town-hall. To protect the city from the horrible contagion was, of course, their only thought. Those who know what is, even in our days, the horror Italians have of infection, can imagine the affright which seized the inhabitants of Taggia in presence of such a catastrophe. Since the physician's return, persons who had met some of the fugitives brought news confirming the report. Every one who had not left Castel Barco was dead. There were only corpses within its walls.

Measures were instantly taken to form a sanitary *cordon* on the Taggia side of the torrent-bed, which no one on pain of death was to cross either way. Pickets of soldiers were placed at intervals along the bank to enforce this regulation, with orders to shoot anyone attempting to transgress it. Com-

mands were shouted to the poor creatures flying from Castel Barco to make their way as best they could across the hills, or along the shore to the nearest lazaretto. Most of them perished miserably.

Messengers were despatched to warn the neighbouring hamlets, and to complete the *cordon* round the plague-stricken mansion. The worst fear was that the unburied corpses would breed contagion, and the wind, which was blowing from that side uncontrolled by municipal edicts, waft it to the city. In view of this imminent danger it was decreed that Castel Barco and all it contained should be destroyed by fire. Recourse was had to the Confraternity of the Black Penitents. Their statutes bound them to accept perilous duties in the service of their fellow-creatures ; and to stimulate their self-devotion, the municipality promised, in return for their consent to choose by lot one of their members for the fulfilment of the civic mandate, to build them a church on a site they had long solicited from the town. The Black Penitents had long

smarted under the inferiority of their chapel to that of the White Penitents. The rivalry between the different confraternities in Italian cities was very keen with regard to their churches, and occasioned the erection of many beautiful sanctuaries all over the land.

The syndic's proposal was accepted, and the drawing was to take place in the evening. The members all agreed to abide by the result, and the one on whom the lot fell was to swear to perform the task assigned to him, and then retire for forty days to a cabin on the opposite side of the torrent, called the Hut of the Four Palm Trees. If he fell sick he was to hoist a black flag, and spiritual assistance would be sent him. Provisions and bedding were to be conveyed during the night to the solitary cabin by the torrent-side, and also a cart laden with materials to facilitate the conflagration, which was to take place as soon as possible.

The Black Penitents, wearing their usual dress and their masks, were standing in a row, and the urn containing their names on a

table in the centre of the town-hall. The drawing was about to begin, when one of them stepped forward and addressed the chief magistrate :

'I ask to be chosen for this mission,' he said, 'and I swear to accept its conditions.'

A thrill ran through the hearts of all present; the relief was great to those about to draw. A few of them protested against accepting the offer. Many hastily assumed that the drawing would not take place, and retired.

The magistrates concluded to confer on the member who had proposed himself the trust he solicited. No one had recognised his voice, it was so hoarse and muffled. Only after the meeting had dispersed was it known that Carlo dei Ubaldi had undertaken to set fire to the home of the Montenegri.

By some, especially by the friends of the other Black Penitents, his generosity was commended with enthusiasm; others sighed and pitied his poor mother; a few—for there are always, alas! people ready to make ill-

natured suppositions—hinted that he had been ill-used by the late count, and indulged revengeful feelings when he offered to set fire to his castle. Little did they know of the motive which prompted that act.

An hour before the meeting at the town-hall, a feeble ring had been heard at the palace-gate, and when one of the servants opened the door, Fra Mauro was seen, looking like a spectre, and scarcely able to stand. The servant took him by the hand, for the old friar was well known and much loved by every one in the house, and made him sit down in the hall.

'Fetch the marchesa,' he faintly said, 'or the Signor Carlo;' and soon the venerable lady was by his side, anxiously looking into his livid face. He was so exhausted that for a few minutes he could not speak; but after swallowing a little wine he revived, and said:

'Send for il Signor Carlo. You must both hear what I have to say.'

'He is broken-hearted,' the marchesa

said, 'weeping his heart out over Geltruda's death.'

'She is not dead!' the old man cried. 'She must be saved. Send for him.'

Doubting if Fra Mauro was in his right senses, afraid of giving her son false hopes, perplexed and distracted, the marchesa went to the chapel, where Carlo was kneeling, with his face buried in his hands, and whispered to him:

'Fra Mauro is here. He says wild things about Castel Barco, from which he tells me he comes. Come and speak to him; but, remember, he may be light-headed. He was fainting when he arrived.'

A little food and the sight of friendly faces had restored Fra Mauro's strength; and, seated between the mother and the son, calmly and coherently he told them the history of his seeing the white handkerchief waved at Geltruda's turret window, of his going to Castel Barco, and witnessing the horrible scene within its walls, and his brief colloquy with the poor girl locked up near that scene of

death, but separated from it by bolts and bars. Carlo's eyes flashed, his brain reeled.

'I must fly to her,' he exclaimed. 'Do not stop me, mother. Even you cannot prevent my going to die with her.'

'I wish you to save her and yourself, my son,' the marchesa said, in a soothing manner. 'If you cross the line by daylight, you will be shot, and Geltruda left to perish.'

'Mother, I cannot think: think for me. Shall I go and tell the chief magistrate what Fra Mauro says?'

'He will not believe it. He will think you both out of your minds, and the panic will be fearful if it is known that there is one in Taggia just come from Castel Barco. The mob may kill him.' She whispered those last words in Carlo's ear.

'What shall I do?' the young man asked, wringing his hands, and looking up into his mother's beloved face with the childlike trust of one who had never turned to her in vain for counsel and for help. She laid her hand on his shoulder, looked into his eyes, and said:

'Do you love Geltruda more than your own life, my Carlo? Could you ever be happy if she died?'

'Never, mother,' he answered—'never. I must save her, or else die with her.'

This moment in the marchesa's life was one of those in which perfect unselfishness, true courage, and calm good sense can alone furnish sufficient presence of mind to think and to resolve. She thought and prayed for an instant in silence, and then said:

'I see but one means of saving Geltruda. If anyone but yourself, my son, is charged with the execution of the municipal mandate, even should her existence be known, she would simply be extricated from her prison and abandoned to her fate, everyone shunning her approach. Offer yourself to perform the mission for which the Black Penitents are about to draw lots. I see, though there is not time now for details, how you can rescue your betrothed. God knows'—the poor mother's voice shook, and she paused an instant—'God knows what it costs

me to suggest this; but, Carlo, I think I could face your death better than your despair.'

The son and mother held each other a moment in a tight embrace.

'God bless you, my Carlo!' she said. 'I must now conceal Fra Mauro in the chapel-room. No one knows he is here except Maria, and we can trust her.'

Carlo went to the town-hall and made the offer which so much astonished his fellow citizens. The marchesa meanwhile led Fra Mauro to a small room behind the chapel and communicating with it by a tribune, stored it with what was necessary for his few wants, and then locked the door of the passage on the side of the house. Before leaving him, she said:

'Fra Mauro, how did you contrive to cross the line unseen?'

The old man smiled, and answered:

'When I saw the soldiers lining the road my heart sank within me. But I looked neither to right nor left, but went on, grasping

my crucifix and invoking our Lady. No one stopped me. God is good. The eyes of men, as well as their hearts, are in His power.'

The marchesa kissed his withered hand, and then began her preparations in the full conviction, which proved well founded, that her son's offer would be accepted. She first wrote a letter to the syndic, briefly speaking of a mother's anxiety at the perilous task her son was about to fulfil, and begging that a pass across the sanitary line should be granted not only to her son, but to the conductor of a cart laden with furniture as well as provisions to be stored in the hut where he was to spend the time of his quarantine. And having sealed and directed this missive, she went to select from her own wardrobe a complete set of female attire and various articles suitable for woman's use, besides those destined for her son, which she packed in a separate trunk. Then she ordered the strongest mule in the stables to be harnessed to a light cart and kept in readiness for the Signor Carlo's return, and a ladder of ropes which was used in the

granary of the palace, and a long pole to be laid at the bottom of it.

These arrangements were hardly completed when Carlo returned from the town-hall. His mother greeted him with courageous composure; then, after despatching her letter to the syndic, she explained her plans to him.

'By midnight,' she said, 'the cart will have reached the Hut of the Four Palm Trees. The servants will unload it before they return, but you will take care the ladder of ropes is left in the cart, and when the parcels of combustible materials arrive, you will order them to be also placed in it. When you remain alone and the shades of night are most profound, then, my Carlo, you will drive the cart to Castel Barco——'

Again the marchesa's voice faltered; but Carlo was hanging on her words with a face so full of eagerness and hope that she commanded her emotion and proceeded with the directions she was giving him.

'Drive it to the left, along the road on the west side of the house. Stop under the turret

window. Oh, my boy! my poor boy! you know it well. Call Geltruda; and with the long pole you will find attached to the ladder of ropes hoist it within her reach, and tell her how to fasten it securely to the iron railing of the balcony. Bid her throw out the bedding and cushions in her room. Lay them on the cart beneath so as to break a possible fall, and then——'

'Oh, mother, mother mine! it will succeed; it will succeed! Our Lady has inspired you. She will be saved! She will return to us!' Carlo cried, starting to his feet, eager to depart.

'Do not leave me yet,' the marchesa said —'or, rather, go, and expedite the lading and departure of the carts, and then return to me. You can ride to the hut and arrive there sooner than they will.'

At that moment a deputation from the municipality came to congratulate the marchesa on her son's heroic conduct and to bring the passes for Carlo and for the servants who were going to the hut, and

who could be re-admitted across the lines within half an hour after their passage over them.

The tinder-box, which was to enable him to set fire to the doomed mansion, was solemnly committed to his hands. His knowledge of the place would enable him, they said, to execute his duty with less risk than another; and with this comfortable reflection the good citizens departed, well satisfied not to be themselves exposed to the danger.

When they had left, the marchesa made her son sit down once more beside her, and stroking his hair as she used to do in his childhood, she said:

'And where will my boy dwell during his banishment—for, of course, he will give up the hut to our Geltruda if God gives her back to us?'

'There is a cave, mother, not far from the hut, and near Fra Romualdo's hermitage, where I can spend the nights. Geltruda used to hang her white handker-

chief at the window of her turret to encourage Fra Mauro to come and beg of her father. You can see the hut from here with the telescope. If things go well with us, we will hoist a white flag. If we hoist a black one——'

'One of you would be ill, my boy; and then your old mother would rush to you at any moment — at any risk — yes, across a thousand muskets levelled at her breast.'

After a silent embrace she said, 'You promise me, Carlo, not to enter the walls of Castel Barco if in any other way you can set fire to it?'

'Oh yes, mother; if Geltruda is to be saved, life is still dear to me.'

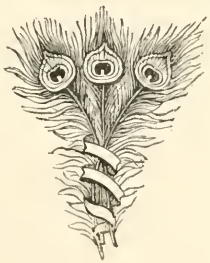
These words were hard, though he did not mean it; but his mother did not show what she suffered.

'You have still a few minutes to spare,' she said. 'Will you come with me to the chapel, and pray for a blessing on your night's work? and you must say good-bye to Fra Mauro.'

She looked wistfully into his face. He understood her.

'Yes, I will,' he said, 'and go to confession, too.'

This was what she longed for; and when the mother and son parted, half an hour afterwards, they smiled in the midst of their tears.



CHAPTER V.

AN EX-VOTO.

LITTLE before twelve o'clock, Geltruda, exhausted with the emotions of the day and worn out with fatigue, had fallen asleep on her *prie-dieu* with her head resting on her hands. Her slumbers were uneasy. She dreamt that Carlo was conducting her across a dangerous bridge over an abyss, and that when they had crossed it they stood on a spot where two roads branched off in different directions, one down a gentle descent into a green flowery valley, and the other up a steep mountain-path. She was hesitating and looking at him to see which he would take, when suddenly

she beheld him no longer at her side, but on the top of the mountain, beckoning her to follow, and she heard him saying: 'Geltruda mia.'

She felt unable to move. Still the same call was repeated. There was a crash; the rocks seemed to give way, and the earth to tremble under her feet. Then she opened her eyes, and heard again, loudly and distinctly, the words, 'Geltruda mia,' and became conscious that sand and stones were thrown against the panes of her window. In another moment she was bending over the balcony and crying out: 'Carlo mio, is it you?'

The relief of that moment threatened more danger than she had yet gone through. It required a strong effort to collect her senses so as to listen to the directions Carlo was giving her. Point by point, however, she minutely followed them, dragging her mattresses and pillows to the window, and pushing them over the balustrade of the balcony, then drawing up the ladder of ropes raised

by the pole within her reach, and fastening it to the iron railing with the strongest knots she could tie.

When all was ready she knelt down before the crucifix, commending her soul to God, stood for an instant on the balcony with her eyes fixed on the sanctuary of Lampedusa, seized the ropes of the ladder, swung herself over the balustrade, and successfully effected her perilous descent.

The time it took seemed to Carlo interminable, though it had been but a few instants. When her feet touched the mattress on the cart, he sprang up to her side and lifted her to the ground. Both fell on their knees, and leaning on each other, thanked God and the Madonna.

But there was before Carlo a terrible task, and he had to break it to Geltruda. They were standing beneath those walls which contained the corpses of her kindred. She pointed to them, and asked :

'Who will give them Christian burial ?'

'Geltruda mia,' he answered, 'for the sake

of the living, it has been decreed that your home and all it contains is to be destroyed by fire. The Black Death, the most fearful of all scourges, has swept away your whole family. None was to approach this spot, under pain of death, except the one amongst our Confraternity appointed by lot and bound on oath to set Castel Barco on fire. In order to save you, my beloved one, I undertook this terrible task.'

Geltruda remained silent a moment, gazing fixedly on the home of her youth, now the sepulchre of her kindred. Tears slowly rolled down her cheeks.

'No prayers,' she murmured, 'will hallow their graves—no Mass soothe their souls.'

'Yes, they will!' Carlo exclaimed. 'Yes; there will be prayers, there will be Masses said in every church in Taggia. This night all the city is watching. My mother has made appeal by this time, I know it, to the faith and piety of every pious person in the town. The Bishop has ordered that as soon as the flames are perceived, a procession shall

carry the Blessed Sacrament through the streets, and the Holy Sacrifice will be offered in every church for the repose of the souls of your departed kindred.'

'Thank God for that!' Geltruda murmured; but her heart was breaking. She seemed unable to turn her eyes away from the doomed building; and when Carlo tried to lead her away she shuddered.

Suddenly the sound of chanting was heard. It sounded strangely in the midst of the solemn stillness of the night.

'Are the angels singing?' Geltruda exclaimed, clasping her hands; 'which side does the sound come from?' and seizing Carlo's hand, she hastened to the farthest end of the terrace and round the corner of the house.

They stood astonished at the sight which met their eyes. A procession of monks, some of them with torches in their hands, and others carrying on a stretcher what Carlo instantly guessed to be the corpses of the dead, was issuing from the back of the house

and ascending the road towards the mountains. His heart leaped with something like joy as he whispered to Geltruda, who was completely bewildered :

'God is good, my loved one. He has sent the monks to our help. Your poor relatives will, after all, have Christian burial. Oh, God bless the good Capuchins !'

'Let us follow them,' Geltruda said, trying to rise ; but her strength failed her ; she sank on the ground.

Carlo ran forward and overtook the procession, which halted an instant. One of the monks fell back to speak to him, whilst the others continued their slow ascent. He told him that some of the fugitives had informed the prior of the awful event at Castel Barco, upon which one of the Fathers had hastened to the spot, but only to find that the tale was too true, and life extinct in every case. Meantime the news had reached the convent of the municipal decree regarding Castel Barco. The prior consulted his brethren, and all agreed to give Christian burial to the

dead. Half the monks went to dig a grave in a deserted but consecrated cemetery halfway between their monastery and Castel Barco, and another detachment departed to rescue the bodies from the doomed house.

'But we have not found the remains of the Santarella,' the good friar added. 'She must have left the house before, or after, the fatal catastrophe.'

'She is alive—she is safe,' Carlo answered; 'and Fra Mauro is in the Ubaldi Palace. Let the prior know of this. I cannot stay. May the blessing of God and St. Francis be upon you for the deed you have done this day!'

'It is as I thought,' he cried, as he returned to Geltruda. 'They will rest in consecrated ground. My task has lost its horror.'

She prayed silently for a while, then, raising her hand, looked at him and said:

'Carlo, you must not enter the house.'

'I have promised my mother not to do so if it can be helped; but my sad duty must be performed.'

'If you enter those walls, I shall enter them too,' Geltruda said. 'But I can show you a cellar which can be reached from outside. It is filled with a great provision of wood and hay. By kindling it, a conflagration may be easily raised. But first let us release the poor animals in the stables and the out-buildings. I have heard them from the turret uttering piteous cries.'

Strong excitement kept up Geltruda. It gave her fictitious strength. She and Carlo went round the place setting free every living thing about it.

'Now,' she said, knowing that the moment was come, and that he dared not ask her to lead the way to the spot she had named—'now, in God's name, follow me.'

She pointed to the cellar. He opened the door, took out of the cart the parcels of combustible material and threw them amongst the hay and wood, struck the flint from his tinder-box, kindled a flame in the midst of a heap of faggots, and rushed to join Geltruda, who had fainted. He carried her

to the cart under the turret, made her swallow some drops from a flask he had brought with him, and laid her on the mattress with a pillow under her head. She soon revived, and then he harnessed the mule and led it down the hill. When they reached the valley she called to him to stop :

'Carlo,' she said, 'will you turn the cart round ? Let us stop and witness from this spot the destruction of my father's house—burnt down with our own hands,' she added, and a strong trembling came over her.

'O my father ! O my poor brothers ! O my young sisters !' she murmured, and prayed aloud for their souls with that vehement and impassioned fervour which in an Italian nature and from Italian lips sounds like inspiration.

Nearly an hour elapsed, and a terrible fear crossed her mind that the attempt had failed. 'Oh,' she mentally exclaimed, 'that it should be a fear !' But just as the thought occurred, a sudden blaze burst from the walls, and one side of the building was soon in flames. At

the same moment the bells began to toll in all the churches of Taggia and its neighbourhood, telling of prayers offered up for the souls of the dead.

Long and silently Carlo and Geltruda gazed at the conflagration, which was illuminating with a portentous glare the sky at the back of the burning mansion. At last, seeing her increasing paleness and evident exhaustion, he insisted on conducting her to the hut which his mother's tender forethought had stored with every possible comfort compatible with such an abode. Gently and soothingly, like a parent nursing a sick child, he made her lie down, and persuaded her to swallow some food. She had hardly wept at all during the agonising days she had gone through, but now her tears fell fast and in torrents. As the dawn was beginning to break in the eastern sky, she fell into a deep sleep. He went out, and, sitting down on some logs near the hut, leant his head against the trunk of a tree and slept also for a little while. When he awoke, the fire was

still devouring the remains of what had once been Castel Barco. It continued to rage throughout the day and the following night, and then smouldered for a long while.

Strange days followed for those two beings, shut off from the outward world almost as completely as if they had been cast on a desert island. No human creature would have approached them if it had not been that the old hermit of Lampedusa, hearing of Carlo's self-devotion and his solitary quarantine, found his way to the hut; and to his still greater astonishment than when a few months before he had seen Geltruda standing at his own door, did he behold her sitting on the grass under the shade of the four palm trees. Her joy was great when she perceived him, and great the relief of pouring into his ear her pent-up feelings.

Carlo had been to her all tenderness. His delicate and watchful care had guarded her from uneasiness, and spared her the slightest feeling of distress in her singular and unpro-

tected position; but Fra Romualdo's visit was, nevertheless, inexpressibly consoling. To him she could impart what as yet she did not venture to say to Carlo, although they spent several hours of the day together, sometimes sitting in the orange and olive groves, sometimes by the side of the torrent of melted snow hastening to reach the blue sea. She was particularly fond of watching that rushing, foaming stream breaking over the stones, narrowing and widening again at intervals. Two words at those moments often rose to her lips —'Time and Eternity.'

Carlo used then to see her eyes turning towards the dark blue line of the distant sea, and the azure sky above it, and there was in them an expression which made it impossible to him to interrupt her silent meditation. Often she spoke to him with touching gratitude, with earnest, even ardent affection, but she never mentioned the future, and something seemed to check him when he tried to do so. There was a sort of tacit feeling on both sides which kept them silent

as to the days that were past and those that were to come.

God and heaven, the marvellous beauty of His works, the wonders of His grace, they spoke of. And the more beautiful the sky, the more lovely the earth, the more their souls rose to the contemplation of the world beyond the grave. When they walked amidst the ilex and olive groves, and flowers of every shape and hue seemed to spring up under their feet; when through the openings in the foliage they caught glimpses of distant scenery, fairer than any poet's dream, they said to each other:

'If the prison-house is so beautiful, what will the palace be?'

Each day at noon, the white handkerchief was waved over the hut as the signal to Carlo's mother that all was well with them. Each morning before sunrise they met at a spot agreed upon, between their respective abodes—the hut and the cave—and walked to an eminence near the boundary they could not cross. When the tinkling bell of the little

chapel announced that Mass was going to be said at the sanctuary of Lampedusa, they knelt on the grass and heard it in spirit.

As the days elapsed Carlo could see that Geltruda found it more and more difficult to converse about anything connected with this world. She seemed to live in another atmosphere, to be sighing for an invisible home. But in proportion with this increasing and absorbing abstraction, so did the tenderness which she showed him seem also to deepen. It was inexpressibly touching, like a mother's for her child. It had in it a pitying sweetness and at the same time a strengthening power. When she spoke of God and heaven, the fire in her soul seemed to kindle in his a kindred flame, and to raise it above earthly cares and thoughts.

Time passed quickly. The last day of the quarantine was approaching. The last but one was a Sunday. Fra Romualdo brought them that morning the Blessed Sacrament to the spot where they were wont to repair for their devotions. Kneeling side by

side, where they had so often prayed together, they received Holy Communion, made a long thanksgiving, and then returned to the valley.

After the customary meal, which they shared as usual, Carlo was about to leave Geltruda alone, as he had been wont to do, till noon; but she asked him to stay and sit down by her on the logs under the palm-trees. Then he took courage. His tongue was loosed. The spell that had kept him silent was for a moment dispelled. He said:

'Do you remember, Geltruda, that to-morrow we return to the world; that my mother will be expecting us, and the Ubaldi Palace opening its doors to receive us?'

'Carlo mio! have we spent so many days together, have our souls held such intimate communion in this solitude—and have you not read my heart? Have you thought it possible that the survivor of this awful catastrophe, the last daughter of a house so suddenly, so fearfully swept away, could go back to the world, to its cares and its joys?

Did you hope so, Carlo? Oh! if you did, then I thank God that silence sealed your lips and mine, and that it has been given to me during these sweet and solemn days to show you how great, how unchanging is my love for you, and not to sadden your soul before the parting hour arrived.'

'This is what I feared,' he said, and buried his face in his hands. 'If you had wept, Geltruda: if you had shunned me more; if you had looked less calm, less peaceful, less unearthly, I would have hoped more; if you had been to me less like an angel leading me to unknown heights, I should not now be so afraid that God will not give you back to me.'

'Then you did foresee it?'

'How could I help foreseeing that He would accept my offering, though weak nature clung to the contrary hope?'

'Your offering! O Carlo, speak. What offering did you make?'

'When I heard of the fate of all your family, when I thought of my Geltruda in the living tomb which had closed over her, and the

solitary anguish she was undergoing, I flung myself on the ground in speechless agony; I asked God to save you, not for myself, but for Him, if such were His will, and if He called you to the religious life, to let me follow in your footsteps.'

Geltruda's eyes beamed with a joy only known to those who obtain the dearest wish of their hearts for one they love more than themselves.

'I owe you all,' she said; 'and now, for eternity we are united. Believe me, Carlo, it is not for those who have walked in the paths by which we have been led to retrace their steps, to drink at the cisterns when the fountain is in sight. My vocation was marked out for me from the hour when my kindred perished near me out of reach of my help, when they died without the Sacraments. Could I with those memories live happy in an earthly home? Would not the remembrance of their deaths, so unprepared for, haunt me day and night? Oh, if you have seen me serene, calm, and hopeful, it is

because to-morrow I shall begin as a Poor Clare to offer up for the repose of those souls the daily sacrifices of my austere rule, the ardent prayers which may hasten their release. I would not leave you before your banishment was over, not till you were restored to your mother; but I have thirsted to abandon this earthly paradise and to enter the cloister with an intensity words cannot describe.'

She hesitated, and then added:

'The moment is at hand. Fra Romualdo has arranged everything for my reception at Santa Chiara, near Oneglia. They expect me this day. Will you take me there, Carlo?'

'So soon!' he said. 'Do they know your history?'

'Yes: the prioress was a dear friend of my mother's. Fra Romualdo has told her all. She consents to receive the penniless orphan, and to conceal her true name from the world.'

'Is that your wish?'

'Yes; my only wish, and what I ask of you. Let no one but your mother know that

the last of the Montenegri escaped the doom which has fallen on her race. Let me be dead to everyone else. And you,' she tenderly added, 'you, my beloved one—where——? when——? You cannot yet tell——'

'In the family of St. Francis, with God's help, I will live and die. Wherever obedience sends me, there will I go. Geltruda, these days have given me new thoughts of heaven. As we have so often said, if the joys of the prison-house can be so great, what will it be when we meet in paradise?'

'And your mother; what will she feel?'

'Oh, she has long lived in readiness to accept the hardest of sacrifices if God's hand points to it. She will thank Him for my vocation. What can Christian mothers like her expect for their children when they ask God daily to grant them His *greatest mercies?*'

This was said with a bright smile, and then Geltruda felt that the bitterness of her sacrifice was over. They might both suffer

in bidding each other an eternal farewell on earth, but the light of heaven was shining on the paths they were both about to tread.

Late that afternoon the mule was again harnessed, and Carlo conducted Geltruda to the Convent of Santa Chiara. In the presence of the prioress the parting took place.

'Addio, Geltruda.'

'Addio, Carlo,' were the only words they uttered.

The aged nun, who knew their story, was in tears. They did not weep—not then, at least. Geltruda felt an intense joy, a deep gratitude, that her offering was accepted, and her life henceforward devoted to the work of expiation. As Carlo looked at her for the last time, he thought, 'I might have made sure long ago that she was not meant for an earthly bride;' and then bravely he went his way to the home he was about to leave for a life of poverty and apostolic labour.

His mother gave her assent and her blessing to his resolution, and entered herself a

religious order. The Ubaldi Palace was turned into a hospital.

Before Carlo left Taggia, he made a pilgrimage to the Chapel of Lampedusa, and hung up an *ex-voto.* He and Geltruda had promised at the last Festa to make an offering of two hearts joined together, in case they were united in the course of the year. On their way to Santa Chiara she had reminded him of it.

'Are not our hearts more closely united,' she said, 'than if the dearest earthly tie had bound us? Do we not owe an *ex-voto* to the shrine of our Blessed Lady?'

No one knew the story of those two hearts except Fra Romualdo, who, before his death, told it to a brother in religion who joined him in his solitude. Thus was the memory of this incident preserved, and the Legend of the Silver Hearts handed down to posterity.

THE END.

THE LILIES OF THE VALLEY.

THE LILIES OF THE VALLEY.

CHAPTER I.

IN the comfortably furnished drawing-room of a château in the north of France, about fifty years ago, two young girls were sitting one morning, with their arm-chairs drawn close to a blazing wood fire, each with a screen in her hand, protecting their pretty faces, and a piece of fancy-work lying idly on their knees. They were engaged in an eager conversation, carried on in a low voice, so as not to reach the ears of the Chanoinesse de Mirecourt, an elderly lady, aunt to Blanche de St. Valery, the mistress of this château and of a large fortune, inherited from her parents, whom

she had lost in childhood. The old Countess was seated at her embroidery-frame, near a window overlooking a terrace full of flower-beds, on which the autumnal sun was shining brightly. A cold easterly wind, however, had been made an excuse by the young ladies for remaining at home and spending the morning in discussing a particularly interesting subject. They had been at school together at Amiens, and Jeanne de Tourville was on a visit to her friend Blanche, who had lately come of age, and was about two years older than Jeanne. Her guardian, the Baron d'Ossouville, lived in Paris, and she generally spent the winters at his house and the rest of the year at her own country place with her aunt, who exercised very little control over her. Fortunately she had good principles and good dispositions. Though the inevitable result of having always had her own way had made the young heiress wilful and heedless, she had many good and amiable qualities, and was a great favourite with everybody, from her aristocratic neighbours down to the

peasants of the adjoining villages. She had high ideas of duty, but did not always apply them to the minor occurrences of life. Jeanne had been her greatest friend and worshipping admirer at school, and had continued so ever since.

On the occasion of his ward's coming of age, M. d'Ossouville, who detested the country, had made the effort of spending a few days at her house, partly to do honour to the young chatelaine, partly to render her an account of his management of her fortune, and to advise her as to the future direction of her affairs. This had led him to impress upon her strongly the imperative necessity of soon making up her mind on the important question of marriage. He had laid before her a list of suitors, which comprehended gentlemen who had seen and admired her in Paris, others—her neighbours in the country—whom she had known all her life, and some who had never set eyes upon her, but whose wealth and titles made them very desirable matches for a young lady possessed of two

hundred thousand francs a year, besides a château and landed estates of no inconsiderable value. He frankly told her that he was growing old, and had too many affairs of his own to be able long to continue to attend to hers; that Madame la Chanoinesse, though she contrived to manage a household, had not much head for business, and, this being the case, that she must really accept a husband, and that with as little delay as possible.

It was on this subject that Jeanne and herself were talking, with their feet on the fender and their faces close to each other. It had been led up to by a discussion as to their dress on the following day—a very exciting one indeed in the midst of the sameness of a country life. Marie de Rochemaure—another of their Amiens schoolfellows—was going to be married, and there was a great gathering of relations and friends at her father's house for the happy occasion. The wedding was to take place in the morning at the parish church, and there were to be festivities in the park during the afternoon, and a ball at the château

in the evening. Blanche had not yet made up her mind as to her dress, which Jeanne thought very odd—for she had settled everything about her own at least a week ago—but then she had not so many gowns to choose out of, and not so many things to think about as Blanche. She said so, and Blanche answered:

'Yes, I have many anxieties. If you only knew how tiresome M. d'Ossouville is about my marrying! He leaves me no peace on the subject. He actually drew up a list of "candidates for the honour of my hand," as he calls them in his old-fashioned style. You may look at it if you like.' And she went and took out of a drawer a paper which she gave to Jeanne.

'And which of these gentlemen do you think you will accept?' Jeanne asked, not without a little trepidation; for in this list was the name of the Vicomte de Plessy, whom she happened to know her own parents had thought of as a desirable match for herself, and she did not dislike M. de Plessy—this

being the greatest length to which a French young lady will go when speaking of a person for whom she may, nevertheless, feel a very decided preference.

'Not one of them will I marry,' Blanche answered.

'Really!' Jeanne said, with a sigh of relief. 'Not the Comte André de Furnival, or Charles de St. Amand, or the Marquis de Bellecourt, or——the Vicomte de Plessy?'

'No. If I was really obliged to marry one of them, why, I suppose M. de Plessy would be the most endurable.'

This made Jeanne's heart sink within her. Blanche might after all choose, as at least second-best, the object of her romantic predilection.

'He is good, and I like him very much,' Blanche said; 'but he is not the sort of man I should wish to marry.'

Then Jeanne thought she would put a bold question.

'Have you ever seen, I wonder, anyone

who would be the sort of person you would like to marry ?'

Blanche hesitated a little, moved the logs about, and then with an effort said :

'Well, I do not mind telling you that there is a person I could like better than anyone else, one, in fact, whom I do like very much.'

'Oh, please tell me who it is ?'

'His name is Paul de Nerval. He is a naval officer. I always had a fancy for sailors. There is something in him unlike other people; he is clever and enthusiastic, and fond of poetry and music. I met him very often at Paris in the winter, and I thought him charming.'

'Have you spoken of him to your guardian, or to your aunt ?'

'No; of course not. Do you suppose I should tell them I wish to marry a man who has not proposed for me ?'

'Would he be a suitable husband for you ?'

'That depends on what people call suitable. If it means someone as rich as myself, then he would not do at all; for he has no fortune—nothing, I think, but his profession to look to.

He belongs, however, to a noble family. He is, in fact, related to the Rochemaures. I did not know it till the other day. I happened to mention him before Marie, and she said he was her cousin, and a very promising officer. They have not seen him since he was a child. But he is asked to the wedding, and arrives to-night, I believe, with some other relatives of theirs who are coming from Paris.'

'Oh! then we shall see him to-morrow, and he will be at the ball. Describe him to me, Blanche.'

'He is considered very handsome, but that is not what I care about. It is his goodness, his simplicity, his originality, I like. He is perhaps a little eccentric, a little superstitious, too. Sailors, you know, are apt to be so. He believes in omens and presentiments.'

'I should not like an eccentric husband,' Jeanne said.

'Oh no, Jeanne, I dare say not! A good sort of commonplace man, like M. de Plessy, would be your beau-idéal.'

This 'shaft at random sent,' found 'aim the

archer never meant.' Jeanne blushed deeply, but Blanche was too absorbed in her own thoughts to observe it.

'The difficulty is,' she said, 'that M. de Nerval is the last man in the world—I am certain of it—to propose to a woman for the sake of her fortune; and poor as he is, if he was ever so much in love with me, he would not show it.'

'But your guardian could sound him, or one of his relatives.'

'M. d'Ossouville would do all he could to prevent my marrying a poor man; and besides that, I have already told you that I will never let anyone but you know that I have the least preference for a man who perhaps does not care for me.'

'Then you are not sure he likes you?'

'Almost, but not quite sure; and it is just that little word "quite" that makes the difficulty. What I am quite certain of is, that if he were ever so much in love with me, he would not declare it unless he knew I cared for him.'

'And how is he ever to know it?' Jeanne asked, with a puzzled look.

For a private little reason of her own, already mentioned, she felt a great interest in the subject; but having no inventive genius, could not suggest any way of solving the dilemma.

'Suppose,' she said at last, 'that some one—not your guardian, or your aunt—I, for instance, were to give Marie a hint?'

'On no account,' Blanche quickly answered. 'Remember, I have spoken to you in strict confidence. Promise me that you will repeat to no one what I have said.'

'Of course not, Blanche, if you do not wish it,' Jeanne replied, in a dejected tone of voice.

After a pause, Blanche said:

'There would have been, perhaps, a way for me to give him a hint without committing myself, but there is no time for it now. Marie said she was glad he was coming to see them, for that he is going to sea again

immediately, and will be absent for a long time.'

'But what was the hint you thought of?'

'Oh, it was an idea that crossed my mind, but too late to carry it out. It would really have been a good plan, but it is impossible now.'

'But tell me what it was.'

'Well, M. de Nerval is, as I told you just now, rather poetical and fanciful, and a little superstitious. He told me one day that when his mother was dying, she sent him to gather some of her favourite flowers, and when he brought them to her, she said, "Paul, I have a presentiment that these flowers will be always connected with the most important moments in your life. When I was expecting your birth, your father used every day to give me a bouquet of them. On the day of your first Communion they ornamented the altar. You will lay them on my grave, for those which you have gathered for me to-day will not have time to fade before I die. And now, mark my words, the woman you will

love and marry will wear them on the day she consents to become your wife." He said he had never forgotten those words, and felt sure they would come true.'

'And did you ask him what flower it was?'

'Yes, but he would not tell me. He said it was his secret. However, yesterday, when I was looking at the rooms which Marie was getting ready for their expected guests, she showed me a picture of a lady sitting on a bench in a garden, with lilies of the valley on her lap. She said, "That is the portrait of Mdme. de Nerval, the mother of Paul de Nerval, whom you know. She had a mania for flowers, and especially a passion for lilies of the valley." I then guessed, of course, which were the flowers he meant; and this morning it came into my head that if it had been the season for them, or if there had been time to get artificial ones from Paris, or even from Amiens, I might have trimmed my gown with lilies of the valley, or, at any rate,

worn a bouquet of them. But it is impossible now. Is it not a pity?'

'Oh, but Blanche, do you know that I think Geneviève, at Outre Champ, could make some for you in time. She would have to work all night, but I dare say she would not mind that.'

'Who is Geneviève?'

'She is the eldest of two orphan girls who live in the village of Outre Champ, a few miles from our house. She makes lovely artificial flowers for a shop at Amiens. She began by imitating the wild flowers Rosette, her little sister, gathered in the fields; and them Mdme. de Lermoise, who died last year, used to send her some from her garden and hot-house. Geneviève has been bedridden for years. She supports her sister and herself by the sale of her work. It is a great charity to employ her.'

Blanche started up, rang the bell, and went for form's sake to ask her aunt if she wanted the carriage, because otherwise she and Jeanne were going to take a long drive.

'How quickly you change your mind, my dear,' the Chanoinesse answered. 'You said just now that it was too cold to go out.'

'We are going to see a poor bed-ridden girl, who earns her bread by making artificial flowers, and to order some I want.'

'Well, my dear, that is a very charitable action; but I hope you will not stay out too long. It fidgets me when you do not come home before dark.'

'Oh, we shall return before five o'clock,' Blanche answered, and as soon as the carriage came to the door, she and Jeanne, well wrapped up, drove off in high spirits.

Geneviève, the flower-maker, was half lying, half sitting in her small bed by the casement-window of her cottage. She was looking thin and wan; deep red spots on her cheeks, and the peculiar brightness in her eyes, gave her at moments a deceptive appearance of health. Inexperienced eyes would not have discerned how ill she was. All around her were flowers. Late autumnal roses and branches of fuchsias, lately intro-

duced into the village from the neighbouring gardens, were visible through the small-paned windows. Flower-pots stood on the sill, and nosegays filled the vases on the chimney. On her bed were lying the implements of her trade, but her hands were folded and her head thrown back in a languid attitude. Tears slowly ran down her cheeks.

The one care, the one love, the one object of her heart, had always been her sister, little Rosette. Little Rosette she always called her, though the pet and darling of other days was now a tall, blooming girl of seventeen, who had been for a year engaged to be married to the son of a neighbouring farmer. He was a good, steady young man, and the wedding was to have taken place at Christmas. But that bane and terror of foreign homes, the conscription, had to be drawn for first, and Jean Bartet had been unfortunate, and was doomed to a term of military service extending over three years, and he and Rosette had to wait to be married till he returned.

Rosette had cried herself to sleep the pre-

ceding night, and had not heard Geneviève's incessant racking cough, nor the sobs which now and then shook her breast. In the morning the elder sister told the younger to go and spend the day at the farm of Jean Bartet's father, whose daughters had been her playmates since her infancy. They had extorted from the farmer and his managing wife a reluctant consent to Jean's engagement with the penniless orphan girl.

'Let her be happy whilst she can,' Geneviève thought. 'These young creatures so easily forget the future in the enjoyment of the present. But, oh, it is hard to die and leave her alone; for she will have to go to service till Jean returns, and to live with strangers is to be alone. My poor little darling! Oh, if Farmer Bartet would but buy a substitute for Jean! He says he can't, and I know he won't. Dear me, how odd it is: the world seems divided between those who could and won't, and those who would and can't.'

At that moment a carriage stopped before

the cottage. The two young ladies, Blanche and Jeanne, knocked at the door of the room, and Geneviève uttered a feeble 'Come in.'

'How are you, Geneviève?' Jeanne kindly asked. 'But I need not inquire, you look so much better.' A deep red flush had coloured the cheeks of the invalid. 'I have brought you a customer—Mdlle. de St. Valery.'

'She is very welcome,' Geneviève said, and opened a carton by her side. 'Would any of these flowers suit mademoiselle?' she asked.

'Roses, violets, geraniums, heliotropes, daisies—no, none of them are what I want,' Blanche answered, after hastily glancing at the contents of the carton. 'I suppose you have not got any lilies of the valley?'

'No, mademoiselle; I sent some in a case to Amiens last month, but I have none left.'

'Well, but you can make some for me. Your flowers are quite lovely! You can

make me a wreath and a bouquet for my dress, and one to wear in my corsage ?'

Geneviève sighed, and said, 'Yes, I think I could, if mademoiselle will give me time.'

The fact was that her weakness made it difficult for her to work at all, except at short intervals.

'Time, my good girl !' Blanche exclaimed ; 'why, I must have these flowers—if not the wreath—I could wear pearls in my hair—but the two bouquets I must have to-morrow, or else I do not want them at all.'

'I cannot make them by that time,' Geneviève said, in a sad manner.

'Oh yes ; I am sure you can, my good Geneviève,' Jeanne said. 'You could if you worked all night, and surely you would not mind that for once.'

How little these girls knew what were Geneviève's nights !—the breathless exhaustion, the deadly sweats, the faint sickness of those hours of solitary suffering.

'I could not,' she again repeated, 'finish them in time.'

'Oh, but you really must,' Blanche said; and Jeanne added, 'You do not know, Geneviève, how much depends upon it, perhaps the happiness of two persons, strange as it may seem to you.'

Mentally, perhaps, she thought of a third person she did not allude to. But her words seemed to strike Geneviève. A sudden light gleamed in her eyes, and she asked:

'How much would you give me if I could finish those flowers for you in time?'

'Anything you like to name,' Blanche cried out. 'I do not care what I pay for them. A thousand francs if you cannot promise to let me have them for less.'

'I will make them for one thousand francs,' Geneviève said, blushing scarlet, for she felt how extortionate she must appear. They did not know what she was selling.

'Very well; I accept the bargain,' Blanche eagerly cried. 'I shall send a man on horseback to-morrow——'

'Give me as much time as you can,' Geneviève feebly said.

'Let me see. Dinner will be at five; we are to dress at the Château de Rochemaure. I must have them by four. The groom will call here at three, and he will leave with you the thousand francs in payment for the two bouquets—the one for my gown of the size of this one,' she added, taking up a cluster of roses from the carton; 'and the one for my corsage as large as that one,' pointing to a bouquet of jessamine. 'You will be well paid, my good girl, but I do not grudge you the money. I hope it will procure you many comforts.'

'It will, please God, procure me peace of mind,' Geneviève said in a low voice; but Blanche and Jeanne did not hear the words; they walked about the village, talking and laughing merrily till the carriage was ready, and then drove back to the château in still higher spirits than when they had left it.

Geneviève sat up in her bed, placed her crucifix before her, joined her hands, and said:

'O my dear suffering Lord, give me strength to earn this sum, and then die.'

She resolutely collected from her stores the necessary materials, and began her work. When Rosette came home, weary and dejected, she knelt down by her sister's bedside, and they said their night prayers together.

'You are in a burning fever,' Rosette exclaimed, as she wished her sister good-night and kissed her cheek.

'Do not blow out the candle,' Geneviève said.

'But you are not going to work now?'

'I do not like to be in the dark when I cannot sleep, and for this once I must be extravagant, and waste a candle. Go to sleep, little sister.'

And the little sister did sleep soundly all the night, whilst the elder sister, with every nerve aching and a weary and sick exhaustion, which increased almost to agony towards morning, went on slowly making the lilies of the valley, and praying for strength not to faint till they were finished.

Before Blanche's messenger arrived, the last sprig was completed. She had again sent Rosette out of the way on some pretext, and when the groom on horseback appeared, bringing with him an envelope containing notes to the amount of one thousand francs, she gave him a carton, and said:

'Tell Mdlle. de St. Valery that I thank her with all my heart.' Then she glanced at the little image of the Blessed Virgin in the recess near the chimney, wrote on a slip of paper the words, 'For Jean's substitute,' inserted it in the envelope containing the notes, and laid it under her pillow. This done, she closed her eyes and rested.

CHAPTER II.

THE wedding at the Château de Rochemaure had taken place. The bright autumnal sun, emerging from a temporary mist, shone on the wedding party, the gay train of bridesmaids, including Blanche de St. Valery and Jeanne de Tourville; the groups of peasants assembled at the church door to witness the marriage of the young lady they had seen since her childhood in the *banc du seigneur*, and the long line of carriages which had conveyed back to the château the friends and guests of M. le Comte. It gilded with its departing rays the festivities which took place in the park, where, after saluting the departing bride, the tenants had

gathered round large tables and done ample justice to the abundant good cheer provided for them.

Blanche had spent many happy hours during that day, for Paul de Nerval had met her with evident pleasure and evident emotion. They had found frequent opportunities for conversation. He had sat by her at the *déjeuner;* afterwards, in company with some of their mutual friends, they had strolled in the gardens. When the banquet and sports in the field began, they joined the lookers-on, and under the shade of the trees talked of Marie's marriage and the good qualities of her husband. This had led to an interesting discussion as to what constitutes the greatest happiness in wedded life, whether similarity of character and tastes, or a dissimilarity, which, when joined to affection, mutual esteem and confidence, sometimes increases instead of diminishing the close union of hearts which should exist between husband and wife.

Jeanne had also spent an agreeable day, for the Vicomte de Plessy had been very

attentive to her. Whether this was only because she was Blanche's friend, and that, finding it impossible to talk to Blanche herself, who was entirely monopolised by M. de Nerval, he thought it the next best thing to converse with her favourite companion, or that, discouraged by the heiress's neglect of his attentions, he was beginning seriously to turn his thoughts to Mdlle. de Fourville, whose appreciation of his merits was highly in her favour, remained to be seen.

When the two girls went up to the room where they were to dress for dinner and the ball, they were of one mind as to the delightful day they had spent and the anticipated enjoyment of the evening that was to follow. On the dressing-table was a white band-box, on which Blanche's eyes rested with exultation. Her maid fastened one of the bouquets of lilies to her gown, and Jeanne placed the other on her breast. She thought her friend had never looked so pretty or been so well dressed, and she could not help saying so. Blanche sent her maid away, and said:

'Am I doing a very strange thing, Jeanne? After all, there can be nothing more natural than that I should wear lilies of the valley; it is only my own consciousness that makes me feel as if I was doing a forward thing. He is not aware that I know his secret.'

'Of course not,' Jeanne answered. 'If you keep your own counsel he need never know it.'

She felt a comfortable conviction that Blanche would not keep her own counsel.

Anyone who had observed Mdlle. de St. Valery's face as she entered the drawing-room with her aunt, who had been dressing in another room, and Jeanne, who was also under the chaperonage of the Chanoinesse, must have been struck by the varying expression of her countenance and the emotion it revealed. She kept glancing at the door, and when Paul came in, anxiously watched for the moment when he would look towards her and notice her dress. When he did so, the agitation in his face was still more unmistakable than in hers. He turned pale and then red,

and during the whole time of dinner could not take his eyes off those white flowers, so full for him of sad reminiscences and agitating hopes. His answers to the remarks of the Sous-Préfet's wife, whom he had had the honour of conducting to the dining-room, were somewhat incoherent.

It was not till dancing began that he could approach Mdlle. de St. Valery. He had engaged her in the morning for the first quadrille, but neither of them had thought of securing a *vis-à-vis*, and after standing up for a moment side by side in the ball-room, they went into a gallery, where the Chanoinesse and some other elderly ladies and gentlemen were playing at whist, and seated themselves on a sofa near the door. For some instants they did not speak, and then he said in a voice broken with emotion :

'Is there any meaning in your wearing these lilies of the valley?'

She blushed deeply, and did not answer.

'There *is* a meaning in it,' he said.

She looked the 'yes' she did not utter. Then he asked another question, and received a favourable answer. Upon that followed an hour of that strange and short-lived happiness which most people have known something of at some moment of their lives, whether followed by a lifetime of real happiness, or by a long and bitter disenchantment. But that it is sweet at the time no one will deny, provided the affection be pure and earnest on both sides; and such was the case with the young heiress and her penniless lover, who would have died rather than own his love till he felt sure that she would be unhappy if he did not do so.

Whilst they were thus sitting side by side, speaking of the bright future before them, the curé of the village, in whose parish Blanche's château was also situated, entered the room with a hurried step. She sprang up to stop the good abbé, for she wanted to introduce Paul to her dear old friend.

'My child, do not detain me now,' he said. 'I have had a sick call, and am going to ask

M. le Comte to order me a conveyance. Whilst it is getting ready I will speak to you.'

He came back in a moment; she presented to him M. de Nerval, and then asked:

'Have you far to go, M. l'Abbé?'

'Yes; several miles,' he answered. 'It is not one of my own parishioners who has sent for me. My *confrère* at Outre Champ happens to be absent, and Geneviève the flower-maker is dying.'

Blanche started, and said:

'I saw her yesterday; I did not know she was so ill.'

'Her life,' the abbé answered, 'has hung on a thread for several weeks. It was like a flickering candle, which the least breath would extinguish. The boy who came to fetch me says that she worked all last night to finish some flowers a lady had ordered for the ball. In her weak state this strain was no doubt a death-blow to the poor girl.'

What Blanche felt at that moment we need not describe. She called the Chanoinesse from

the whist-table and Jeanne from the ball-room, and begged them to send for the carriage at once, and to go home.

'Tell my aunt all about the lilies,' she said, as she threw herself into a corner of the coach, weeping bitterly. 'Geneviève is dying.'

CHAPTER III.

EARLY the next morning Blanche and Jeanne drove to Outre Champ. Blanche told her friend what had passed the evening before between her and M. de Nerval, but added :

'However, that is all at an end : I shall never marry. How could there be a blessing on a marriage brought about at such a cost ?'

And her tears flowed again with more bitterness than ever.

When they arrived at the cottage, the shutters of Geneviève's window were closed, and they felt it was all over. Rosette met them at the door, pale and weeping, and led the way to the little room where her sister

was lying dead. The three girls knelt down together, and prayed for some time. When they returned to the other room, Rosette said to Blanche with a tearful voice :

'Oh, mademoiselle, my poor dear Geneviève blessed you so fervently before she died. She said you had enabled her to leave this world so much happier than she could have expected, and that she would ask the good God to reward you.'

Blanche seemed bewildered.

Jeanne asked Rosette to explain what she meant.

'Look here, mademoiselle,' she said: 'this sum which mademoiselle gave my poor Geneviève for those lilies of the valley her dear hands made during the last hours of her life, was just what was wanted to get a substitute for Jean Bartet, my betrothed. She said I was to tell you that if she had asked to be paid so much for those flowers, it was because she was dying, and that she could not bear to think that after her death I should have to live amongst strangers, and not to

be married for ever so long. Now he can stay ; but, oh, the happier I am, the more it makes me cry to think I have lost her, and that she was working so hard that last night when I knew nothing about it and was sleeping like a log by her side ;' and then Rosette covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

Blanche rose, and said : 'I will always be a friend to you, poor Rosette, for Geneviève's sake. I will come and see you again, and Jean Bartet will not marry a portionless bride.'

Then once more she went to the bed where the fair and peaceful corpse was lying, and prayed long and fervently.

It was some days before Mdlle. de St. Valery recovered from the emotions of that night, in which joy and grief had been so strongly mingled. Self-reproach, which she carried to a morbid excess, made her refuse to see Paul de Nerval, and prevented her from speaking of their engagement. On the day of Geneviève's burial, she sent to be laid on her grave the lilies of the valley which had

been the cause of so much joy and so much sorrow; and on the following Sunday she went to the Presbytery to see her old friend, the curé. She told him all her story, and ended it by saying that she was going to break off that ill-fated engagement, and to atone for Geneviève's death by becoming a nun.

The old man smiled, and said:

'You will do no such thing, my child. God does not call you to be a nun, but a faithful servant of His in the world. I know that M. de Nerval is a good Christian, and a worthy man. You will marry him, and together you can both do much good.'

'But I do not deserve to be happy after being the cause of Geneviève's death.'

'Come, my child, you must not exaggerate your offence. You acted thoughtlessly, and perhaps a little selfishly, but the good God, as He so often does, has mercifully made that thoughtless act a source of blessing to Geneviève and Rosette. Thanks to the money you gave for the flowers, the eldest sister died in

peace and joy; and her young sister, the object of her life-long devotion, is happy and well provided for. As for you, my dear child, you will enter on the married state with more subdued and holier feelings than would have been the case had it not been for this strange incident.'

'But still I ought to atone for my selfish thoughtlessness.'

'Well, I will give you a penance, my child, which must last as long as your life.'

Blanche looked rather anxiously at the good priest.

'You will never say yourself, and you will use your influence with all your friends to prevent their saying, when they order an article of dress, *I must have it by such a day.* Sadder consequences than Geneviève's happy, though hastened, end have been the result of those words.'

Three weddings took place on the same morning a few months afterwards. Mdlle. Blanche de St. Valery was married to M. Paul de Nerval, Mdlle. Jeanne de Tourville

to the Vicomte de Plessy, and Rosette to Jean Bartet. There were no lilies of the valley in the bouquets of the brides, but each one of them thought on that day of the flowers Geneviève had made during the last night of her life, and as they left the church turned aside from the gay *cortége* and went to kneel at the grave of the poor girl to whom they owed so much.

THE END.

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