

As he walked he pondered, then presently thought out a subterfuge to be resorted to if the master of the house chanced to be in his way, guarding that green gate which before him no priest had ever passed. But he soon took courage; there was no one in the courtyard but Madame Le Huguet, who was seated on the stone bench knitting, and who came to meet him as if she had expected him. Her face wore a gloomier and still more passive look. One would have said she was a sleep-walker acting without any will of her own taking part in her movements. And truly she did not belong to herself—she was undergoing a tyranny which mothers cannot resist; her daughter for so long hopelessly reserved, cold and mute, had given way at last, weeping on her bosom and covering her with caresses, and had placed at her mercy the consolation or the despair of her last days. She yielded in distraction, knowing that she was doing wrong, that this cowardice would heap burning coals upon her head; she felt sure of the anger of her husband, and of a still more terrible judge, to whom, twenty times a day, she repeated as her whole prayer, "Lord, may I alone be punished!"

Without speaking to the priest, without looking at him, she showed the way as she had done the day before, and then returned to watch in the courtyard.

This time the windows were closed, the curtains closely drawn; instead of the perfume of pinks, an odour of ether filled the room. The priest saw the fatal impress upon that wasted brow. He had assuredly done well to come.

"Simone!" said he, in a very low voice; for she had not opened her eyes at his approach.

She awoke with a start, stretched out her arms, tried to speak; a ray of joy had suddenly changed her whole appearance—a joy that still distrusted itself, a joy mingled with apprehension, but still more with gratitude, with boundless gratitude.

"Oh, how kind you are!" she murmured at length; "how kind you are!"

And not meeting in the eyes sought by hers all that she wished to discover, "Yes," she continued timidly, "you are kind not to despise me altogether. That note-book, after giving it you, I longed to take it back again. It seems that I had delirium the whole night, that I kept on crying out, 'Do not read!' My father told me so without being able to account for it. . . . Perhaps you have not read the book, since you are here!"

"I have read—I do not despise you; I pity you," he replied, in his clear, manly voice, softened by compassion.

"You pity me?" she repeated. Then after a pause, as if she were expecting something more, she added, "That is all you come to tell me?"

"No, I have many other things to tell you, my daughter, my sister," answered he then. "I have come to talk with you, as we may do; I, who belong to God, you, who are to appear before Him, concerning a love condemned upon earth, but which it rests only with you to see reflowerish up above, where nothing dies."

Leaning upon her elbow, she listened to him with her whole soul in her eyes.

"Simone," he went on, "you have confided to me the history of a poor child who has been loving, without knowing that she was sinning, whilst paying with her life for this involuntary fault, a man who had forbidden himself by oath the most lawful joys in this world, and who would himself rather have died than be perjured. In such rare kinds of love the soul either burns or refines: they lead to heaven or to hell—to no middle place; they have for their end either eternal separation or eternal reunion."

"Reunion?" sighed Simone.

"Yes," continued the priest, his handsome face beaming with a deep and lofty impulse; "it is for you to choose." (And he drew from his belt and laid upon the bed, as a witness of their interview, the little black wooden crucifix that never parted from him.) "My Master forbids me to hear anything that could turn me aside from Him. But of what consequence is this passing world? If I were the poor girl whose tortures of mind you have revealed to me, I would not stop at such a transient meeting, I should aspire to a tryst without end—again to see him, who instead of being for me an occasion of falling has tried to be a means of salvation, in that realm where there will be no more sins, no more obstacles; where all is pure, all is love."

"How can that be brought about?" she stammered, deceived by that apostolic fervour which resembled passion, which was indeed the strongest kind of passion—that of proselytism.

"Do not you know," said he, "the souls that meet again are those that in this world have had a like faith and a like hope for the next. There is still time. Allow me to teach you, or rather yield yourself to the heavenly promptings which warn you that by strange and devious ways God is leading you to know him."

"Then if I believed what you believe we should meet again?"

"I can promise you that."

"You think so? You really think so?"

"I am sure of it."

"Speak, then!" she exclaimed.

And he did speak—eloquently, ardently; he found without effort words fitted to open that wounded heart, consumed by many fires, to the depths of tenderness, the profound mysteries, the matchless consolations of Catholicism.

She listened intently, wishing only to hear his voice as long as possible, to keep him beside her upon any ground conceivable. That desire which he had expressed to see her again in the life to come sufficed to cast a spell over her dying hour. The time was flying quickly away while her

thoughts were all turned to his beloved presence, and his to the instruction that he had begun. Suddenly they heard Monsieur Le Huguet say aloud in the garden, "I am going upstairs to Simone," and his wife reply with evident agitation, "Take care you do no such thing! She is resting." Then a few minutes later the mother came and said to the priest, "Take advantage of his back's being turned. Be off quickly."

"But to-morrow!" murmured Simone, "to-morrow!"

"Yes, to-morrow," answered Vicar Fulgentius.

And Madame Le Huguet repeated after him, as though in spite of herself, "To-morrow!" happy midst her grief to see that a thread bound her child to life; certain that to-morrow, by the sovereign virtue of that hope, she would still be in life.

VII.

TWICE, three times did the vicar of Arc return to La Prée. He chose the hour when the father was absent; he slipped in furtively towards the little back door, half-opened mysteriously to him; he multiplied stratagems and precautions, as a lover would have done to cheat jealous guardians. His design and the condition, every day more alarming, of her whom he called his catechumen, justified this trickery in his eyes. Never did a scruple check him in this battle fought, as he deemed, with the demon of heresy; only he lamented that he did not meet with more dangers.

All was too easy, thanks to the complicity of the mother. But this interesting task absorbed him body and soul; they were the best filled days of his life, those that supplied him with emotion—the food his heart had longed for. In the intervals between his visits to Simone he prepared overwhelming arguments, applied himself to opposing the principle of love to the principle of protestation, in which she had doubtless been brought up; he summed the doctrine up in a rapid and substantial manner adjusted to their interviews, so brief and so soon to be broken off. Besides, it was of little consequence to fathom dogma, to explain symbolism to the bottom; he only required an impulse of confidence and faith, one of those impulses that decide in a second for eternity. Was he gaining ground? How could he tell?

She offered no objection, she lent her ear, kept ever silent, appeared docile. At times a big tear stole down her cheeks from her closed eyelids; at times she would fix a heart-broken look on the mirror in front of her—the mirror of that famous wardrobe about which there was a talk in the locked note-book. But if, while he spoke of heaven to the Christian, the woman was weeping for her vanished beauty, he knew it not, but steadily pursued his aim, without looking at her, without any distraction. Never did he observe the funereal coquetry with which to receive him she wrapped herself in delicate white shawls. One day when she said to him, with a look of unutterable pain, "I am no longer a woman, I am only a phantom,"

"You are a soul," he answered, "a purified soul; that is why I return here."

And when she grew more pointed, saying, "Since you have taken pity on me, and I have seen you every day, death which before did not terrify me, I now recoil from."

He added, sternly still, "Do not regret life: it had nothing to give you," thus driving her back sadly submissive to the unknown shores, where she was to wait for him. Yet sometimes, jealously exclusive, she relished the certainty of leaving her memory in a heart which no human affection would ever enter; at other times, again, so feeble a consolation did not suffice her. In all sorts of ways earthly feelings continued to have a hold upon this dying girl, unknown to him who in the full vigour of youth and health was more dead than herself to the impressions of life. Nevertheless an article of the faith proposed to her delighted her, enraptured her; it was the close though invisible bond subsisting between those who are no more and the friends that survive them, leaving them the power of caring for each other, and influencing their destiny. "You will think of me," said she to the priest; "you will speak to me in your prayers; and I will never leave you any more. I will not leave you again for a moment—never again!"

These words were the last let fall by her lips.

(To be continued.)

THE DECAY OF GENIUS.

THERE is a general feeling in the world that the present is not an age of genius. Despite the many brilliant discoveries which have been made, despite the enormous pains taken to develop the intellect of the human race, despite the large number of clever and educated men there are, a conviction is abroad that there is a lack of genius. Nor is this merely the discontent often felt with the present, and a longing retrospect to a former age of gold. There seems really to be good evidence that, however improved our civilization may be, however increased the number of men who work in concert for the advancement of knowledge, the individual greatness which marked some previous epochs is no longer to be found.

It might have been thought that when education reached the lower classes, when many more men were brought within the light of knowledge, many "mute inglorious Miltons" would have found their voice, and enriched us with their song. It is not so. Neither in eloquence, nor in poetry, nor in painting, nor in the art of leading men in politics, have we found successors to Shakespeare, or Burke, or Joshua Reynolds, or Pitt. The same kind of decadence has been seen in other days.

It is notorious that while ordinary talent is more or less hereditary,