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ROSE LEBLANC;
OR,
THE TRIUMPH OF SINCERITY.

CHAPTER XVII.—Continued.

Madame Vidal tells every body that she can get to listen to her, that her sons are now gentlemen, and M. Baptiste is thinking of settling at Bordeaux, and she means to go with him.—When people become rich they do not much like living in the place where they once were poor. That is why I am so much afraid that M. Andre will go and establish himself somewhere a long way off from Jurancon. Ah, you are going to be a real *madame*, Mlle. Rose, a *lionne*, perhaps, as the newspapers say, and there will be no getting near you!

Hold your tongue, Jules, you provoke me, exclaimed Rose, stamping her foot.

Ah, I am so glad to hear you tell me to hold my tongue; it shows that you are not changed yet, Mlle. Rose; but then, also, you are not married yet. If I go to Paris, as I hope to do, for my aunt has promised to get me placed with one of my cousins in a linen-draper's shop, I shall never dare to present myself before M. de Vidal.

Then it is you that will be changed, not I, my dear Jules; for who ever knew you to lack courage to push yourself any where?

Well, you are quite wrong, Mlle. Rose. For instance, I was quite unable to overcome my natural timidity, and call at the Chateau de La Roche Vidal all the time that you were staying there, though I was once in the neighborhood upon some business of my aunt's. I was dying to go and see you, but never succeeded in summoning up sufficient courage. I should have been so glad, besides, to renew my acquaintance with that charming young lady whom I saw and spoke to at Pau, and who sent me such a beautiful cresset from Betharam. She made an impression upon me that time can never efface.

Jules said this with such a sentimental air, that Rose burst out laughing; but the next moment she said, with a sigh, Mlle. de Morlaix is an angel. Jules can you tell me at what time the diligence from Brittany comes in?

At the same time as that from Bordeaux, about four o'clock. Do you expect any one to come by it?

Yes, Henri.

Ah, M. Lacaze. He is grown quite gentle since last summer; every body says he is hardly like the same person. It is ever since you went together to Betharam. You can have no idea how benign he is grown to everybody.

Do they say that? cried Rose, looking at Andre's letter, which was lying on the table.

Yes; but they also say that he looks ill, and that he has grown very thin; and it is not to be wondered at, for it must be very unwholesome to keep in one's anger as he does. I know by myself; when I don't speak, it always makes me feel quite ill.

Jules, go away, cried Rose, in great agitation, for she had just heard Henri's voice in the kitchen, and her heart beat so violently as almost to choke her. She took up the letter, for she wanted to give it to him herself. Oh! if I only knew what he says, she murmured, clasping her hands over it. Jules went away, and soon Henri came in.

Well, Rose! how are you? said he, taking both her hands.

Very well, thank you, she replied, trying to avoid his eyes.

But I say just the contrary. You are ill, Rose. What is the matter with her? said he, turning to Aunt Babet, who just then entered the room.

You had better ask herself, answered her aunt, who was a little nettled by Rose's unusually taciturn demeanour. She does not open her mouth twice in an hour. I suppose she does not care about talking to us now that she is going to marry a gentleman.

Oh, Aunt Babet! how can you say such things, when you know how glad I was to see you, and how often I asked to be allowed to come back? and the poor girl went into the garden without seeing that it was raining.

What is the matter with her? demanded Henri a second time, in a voice like thunder.

I tell you I know nothing about it; the whims and follies of the young people now-a-days are quite unbearable. In my day they either married or they did not, and you knew what to be at; but as for Rose. . . . Here she comes back; she looks quite upset. I shall leave her to you;—perhaps you may be able to make her speak.

Rose came in, and going up to the table put Andre's letter upon it. Will you read this letter, Henri? said she, pointing to it. She went and sat down near the window. Medor, who could not obtain the smallest notice from his master, laid himself down at her feet. Henri leant against the chimney piece, and opened Andre's letter. A profound silence ensued. Rose sat

with her eyes rivetted on Henri's face trying to discover there some indication of what was passing in his mind. It betrayed nothing, however. He read steadily to the end of the letter, and then turned back to the beginning and went through it again. This time he stopped reading now and then, and looked straight before him, but without changing countenance or giving the least sign of what might be passing within him.—At last he folded it up and put it in his pocket, and went out of the house. The rain had ceased and a ray of bright sunshine flitted across the valley, and the white clouds were sailing rapidly over the blue sky. Henri took off his hat, for his forehead was burning. He walked round the orchard and stopped for an instant by the meadow, and looked at the cows which were quietly chewing the dripping fragrant grass. Soon he retraced his steps, and went back into the house. Rose was still sitting where he had left her, with her head leaning on her hands, and the dog sitting before her and gazing at her with anxiety. Henri sat down beside her.

Rose, he began, try and take courage to bear what I have got to tell you. God is my witness that I would rather die than give you pain. You know well that I would do anything, and give all I possess to make you happy, but if He does not see fit that. . . .

Is Andre dead? asked Rose turning pale.

No, not dead; but he. . . . the man who loved you, the man whom you love. . . . Oh, Rose, pray for strength to bear it, for strength to say, 'Thy will be done, Lord! Rose, my own beloved child, that man loves you no longer.'

Oh, Henri, murmured Rose, in stifled accents, does he say that? is that what he says in the letter?

He is still ready to marry you, he says, if you insist upon it, but he loves some one else, ungrateful villain that he is. Oh, Rose, Rose, do not cry so bitterly; you will break my heart.

Oh, Henri, if you only knew! murmured Rose, half choking with sobs.

Poor child! you are very unhappy. I know very well how it is.

No, no; you don't understand, you don't know Henri. . . .

Oh, yes I do, only too well. Do you think I too have not suffered, I who love you with my whole soul, who would give my life to see you smile, and to hear you say, 'Henri, I love you?'

Rose lifted up her head, and let her little hands fall into the two large ones that were stretched out to her. Tears were still rolling down her crimsoned and burning cheeks, but a radiant smile was beaming on that childish face, and her features expressed nothing but happiness.

Henri, cried she, Henri! don't you understand that I love you? Oh! I am too happy!

Henri's face became as pale as death. Rose what do you mean? Speak quick, if you do not wish me to die! What do you mean?

That I love you, you, and that I love him no longer, and left off loving him a long time ago.

It is not possible. My God! it cannot be true, murmured Henri in a stifled voice, and clasping convulsively the two little hands that lay in his with such force as almost to crush them. When was it? How did it come about? Tell me every thing.

I hardly know, said Rose, laying her head on his shoulder. I hardly know myself when it began; perhaps it has always been so. I was doubtful about it before I fell ill, since the day that you carried me in your arms when the road gave way under us. But when you went to Bordeaux with the money for the substitute, I was quite sure of it. And afterwards, when I saw M. Andre again, before he went to Italy, I felt more certain than ever that I did not really love him, and that I always loved you, even when I was not conscious of it. But I did not dare to tell any body, for I had so often promised M. Andre that I would marry him. And, besides, he said he loved me. And you. . . . I don't know. . . .

You don't know! Oh, Rose, how narrowly we have all escaped being miserable. But read this.

Rose took the letter which Henri held out to her. But, before beginning to read it, she raised her eyes to his face with such a look of love and happiness that he—the man from whom sorrow had never wrung a single tear, even when his heart was breaking—felt his strong heart heave, and turned away his head to hide the tears which rose to his eyes.

Let us see, said Rose, with one of her old merry smiles, let us see what says this poor Andre, who does not wish to have any thing more to say to me. And in a low voice she read what follows:

It is to you that I address this letter, which it costs me more than I can say to write; to you, who more than any body have a right to reproach me, and to whom I have been the cause of such bitter grief; I now venture to come for counsel and guidance; and according to your decision my conduct will be ruled. In your hands

I place my fate, and that of Rose, whose happiness, as I declare before God, is dearer to me than my own. Would that I could prove it by actions instead of words. What can I say? I loved Rose, as you too well know.—What I have suffered during the last six months has made me understand what torture my love for her must have caused you. . . .

He understand! cried Henri, striking the table with his clenched fist, that he never will!

And yet your heart has never been racked with remorse. . . .

How does he know? It is very well for him to talk.

You have never had to accuse yourself of ingratitude, while I—not a day, scarcely an hour passes, that I do not reproach myself bitterly with the involuntary wrong that I have done to her, who ought to be dearer to me than anything on earth. . . .

Ah! God be praised! cried Rose, interrupting herself, God be praised that he loves me no longer! What a pity that he should torment himself so much. We must write to him at once.

Go on, said Henri; finish reading this first.

Whom I promised to marry, had am still ready to marry. . . .

You see he says that, said Henri, with a slight touch of uneasiness.

Ah, you think perhaps. . . . You deserve that. . . . and she lifted her forefinger as if to threaten him.

Henri seized her hand, and pressed it to his lips in rapture.

That I am still ready to marry her if she wishes it, and if you, her friend and protector, insist upon it. . . .

And why don't you insist upon it, then? said Rose, half pouting and half smiling.

I am master of my own actions, but alas! I am no longer so of my heart. Removed suddenly as I was from the obscure and monotonous life which I had led since my childhood, circumstances brought me in contact with one who inspired me with that deep, unchangeable, irresistible love which departs only with life. God knows I have struggled and prayed, but in vain I have tried to banish her image from my mind, and to conquer the love that I always looked upon as treachery to Rose. I have no hope of ever seeing her again; I shall never be of any account in her life. The torments I suffer are not relieved by one delusive hope. If Rose calls me back to her—if you tell me to marry her—I will promise her a faithful love, and an unflinching devotion. But would she find her happiness with me? . . .

What do you say, Henri? We must write and tell him not to make himself uneasy about my happiness. Poor Andre! I am very sorry for him. Let us see what more he says.

I cannot believe that she would. It is not possible to be happy with one who suffers, and whose life is one long torment. My health gets weaker every day under the burden of grief that weighs upon me. I tremble at the thoughts of making my poor little Rose, whom I love so dearly, share my sadness, my weariness, and my misery. Oh, Henri! you who once loved her so, who love her still perhaps. . . .

You see, cried Rose, how truly he guesses.

He need not be a magician to find that out, said Henri.

Ah, well! I know I thought you had quite left off loving me.

You were a little fool. But now let me finish the letter.

Henri took it. It was as long as letters are wont to be when the person who writes is sometimes at a loss what to say. Andre offered to give Rose half the fortune that had come to him so unexpectedly, and begged his former rival to try and make her happy, since he was no longer able to do so.

Do not hate me, he added. I deserve that you should, I know I do; but if suffering may expiate a man's faults, I have a right to your forgiveness.

Rose was much touched by these last words.

Henri, said she, we must write him a very kind and comforting letter. We will tell him that you forgive him with all your heart. You do, don't you, Henri?

It is not very difficult now, he replied with a smile.

We will tell him also not to trouble himself about my happiness, and that we thank him with all our hearts for what he offers to give us; but that we do not require it. We shall be rich, you know, Henri. Uncle always told me so.—Oh, how pleased he will be, poor dear uncle! I forgot how happy it will make them. How I wish that Andre could be happy also! I wonder who it is that he loves.

Why, Rose, do you mean to say that you do not guess? replied Henri much surprised.

Well, you at all events are not a witch! . . . Why, Mlle. de Morlaix, of course.

My good angel! Is it possible? Oh, how nice it would be, if they were to marry. They would be so happy together. They would read as long as the day is long. Only I wish for her sake that he cared more about animals, for she is very fond of them. Give me the letter.

What are you going to do with it?

Give it to me; I have an idea in my head.

Such being the case, Henri had not another word to say; the letter was made over to Rose.

CHAPTER XVIII.

One morning, when Mlle. de Tournesfort and Alice were sitting at breakfast in the little sitting room in the turret, where Andre had so often the year before watched Mlle. de Vidal at her studies or her work, two letters were brought in by an old grey-headed servant, and handed to his young mistress, who, as she took them from him little foresaw the influence they were to have on the whole of her future life. Coming from different places, arriving at the same moment, little had the writers of those letters guessed the effect they were destined to produce. One was from Rose Leblanc. It had been penned on the day when she insisted on taking from Henri the one he had received from M. de Vidal, and was the result of the idea which had so suddenly occurred to her mind. She had been at great pains to write it, and had spent nearly a whole day in its composition. Henri had been banished from the parlour, Medor repulsed, and Jules Bertrand, who had called to offer his congratulations on her approaching marriage, warned off the premises. Once achieved, she looked upon this specimen of epistolary style with no slight amount of complacency. It seemed to her a successful effort, which could never be equalled, and had, therefore, better not be repeated. She lived on her own consciousness of its merits, and vowed she would never write another if she could possibly help it. This *chef d'œuvre* was as follows:—

My Sweet Angel,—When one is very happy, it is natural to wish every body else to be happy also, and more especially those one loves. Well I am so very happy, so very joyful, that I would give the world to make others as happy as myself. And, in the first place, I must tell you, my sweet angel, the good news; and that is, that I am going to be married, and not to M. Andre at all, but to Henri, who has loved me dearly all along, and whom it turns out that I have been fond of also all the time I thought I hated him. And the best of it is, that M. Andre does not care for me, and does not wish to marry me.—And this is all so very pleasant, that I can hardly believe it has really come to pass. And now I must tell you all about it. But first, I hope you will not think me a deceitful girl, and that I was pretending to like M. Andre when I did not.—You see, when once I had promised to be his wife, I felt it was my duty to love him, and I tried hard to do so. But still, if you had said to me when I was with you at La Roche Vidal, 'Come, Rose, with your hand upon your heart, do you really care for Andre?' I am sure I should have told you the honest truth. Whether I did at one time really like him, I can hardly say, but indeed I think I did. I am sure I must have been fond of him when he was going to draw for the conscription, and Henri scolded me for talking to him. But then, no sooner were we engaged than it seemed as if I had left off caring for him. And when he went away, and Henri had saved my life and taken care of me when I was so ill, I soon found out who it was I really loved. I tell you all this that you may understand how it all happened, and that I was not deceiving any body on purpose, when I pretended to like him. It was true, you see, at one time; and then, afterwards, it left off being true; and at last it was not true at all. Like the pretty landscapes on the window, when it freezes in the winter; early in the morning they are quite distinct; then, a little later, they are half gone; and about noon nothing of them remains. You who are so clever, and understand about everything, can explain it all, I dare say. Henri says that it was a trial Almighty God sent to teach him not to be so passionate and jealous.—And I dare say this may be true; for he never goes into a passion now, and as to jealousy, why, dear me, he will never be jealous again as long as he lives; though he did say the other day that Jules Bertrand was a little jacksack, because he kissed my hand when he wished me joy; and he tore up a paper with some very fine verses M. Firmin had written about 'The Rose of the Pyrenees.' But I don't care now. If he was to be ever so cross again, and beat me, or shut me up in a tower like Blue Beard, I had rather marry him than twenty M. Andres, though I am sure I should be sorry to say anything uncivil about a cousin of yours, my sweet angel. But I must tell you that M. Andre wrote himself to Henri to say that he did not care for me; that he was attached to somebody else, whom he would love as long as he lived, but whom he never hoped to marry, and that he would marry me, if I insisted upon it. But I suppose he felt

pretty sure I should not. And then he very civilly offered to make over to us all his fortune, which was very handsome behaviour on his part. But, thank God, we do not at all want for money though we are much obliged to him all the same for his kindness. I send you his letter to read, my sweet angel, that you may see that he has not behaved ill to me. If it is wrong in me to do so, pray excuse my foolishness. One must not be too hard upon people. It is not his fault, poor man, if he likes somebody else better than me; and, as it happens, it is a great blessing. It would have been very tiresome if it had been the other way, you know. As Henri says, 'We have been very near being miserable for life, just for want of understanding each other.'—How I wish every body would understand every body, and every body would be happy. I am sure a king and a queen could not be so happy as Henri and I. There is only one thing I care for now, and that is that you, my sweet angel, should be happy also. Every day in my prayers I will beg of Almighty God to make you so.

Your grateful little friend and servant,
ROSE LEBLANC.

The other letter was from Colonel de la Ferroniere. He gave in it a very bad account of Andre's health. A young man who had been travelling with him in Italy, and had become much attached to him, wrote to Rome to communicate to his friend's relatives the apprehensions he entertained with regard to his health, and the deep depression of spirits which was either the origin or the result of his illness.—Obliged himself to return to Paris, he could not forbear from urging on Colonel de la Ferroniere the necessity that some friend or relative should supply his place, and relieve the solitude of Andre's existence. M. de la Ferroniere expressed his regrets that he did not see what arrangement to suggest on this point. M. Baptiste Vidal, who had just assumed the management of a commercial enterprise in Boulogne, and his aged mother, much too infirm to travel, could not be expected to leave home. And even had they been able and willing to do so, added the Colonel,—I greatly doubt if, after the first moment of pleasure which he would have in seeing them, our dear invalid would have found much enjoyment in their society. You, my dear Alice, who, together with a feeling heart, possess that peculiar intelligence which understands and hits upon the best remedy for every kind of suffering, will perhaps be able to advise me on this subject. If it was not for the duties of my position, which claim me to my post, I would at once set out for Rome; but this is, alas! out of the question.

Dear aunt, Alice said, read these two letters; and whilst Mlle. de Tournesfort was looking for her spectacles, and then slowly perusing first Rose's elaborate though artless composition, and then the Colonel's hurried note, she knelt down by her side, leaning her forehead against the back of her chair. A tear trickled down the old lady's withered cheeks, as she folded up the letters and took off her spectacles. Two arms were thrown round her neck, and a faltering voice said in her ear, 'Let us start for Rome to-morrow.'

So we will my dear child, was the good woman's answer.

There was not a tenderer heart in the world than that of uromantic Mlle. de Tournesfort. Sentiment had never rippled its surface, but sensibility dwelt in its inmost core. And real sorrow, whatever its source, was always sure to awaken her sympathy.

Two days elapsed, and on the third the aunt and niece were on board the steamer from Marseilles to Civita Vecchia,—the former somewhat uneasy at the suddenness with which she had acted on the impulse of the moment, and undertaken so long a journey with so little advice from any one but her own heart and the Cure of the village, who had assured her it would be a work of mercy to go and visit the poor young man, whom the late Baron loved as a son,—and the latter absorbed by the thoughts of the task before her, and vague hopes and fears as to the ultimate results of the step she had taken.

On a lovely afternoon in February, just as one of Rome's glorious sunsets was illuminating the sky with its gorgeous hues, and throwing a red light on the domes, towers, cypresses of the Eternal City, Alice arrived in Rome, her hands clasped together her lips moving in voiceless prayer, even as if entering a church. As she passed through its streets, the words of Jacob in the desert where angels had visited him rose spontaneously in her mind. 'This is the house of God, this is the gate of heaven; and from each cross, each altar, each sanctuary on the way, a voice seemed to reply; 'God's peace be with you.'

At that very hour Andre was sitting on one of the long wooden benches in St. Peter's, his head sorrowfully sunk upon his breast, his forehead on a marble paleness, and his cheeks flushed with the hectic hue of a consuming fever. As the