

## Choice Literature.

JOSEPHINE FOUGERE.

AN ALPINE STORY.

## CHAPTER VII. (Continued.) HAPPY TIMES

The woman and the child turned out of the wide avenue. Already the castle could be seen through the branches, and Josephine plucked up courage to go on. She soon came in front of the house. It seemed dismal enough; the windows, cut in the high gray wall, were like eyes opened wide to look at her. She did not know where to go; the door seemed so elegant and massive that she did not dare to pass through it. She looked at the white stone steps without venturing to go up, when Isabel appeared on the threshold of this splendid dwelling, smiling, and serene, she beckoned to her.

"Come," she said; "it is only I who have been scolded—come; are you afraid of me?" She reached out her little hand to the young girl.

Josephine came forward, but as she had just come in from the bright sunlight, she could hardly see the inside of the dark vestibule. The painted windows threw a strange light over the marble pavement, and in the shadowy corners of the large hall, men clothed in iron and with swords in their hands guarded the doors. Josephine stopped.

"Follow me," repeated the child, raising with her little hand the heavy tapestry which separated the hall from one of the rooms.

"But my wooden shoes!" stammered the peasant-girl.

"Your wooden shoes are very nice, and I say come," said Isabel, shaking her head impatiently.

Josephine had to obey: she followed the child-fairy into a room brighter and larger even than the first. On the panelled walls were hung the portraits of those who had lived in the castle before—lords in scarlet coats, marquises with vermilion faces, powdered abbots and soldiers with their wigs. Smiling or serious, but always passive, they looked at Isabel as she passed, and behind her the peasant-girl trying in vain to soften the noise of her wooden shoes on the bare floor.

The child had opened the door of a smaller room, where a young woman in deepest mourning was sitting half in the shadow. She was holding in her lap an open book, but she was not reading. In front of her two delicate vases held some exquisitely beautiful flowers. Between these two vases, in a little frame, was a very small portrait. The countess did not look away from this.

"Oh, guess, mamma—guess what there is in this basket. They are there, alive, mamma!" cried the little girl, coming with a bound to her mother's side. "These are my pigeons, my turtle-doves, that flew away yesterday, and she has brought them back. Aren't you glad, mamma?"

"Yes, I am very glad," answered the countess languidly. "Come here, my child," said she, turning toward the door, where Josephine stood without moving. The girl came forward a few steps, then dropped a curtsy. A ray of light, falling full upon her, showed all her clothes from the pink stockings to the white wings of her cap. Thus placed, she was well seen as she stood against the dark hangings. Her hands crossed on her blue apron, easy and quiet, timid but not awkward, she waited in the middle of the room for the lady again to speak.

The countess was pleased with her manners. "Who gave you these doves to bring to me?" she asked.

"No one, my lady," said Josephine with a second curtsy. "I found them in our house."

"When was that?"

"Yesterday, toward evening, they lighted on our roof. My father said that one did not see these rare birds except at Blancenay, and that they must be yours."

"What! did you bring them back of your own free will? Didn't you want to keep them?"

"So much, mamma," interrupted Isabel, excitedly, "that she talked to them before she came in, and even kissed them in their basket. I saw her well from the wall above the hedge before she knew that I was looking at her."

Josephine blushed scarlet and dropped her head. She wished that she might sink through the polished floor at her feet.

"Isabel is very indiscreet: you must excuse her," said the countess with a half smile. "Your mother has brought you up well: give her my compliments."

At these words the poor girl lifted toward the countess a look of desolation, and two great tears rolled over her scarlet cheeks and upon her black scarf.

"Perhaps you are in mourning?" Excuse me," said the lady. "Is it possible that you have lost your mother?"

"Alas! yes, madame, I have lost her."

"Forgive me, my child. You see I am in mourning too;" and the lady laid her delicate white hand upon the crape on her dress. "I am a widow. Was it in sympathy? At this moment the lady bent her head, covered her sad face with her hands, and Josephine saw the tears escape between her fingers.

"Poor lady!" said Josephine to herself, so surprised that her grief suddenly came to an end. "Who would have believed it? She who is rich is crying like a poor woman! It must be that her husband never beat her. She loved him as I loved my mother."

Isabel, grown serious, had taken her little handkerchief and was tenderly wiping the lady's hands.

Josephine dared not move. She looked above the green tops of the lime trees to the skies, clear, pure and bright. Then she began to think of heaven and of Genevieve's dying smile. "There will be no sorrow in heaven," she said, half aloud.

The widow raised her head and fixed a sweet, sad, rather surprised look on the young girl. "You speak truly, my child," she said. "I should like to see you often," she added after a pause. "But are you from the village? I do not know you."

"No, madame: I live on the other side of the river, in the tower of Fierbois."

"So far off? How honest you are! Truly, you deserve a reward. Come," said the countess, rising—"come; I am going to put into your basket two pairs of the best pigeons in my poultry-yard. You can bring them up and have a dove-house yourself. Those foreign turtle-doves would have done you no good. They cannot live in the open air in our climate."

Surprised and very happy, Josephine followed the countess into a garden beautiful as a dream. Isabel made her tell about her life, and asked her many questions about Benedicte, in whom she was soon deeply interested. After they had led her through gravel walks to the pigeon house, they put four French pigeons into her basket in place of the turtle-doves. It seemed to Josephine that she was walking in a dream. The lady always went first, and turned toward her from time to time with a sad, sweet look.

Isabel, gay as a bird, laughed and frolicked at her side and showed her a hundred curious things. In the clear and tranquil bosom of the lake she saw the castle reflected like a face in a mirror; nothing was wanting in the picture, not a window nor a turret. Sometimes the picture swayed when the calm mirror was gently ruffled by a breath of wind. Josephine had not eyes enough to see and admire every thing.

At last, by a winding road, they came back to the house. The scent of something good that was cooking floated on the air. It came forth in puffs from an iron-barred window overgrown with ivy.

"Veronica!" called the countess. Soon there appeared within the green frame the fat face of an old woman, smiling and rosy under all the wrinkles. Her bright eyes, black and sparkling with good humour, were fixed at once upon Josephine.

"You must give this young girl a good breakfast," said the lady. "She has come a long way to bring us back Miss Isabel's doves that had flown away. Good-bye, my child: I thank you," said the lady as she left her.

"Do you like apricot tarts?" asked Isabel; and without waiting for an answer she disappeared.

"Oh, that girl!" said Veronica's sharp voice. "Don't you see the door? Don't be afraid to walk over it," said the old woman, looking with contented pride at her clean-scrubbed stone floor.

"I will take off my shoes," said Josephine, filled with admiration and respect.

"Come in; I love order," said the worthy cook. Her gray hair was drawn back under a snow white cap. The beautiful neatness of everything was the charm of her green old age. "Sit down there," said the old woman, pointing to the end of a bench before a little plate all ready. Something rich and juicy smoked on the plate; any one could tell that it was good by the scent alone.

Josephine, famished, sat down happy enough, but Veronica's eyes, fixed upon her, disturbed her pleasure. She looked down at the plate while she was eating, although she would much rather have looked at the bright-red copper saucepans set against the white wall like a row of setting suns. But, alas! she could not. Veronica, standing before her, pierced her with her looks.

"How clean you are!" said the old woman sharply, "and your face pleases me."

Josephine raised her beautiful astonished eyes.

"I am too old to do my work alone; I need some one to help me. They think that Veronica is good for nothing but to make the sauces," said the lively old woman with the bitter tone of offended pride. "I was born in a time when women worked, and I don't want any of those young girls who have no spirit nor courage, who don't know how to do anything but chatter, to help me. What would you say if I were to bring you up to the castle as kitchen-girl?"

Dame Veronica looked proudly around the four corners of her domain, then she looked proudly at the poor peasant girl whom she was inviting to come into this house of abundance.

"I live in my father's house," said Josephine quietly.

"And your father, does he give you such pieces as these, and white bread with them?" The old woman was deeply hurt to see her offer despised.

"Excuse me if I have said anything wrong. No, certainly not: such food is not for me. I am but a poor girl. But now I could not leave my father to go out into the world."

Isabel came in. "This is for you. Are you happy?" she said, laying a slice of cake before Josephine.

"Oh, Miss Isabel, you are too kind; but if you will let me I will save this for Benedicte."

"I will let you."

Then the foreign voice that had frightened Josephine in the woods rang through the great halls. Isabel went slowly away: when she reached the threshold she turned around, and, placing the end of her finger between her pretty eyes, she said, "I have an idea."

"That is the way things go in this house," said Veronica, looking lovingly at the graceful figure which disappeared among the shadows of the vestibule. "Without her I don't know what would become of my poor mistress. Since the countess and one would say that the soul and will are gone out of her body; her heart is broken."

Josephine was very thoughtful as she went away from the house. "Yes, my mother was right," thought the young girl, "when she said to me 'Eury no one.' I did not believe it then. I never could have believed that there could be such deep sorrow in such a grand house. I pity the poor lady so much that I cannot go away from her house without praying for her no journey was ever spoiled by a prayer; after that I can walk all the faster."

By the roadside was an old oak; beside it the young girl knelt down, and never did a more fervent prayer go up to heaven for the lady of Blancenay.

Josephine went on in haste, when again Isabel showed herself. She was standing on a green hillock opposite the old oak, but this time the child was serious. She came up to Josephine and said softly, "Did you forget your prayer this morning?"

"Excuse me," said the peasant-girl, blushing; "I thought I was alone here, and I was asking God to comfort your

good mother. How could I, poor girl that I am, thank her for her kindness?"

"Don't go yet," said the little girl; "see what I've brought you. It is wax, opens and shuts its eyes, and you can take the stockings off. It is for Benedicte;" and the child placed before the astonished Josephine a delicate French doll.

"Never, no, never! your heart is too good," cried the wondering peasant-girl. "It is much too pretty for us, and Benedicte is blind."

Isabel was enjoying the innocent Josephine's wonder and astonishment, when, for the third time, the foreign voice separated them.

The sun was setting when Josephine, after having taken Benedicte from the haymakers, went to the tower.

"Where have you been?" asked her father roughly.

"To Blancenay, father, where I went to carry back the birds that escaped from there yesterday. You were asleep when I went away."

"Are you so stupid as that?" asked the poacher, rising suddenly from his chair.

"René Fougère, don't be afraid for my Josephine; she has four of them in her basket now," said Benedicte's little voice.

"The countess gave them to me to make a dove-house," added Josephine; "and they are better than those I carried back."

"That's good," said the father, softened; "I know that you always come out well. He that doesn't know how to do that ought to die of hunger."

Because of her blindness Benedicte had no fear of René: she could not see his stern face. As for him, in spite of his roughness, he felt the confidence of the child; who, like a dove of peace, had come to take shelter under his roof. Benedicte had an influence over him that he did not himself understand. He loved to hear her sweet voice; he loved to follow the quiet movement of her eyes. The presence of James Tristan's daughter in his house flattered his pride and restrained his violence. He had never abused Josephine since the child had been there.

On Sundays, after the afternoon service, James came to see his little girl, and each time was surprised to find her more lovely. Josephine had put a little spindle into Benedicte's hands. One day the child proudly showed her father a skein she had spun herself. As he saw her growing so pretty, Tristan felt more and more how much he loved her, yet he did not speak of taking her home, although without Benedicte his house was as gloomy to him as a prison.

Sculastique, as we can imagine, never came up to the tower. She thought it was a shame that her husband's daughter had left home and gone to live with beggars. But she said nothing about it to James, nor did James speak to her of his beloved child. He told only Denis how happy Benedicte made him.

The faithful servant nodded, and said, "Never fear, master: the little girl will make you so happy some day that you won't know yourself."

The year was warm and beautiful; to the farmer's joy, the wheat ripened well, and of all the lands of Fierbois the finest, without doubt, belonged to James Tristan. "You shall come to the fields to see us," he said to the child the Sunday before the harvest-fest.

"With Josephine?" asked the little blind girl, feeling for her friend's hand.

"Cannot your father take care of you?" he asked, smiling.

"I love you, father, and I love my Josephine, and I am happy when I am with you both."

"You must come too," he said to the young girl.

"No, Mr. Tristan; you can take care of her, and I ought not to go among your harvesters when I have done nothing for you."

"Ah, Josephine, why do you speak of doing nothing for me—you who have twice saved my child's life? I can never, never repay you what I owe you."

"What you say is indeed true, father; to pay her we must love her very much."

On one of the brightest days of July Tristan finished gathering in his harvest. His men, seated in the fields, were taking luncheon for the last time, when James came among them leading his little girl by the hand; they all smiled as they saw her. "My friends, I am bringing my child, my Benedicte. Look at her; has she not grown since the last harvest? Look at her!" said her father, setting her with proud delight on a bundle of sheaves. The child let him do what he would with her, smiled, and stretched out her hands to the people.

"How gracious she is, poor little thing!" they said one to the other.

"Yes, truly, master, she is a very tall little girl. She is as sweet to look at as a white lamb. She is the queen of the harvest. Long live the harvest queen!" they cried all together, and began to look among the sheaves for the freshly cut grasses to braid her a crown.

"The harvest-bouquet shall be for her," said old Denis, offering Benedicte a sceptre of wheat-heads as full of grain as those of Pharaoh's dream.

Sitting on the sheaves, Benedicte received all this homage with the dignity of a queen and the grace of a child. The blue crown upon her forehead, her long hair floating like a golden veil over her shoulders, gave her the air of a queen, which was heightened by the calm beauty of her face.

"I thank you, my friends," she said, pressing the heavy bouquet with her crossed hands to her breast. "I am glad that my father has brought me among you; I wish I could see you, but I am blind. I hear you speaking and I know your names."

James looked at her smiling; the harvesters, too, were surprised and charmed by such grace and kindness, and only say how sorry they were that such a sweet, gentle child would never see the light of day.

The men soon went back to their work, and Benedicte stayed alone, sitting in the shadow of the gathered wheat. She heard the noise of the scythes cutting down the grain and the chirping of the cricket who was delighting itself in the intense heat.

When her father came back to take her the last wages