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ISABELLE DE VERNEUIL; OR, THE CONVENT OF ST. MARY'S.

BY MRS. CHARLES SNELL,
Author of "Helen and Florence, or a Month's Holiday at Rockwell Castle."

CHAPTER III.

Isabelle had arrived at the convent on a dark and dreary day in March. Three months had passed away since that time. June had just opened, and the soft summer air waved over the luxuriant masses of woods and the beautiful gardens surrounding the convent. The grounds belonging to the holy habitation were in a high state of cultivation, and the delicious perfume of lilacs and roses, mingled with that of other flowers, filled the air. On one side, a lawn, exquisitely smooth, extended from beneath the convent windows almost to the confines of the territory appertaining to the community, and through the tall but decayed palings that indicated on the west the limits of the property, one could distinguish the bright waters of the channel, at that season, blue, clear, and transparent as a looking-glass, and reflecting on their broad bosom the silvery beams of the moon by night. But, however ardent were the former, they could barely penetrate the thick foliage of the ancient trees forming a grand and noble avenue on one side of the lawn, beneath whose shade a gentle breeze was always playing to temper the extreme heat of the day. Altogether it was a lovely scene, and in this quiet, sequestered home, the inhabitants led peaceful and happy lives. Days, months, and even years of almost uninterrupted calm succeeded each other, and no rapid incidents, startling vicissitudes, or great and increasing responsibilities, such as destroy the rest and wear out the frames of the children of the world, were known within the high stone walls surrounding on three sides the convent of St. Mary's.

In the hedges and in the trees hundreds of birds built their nests and sang gaily to their mates, thousands of bees buzzed among the flowers, and never had the gardens presented a more lovely appearance than they did on the third of June of the year 18—.

It was the eve of the feast of the Ascension of our blessed Lord, and the day after Cecile, Clemence, and Eugenie were to kneel for the first time and receive the Bread of Life from the hands of the venerable priest: we have already mentioned as being Madame de Verneuil's confessor. In that hour of sweet anticipation and happy imagining, the three girls, full of the serious thoughts suggested by the important and solemn ceremony they were to take part in the next day, had left their companions and had sought refuge beneath the shade of the old elms to enjoy an hour of calm reflection, and to talk over the inexpressible bliss of receiving their Lord and possessing Him in their souls. Isabelle alone had ventured to follow them for she had learned to love her first friends, and although she was far from being as obedient and attentive as they were, the good nuns hoped and prayed that her generous nature would bend itself to the force of circumstances as soon as her capricious and independent temper softened beneath the influence for good exercised over her by

the amiable young girls with whom she daily associated.

However urgent or pressing had been the business or occupation of the Mother St. Euphrasie, she had nobly kept her promise to Madame de Verneuil. Watching over Isabelle with a truly maternal tenderness, she had struggled with an extreme perseverance against the innumerable difficulties that had presented themselves, and against the thousand and one faults which were only too deeply rooted in the disposition of her pupil, faults, however, which were mostly due to her want of education. Not wishing to wound the feelings of the young Isabelle, the Superior had ordered her to be placed in the Sister Josephine's class, not that she was able to follow, or even to attempt to do so, the studies occupying her school-fellows, but the kind-hearted lady was unwilling to cause her the humiliation of finding herself in a room with children of six or seven years of age presided over by the Sister Marguerite. In acting thus the Mother St. Euphrasie hoped that the example of her more advanced companions would stimulate Isabelle, and that she would, on finding herself the object of so much interest and kindness, lose her distaste for study and bring to it the indispensable attention and application so essentially necessary. The good Superior was right.— Isabelle's pride took the alarm, and if she had many faults, it was soon perceived that she had many good qualities. She set herself seriously to work, and at the end of three months the Sister Josephine, much pleased with her progress and aptitude for learning, gave such a favorable account of her to the Superior, that that lady wrote at once to Madame de Verneuil to give her the glad tidings of her stepdaughter's improvement.

"How happy you are, Cecile," said Isabelle, after they had sat for some time in silence. "O, how I wish I were in your place."

"But you will receive your first communion next year," answered Cecile.

"Yes," added Eugenie, "for the Sister Josephine was saying the other day to the Superior that she was very much pleased with you and that you were improving wonderfully."

"Did she indeed say that?" cried Isabelle in a joyous tone.

"Oh, yes, and she even said more; and then our Reverend Mother told her that she was going to write to your stepmother to tell her how well you were getting on."

"But a whole year must pass first," answered Isabelle, referring to the first communion, "and a year comprises twelve long months."

"And there is not one too many to enable you to reach the point at which we have arrived," said Cecile.

"The Cure is very severe with the catechism class, is he not?" asked the child.— "I could never answer as well as you all did."

"Yes, yes, you will, with patience and perseverance. Just remember what you were when you first came here; and if you have already improved so much in three months, what will you not be able to do at the end of the year?"

"And then you work so neatly, Cecile.— Oh! I have a great deal to do to be able to hem and stitch as well as you do. Did you remark the big tears rolling down the faces of those poor mothers when you all showed them the clothes their children are to wear to-morrow?"

"Those women are very honest and industrious. They have both of them several children and have hard matter to find bread to give them. But, hark! there is the Sister Josephine calling us, and we must go in."

The religious impression, however slight and evanescent, made on the mind of Isabelle at this period of her life, cast an influence over her future career. The example of her young companions, and it was rare to find more obedient and attentive children anywhere, contributed greatly to strengthen the resolution she had taken to pay the most serious attention to all the rules and studies of her class. Cecile, Eugenie, Clemence, and Isabelle were almost inseparable. The Mother St. Euphrasie the nuns observed this intimacy with pleasure, for they placed every confidence in their pupils, and trusting them implicitly, they knew that Isabelle would learn no harm from them. She had never once left the convent since her arrival, but her father and stepmother had been several times to see her, and her little brother had accompanied them on two separate occasions. Each visit to Isabelle carried conviction to the mind of Madame de Verneuil that she had acted rightly, and consoled her for the part she had taken in the departure of the spoiled girl from her home. It had, in fact, been a relief to her heart for many weeks, but the great and visible change that had taken place in three short months, both in the manners and conversation of Isabelle, rejoiced her sincerely, and she thanked the gracious Ruler of the universe who had inspired her with the

courage necessary to persuade her husband how highly necessary it was to prepare their daughter for the most important action of her life. Although her education had been commenced from the beginning, Isabelle was bringing herself to like her new mode of life. She had soon become accustomed to the rules, strict though they were, of the house, and had exchanged without a murmur her silk and cachemire dresses for the usual convent uniform, composed of a black merino for winter and a simple lilac cotton for summer wear. She had repaid the kindness of the nuns by a passive obedience; nevertheless, she had much to learn and many faults to get rid of; and happily her kind mistresses, wanting neither in indulgence or patience, lent a willing assistance to the young girl to enable her to repair the lost time, and so overcome the difficulties incidental to her position.

Isabelle was present at the holy ceremony which fulfilled all the wishes of her three companions. The little girls they had dressed, and whose clothes had been made with so much pleasure by themselves, spent the day at the convent, and our youthful heroine could then see and judge for herself how supremely happy were the young communicants, who, to enable them to finish their work of charity, had given up the best part of their daily recreation and had worked for more than six months with no other motive than that of pleasing their Heavenly Father.

Isabelle was also very happy on that never-to-be-forgotten day, which made an eventful period in the young girl's life; for, in the early morning, she had been commissioned by the Mother St. Euphrasie to renew the white flowers that surrounded a beautiful statue of the Blessed Virgin that stood above the altar dedicated to her service in the convent chapel.

CHAPTER IV.

The Christian name of M. Blanchard, Cecile's father, was Thierry, and for some weeks his daughter had been busy preparing the presents she was accustomed to offer him every year on his name-day. A handsome pair of slippers embroidered in Berlin wool, and a purple silk purse worked in crochet with gold beads, were rapidly advancing towards completion; but as the ceremony of the first communion and the necessary religious instruction that had preceded it had somewhat retarded the work, Cecile again sacrificed a portion of her daily recreation to enable her to finish them.

Frequently the four inseparables would settle themselves in the garden, where, beneath the spreading branches of an old elm tree, they would sit and work until the bell recalled them to their studies. They were never left alone, for a nun, and perhaps two or three, was always in sight, and would occasionally approach near enough to the little group to ascertain the subject of conversation, but their presence made no difference, as, during the recreation, the pupils talked freely before them, and often appealed to them for their advice or opinion on any topic that engrossed their attention. On one particular day they had assembled as usual, and Isabelle, deeply interested in Cecile's presents, to help and expedite the work—for the young girl was then grounding her second slipper—would thread her needles and hand them to her as fast as she required them.

"What is your father's name, Cecile?" she asked, after a few minutes silence.

"Thierry," answered her friend, handing her a needle.

"And do you always make him two presents on his name-day?"

"Always, and also at the new year. I work him two pairs of slippers, one for summer and one for winter; but I vary the other presents, and last year I braided him a smoking-cap.— This time mamma has allowed me to make him a fine linen shirt for the new year."

"A shirt!" cried Isabelle. "I always thought the work-people in the town made men's things. And then I thought your father was very rich."

"That does not signify in the least," replied Cecile. "Mamma insists on my learning to work, and is anxious that I should acquire a certain degree of skill therein. She has always told me that the most difficult thing to make properly is a shirt, and that it is the thing of all others that contains the greatest variety; for there are in it hems, seams, felling, running, stitching, button-holes, and in fact everything, and I intend trying to obtain the first prize of needlework to please her.— My father may be very rich to-day, but reverses may fall to our lot as well as to that of other people, and then my work, added to the accomplishments my parents are so kindly bestowing on me, might be turned to account.— But what is your father's name, Isabelle?"

"Henry Louis Joseph," replied the little girl; "but why do you ask?"

"Simply to know why you do not make him something for St. Henry's day, once these things done, and I return to school, I shall be able to look after you and teach you the differ-

ent stitches, and between the feasts of St. Thierry and St. Henry there are eleven days."

"But I can neither embroider nor work crochet."

"Never mind; you must do something else. Let us go and consult the Sister Therese; she is walking in the avenue."

"I know what she can do," cried Eugenie. "Don't you remember, Cecile that cambric handkerchief I hemmed and marked for my father two years ago? Why cannot she do one like it?"

"What a capital idea!" answered Cecile; "and as you are not so much pressed for time as I am, Eugenie, you might teach her the marking stitch on a bit of canvas. After the third of the month I will undertake everything."

"And could I hem and mark a handkerchief by the fifteenth?" asked Isabelle, coloring with pleasure. "But you must remember that I had never done a single stitch until I came here, and that I work very badly. Besides, I have no handkerchief and do not know how to get one."

"Our Mother St. Euphrasie keeps all those kind of things for the pupils," said Eugenie, "and you will only have to ask for one, and tell her what you want it for."

As five or six days intervened between the date of this little conversation and the third of July, Isabelle had ample time to learn the marking stitch, and the letters "H. de V." had been worked more than twenty times on the piece of canvas; and when Cecile, who had spent three days at home, returned to the convent, she made her repeat the lesson on a bit of fine linen. She succeeded admirably, and her last trial having taken place on an old rag of cambric, the Sister Therese went herself for the handkerchief, and after having drawn a thread to enable her to cut it even, she tacked two very narrow hems, so that Isabelle might keep them straight. As a companion to accompany the handkerchief, she had copied out in her very best hand, under the supervision of the Sister Josephine, a little fable, to show her parents the improvement that had taken place in her writing. The day before the important anniversary, Madame de Verneuil came in her carriage to fetch her home, and we can easily imagine the joy of our little heroine on witnessing, the next day, her father's pleasure at receiving the two presents.

"Since you have been so good in trying to please me," said M. de Verneuil, "it is only fair that I should try to please you; therefore your mother shall take you to Germain's, where you may choose whatever you like best."

"What shall we buy, Isabelle?" asked her stepmother, smiling.

"I will tell you during the drive," answered Isabelle.

And she kept her word. She related to her kind companion everything that had taken place since her arrival at the convent, and wound up by asking for a large and well-fitted up work-box, and a quantity of calico, flannel, and other materials similar to those contained in Clemence Lamorliere's parcel. Her wishes were gratified, and when she returned to the convent in the evening, she hastened to call her three friends, who came flocking round her to admire her riches, and to listen to her account of the happy day she had spent at home.

But Isabelle also had something to hear.— During her absence, one of the excellent Sisters of St. Vincent had called at the convent, and had related to the nuns and assembled pupils the sorrowful history of a poor little girl only a few days old, who had, the day before, lost both her parents, and who were burned to death while endeavoring to save the humble dwelling, which by some strange accident had caught fire. The Mother St. Euphrasie had not only permitted the pupils to raise a small subscription among themselves, but had allowed them to promise a few articles of clothing for the infant, which they had undertaken to make themselves during the hours of recreation, and on the half holidays.

The Mother St. Euphrasie never lost an opportunity of accustoming her children to do good. She never allowed them to neglect a single duty, but they had her free permission to lay aside either the woolwork or embroidery that occupied the leisure moments, for the sake of working for the poor, and each and all felt, that, in consecrating these short hours to any work of charity they might have in hand, they were working for the honor and glory of God.

Some very urgent business having called M. de Verneuil to England, Isabelle spent the holidays at the convent. Cecile Blanchard and Eugenie de Grandville remained also under the charge of the good nuns; and the summer passed very pleasantly for our young friends. Clemence Lamorliere, having been very dangerously ill with inflammation of the lungs, had gone with her father and mother to Italy, from whence it was scarcely expected she would ever return. For her illness had made such fearful inroads in her naturally delicate

constitution, that the medical men had all agreed that the only remaining chance of saving her was to seek immediately a warmer climate, and sunnier skies for their precious invalid.— For Isabelle, Cecile, and Eugenie, the beautiful garden of their peaceful habitation was their world, and the ivy-covered wall of the venerable building was the boundary of all their hopes and aspirations. Not a cloud had yet dimmed the bright sunshine of their young lives. To them the world, with its artificial pleasures, was an unknown region; and if the trials and bitter disappointments of life, of which so large a share generally falls to the lot of humanity, were destined to be their portion, the heaven-born pity of the nuns of St. Mary's set them the example of every feminine virtue, and taught them that God, who measures our strength according to the demands upon it, would, if they invoked him prayerfully and fervently, send them courage to bear the heaviest dispensations with patience and resignation.

The holidays passed away, but our little friends had not spent them unhappily. The cooler weather enabled them to spend the greater part of their time out of doors, and their delight was to take long walks in the convent garden of an evening, accompanied by the two nuns, to enjoy the fresh sea breezes that played in the deep green foliage of the old elm trees. Notwithstanding that it was holiday time, the days were not spent in idleness; and Isabelle, who remembered with a sort of terror difficult to describe the weariness and dullness of those three first days, was endeavoring with all the good will she could summon to overcome her great love of play, and was beginning to understand that the mild and tender lessons these true-hearted women strove to impress upon the mind of their pupil were taught her by experience and faithful practice. Not, perhaps, that she then understood the full force of their words, but the seed fell on good ground, and in due time it brought forth fruit. The early training of that wild, unfettered spirit was indeed an arduous undertaking; but the way grew brighter as they went along, and the tender love and devoted care of those holy women were daily meeting their reward.

CHAPTER V.

By the last day of September all the pupils had returned to school, and on the first of October they assisted, preparatory to resuming their studies, at the celebration of a solemn Mass in the convent chapel.

A few days later, the usual routine of a school life recommenced, and the pupils of the first class set themselves seriously to work.— Although Isabelle could not as yet join in the regular lessons, and her daily conduct was so good, that, at the recommendation of her two kind instructresses, the Sisters Josephine and Therese, the Mother St. Euphrasie allowed her to join the catechism class, in order to prepare herself against the celebration of the first communion in the following spring. The good Superior had not come to this resolution, however, without much anxiety; she had narrowly watched the child committed to her charge, and had early discovered that she had not formed any habit of application, and needed powerful motives to stimulate her to exertion. But the extreme uneasiness she had at first experienced concerning this spoiled girl was rapidly decreasing, and she was beginning to look forward with the encouraging assurance that she would yet succeed in her undertaking. In all her letters to Madame de Verneuil she gave very good accounts of Isabelle's conduct and progress, and concluded with the hope that ere very long she would develop those powers and capacities which had in her early childhood found little scope for their expansion. Under such healthful influences, and under such judicious training, it was almost impossible for Isabelle not to reap considerable benefit. The excellent nuns spared no pains to impart to their pupils the love of virtue, and particularly sought to strengthen their minds and store them with lasting treasures; and, as time rolled on, it became evident that, from the shy, unformed child she had been, Isabelle was fast becoming an amiable and affectionate girl, with a warm and sincere heart.

In one of the wings of the venerable building, and in one of the large lower rooms, the Mother St. Euphrasie had founded, some years before the period of which we write, an orphan school for the children of the neighboring village, whose fathers had been lost at sea either in fishing or merchant vessels, and when we first presented the convent to our readers there were about thirty little girls who, under the superintendance of two nuns specially appointed to this pious work, there received a good, solid, and useful education. They were taught reading, writing, and arithmetic; needlework, knitting, and netting were carried to the highest pitch of excellence; but all fancy work, such as wool-work, embroidery, crochet, &c., was strictly forbidden; and they were early trained in all kinds of domestic work, to enable