

CHAPTER X.

FAITHFUL TO THE FIRST LOVE.

TOWARDS the close of the summer of 1847, Walter Phipps was engaged on the quays receiving some merchandize which had arrived to him from England. After his work was done, he was about returning to his store, when his attention was attracted by a large crowd gathered around a newly arrived vessel. As he approached nearer, he observed a ghastly sight of men, women and children just disembarked on the pier. It was an emigrant ship disgorging its mass of human freight. The spectacle was so piteous, that the benevolent merchant advanced still nearer, and stood at the head of the gangway, as a sick and apparently dying man was being borne out on a stretcher. There was something in that wasted figure, those sunken eyes, and that thin, iron-gray hair which appealed forcibly to his compassion, and without further reasoning, with himself, he requested the captain, who was standing by, to allow him to take charge of the invalid.

"Do so, sir," said the captain, in a low voice. "It will be a charity. He has not a moment to live in the world and he is dying."

Instead of taking a vehicle on the quay, Walter directed a boy to run to his store and bring him his own carriage which was waiting to take him home. In that he transported the invalid to the Hotel-Dieu, where he recommended the nuns to give him every attention, as he himself would be responsible for all the expenses.

"Poor Edgar Martin!" he murmured, as he descended the steps of the hospital, "come and see me to die. I did not recognize him at once—he is so altered. But now I know it is he. What a Providence that we should thus meet!—and Rosalba! Alas!"

He drove immediately to his physician's and brought him to examine his patient. The result of the diagnosis was that the sick man had not more than twenty-four hours to live. "I must perform the sad duty myself," said the faithful Walter, "and that speedily."

It was five o'clock in the afternoon. He re-arranged his horse, ordered his double carriage and his night down to the Longueuil ferry. Once across the river, he proceeded rapidly to Valmont. A little after eight he reined in his horse in front of Rosalba's cottage. She, as well as her mother, were very much surprised to see him at that unusual visit. They received him cordially, but his grave and constrained manner gave them no room for merriment.

"Nephew ill-at-ease. What could this mean?" said the mother. "Did he come, and in his double carriage?" "Yes," said Walter, "but their anxiety was all the greater that Walter should have come to explain himself. He was visibly embarrassed and utterly at a loss for words to produce the subject of his painful errand."

But time was pressing and he had to make an effort.

"Miss Varny," said he, "I have come to invite you and Mrs. Varny to accompany me to Montreal."

The mother and daughter stared at each other.

"When?" asked Mrs. Varny.

"This very night."

"And why?" demanded Rosalba, nervously, rising from her seat.

"On a mission of charity," said Walter, laying stress on the word *charity*, which he here understood in its full sense.

"Explain yourself. Where?" continued Rosalba, who noticed the increasing agitation of the merchant.

"At the Hotel-Dieu!" replied Walter in a whisper.

Swift as lightning flashes are the instincts of love. Rosalba grew deadly pale, as she screamed:

"O mon Dieu! He is there!" and pressing both hands on her poor heart, she sank to the floor.

Walter and Mrs. Varny raised her up and placed her on the sofa, but reviving convulsively, she sprang out of their hands:

"Quick, quick; let us go," she cried. "I am ready. Let us start at once. Oh! if I should arrive too late."

"Calm yourself, Miss Varny, I entreat you," said Phipps, in a soothing and gentle tone. "We have time. You need to dress yourself warmly, for we have a long drive and the night is chilly."

"Yes, yes, we have far to go, and that is why we must depart immediately."

"My horses are fleet, Miss Varny. Once upon the road, we shall advance rapidly."

"And the ferry?" said Rosalba, who, in her wild passion, still thought of everything.

"I have engaged for a special trip at midnight. We shall be at Longueuil at that time."

"O thank you, thank you! Mr. Phipps. God will reward you for this."

The girl became calmer, and, with the help of her mother, made all suitable preparations for the journey. At ten the three departed. Before twelve they were at Longueuil. The ferry had steam up and they crossed immediately. At one they rang the bell of the Hotel-Dieu.

In the first part of the night the sick man seemed to sink rapidly, and one of his nurses was commissioned to apprise him of the fact. He heard the nun's exhortations with those open, staring, blank eyes which give so sad an expression to the face of the dying, and without answering a word his mind gave way, drifting slowly into delirium. He lay very still, and his frame was convulsed by no agony, but every now-and-then his lips moved, uttering faint words. The nurse stooped above him to catch their meaning, but all she could understand was the exclamation, "Rosalba, Ros-al-ba!"

When the visitors arrived, the nun, who, with the infallible feminine instinct, had understood all, went forward into the corridor to meet Rosalba, and prepare her for the scene that awaited her, when the latter exclaimed:

"No need, *ma sœur*, no need. I know exactly what it is. I have always had that hope and presentiment. They are to be fulfilled to-day."