



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XIX.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, MARCH 12, 1869.

No. 31.

THE DEBT OF FRIENDSHIP.

(From the French of Eugene Margerie.)

VI.

Do not infer from this that I was unhappy.—The period of my friend's brilliant success was for me a happy and calm, if not brilliant epoch.

When I left college, I took my diploma, and studied law. At twenty I entered the department of internal improvements, as a supernumerary.

My aunt died that year. I cannot mention her death without devoting a few lines of tardy homage to the poor woman, to make amends to her, in fact.

As I had grown older, my aunt's severity towards me had relaxed. She had ever loved me. In the latter end of her life, she concluded to show her affection; I was delighted at the discovery.

To show my gratitude for the eminent services which she had rendered me in my youth, and for this late tenderness which was a boon a thousand times more precious, I could do no better than go live with her, as soon as I had finished my studies.

I had been some weeks in —. The cares of fixing up our new home, my occupations at the office; and, more than all, perhaps, the fear of meeting indiscreet strangers who, reading my sorrows in my deep mourning, and sad looks, would have undertaken to console me—the very thought was odious to me—all this had kept me within the limits of the small town, or rather within that section of it extending from our humble home to the church and the Under Prefect's office.

How often this happens! How many beings spend their life-time in observing each other like foes, who were destined to love each other.

My aunt had forgotten to make her will. In consequence her estate had to be divided between twenty-five nephews and nieces. I had for my share 1,150 francs per annum, invested in the stocks, which added to my salary of 1,800 francs, made me an income of near a thousand crowns.

This was a good deal for a bachelor. I married an honest and charming girl, who had no fortune than her virtues, her beauty, and the very uncertain income she derived from private teaching. We were almost poor. But, good Heaven, how happy we were!

If we tasted none of the enjoyments that wealth procures, we suffered none of those painful privations consequent on poverty. We were blessed with perfect health; we labored with zeal, with that earnestness which makes the hardest task attractive. In the evening, when I returned from the office any my Eliza returned from her lessons, tired both, but happy in the consciousness of a duty fulfilled, we had nothing but thanks to return to kind Providence, and we could not conceive a happiness greater than ours.

On Sunday, after hearing Mass, we would take a few provisions along, and start to spend the day among the fields. In two years we knew every pleasant spot, every admirable site in the environs of Paris.

What greater pleasure, on a fine evening in July, or a bright morning in spring, or when the October sun, at mid-day, gilds the last leaves of the trees, than,—with the object of the most tender and legitimate affection, leaning on one's arm,—to ascend and descend the green slopes of the hills, to follow the meandering paths in the balmy woods; or to roam across the fields when the hope of the next crop already burst from the generous soil in tiny, shining blades of grass?—What pure enjoyment in the contemplation of the beauties of nature! We admired the beautiful landscape, but with the eyes of the Christian, which give wings to imagination and always see God in the midst of His works, which never isolate material beauties from the still grander beauties of a spiritual order.

Nature, art, the loveliest and purest affections, all for God and in God, such are the ethics, the moral of Christianity. And I can assure you that neither art nor nature, neither friendship nor pure love lose anything by it,—unless you believe that the precious metals lose something whilst being purified in the crucible—there are people who think so.

We were too happy! and if this peaceful happiness had lasted, it would have been almost an argument in favor of those who hold that happiness can be found in this world—provided we know how to seek it.

Too happy with an income of 5,000 francs! I see many a reader smile. Yet, such was the fact. We had organized our life according to our means; and, thanks to the admirable economy of Eliza, our simple tastes and the retired life

we led, we lived within our income. We were never short of money. We were young; we had never known disease. We loved each other much, but we loved God still more. Whilst we labored diligently all day, in the evening we found some relaxation in reading the poets, in making music; on Sundays in admiring God in His works. We gave to the poor.

God had blessed us with three little children, as pretty as angels we thought, and as gentle as their mother. What more could we desire?

Alas! It is when we have nothing to desire, that we have everything to fear.

In the month of July, 1850, my wife died of angina. Eight days after, my two oldest children followed their mother, and I fell from the height of happiness, into the most cruel desolation imaginable.

God, in his mercy, preserved me from complaint and despair. As a Christian I felt that I must bow humbly under the hand that struck me. As a father I needed all my energy to watch over my little Maurice, the only survivor of this wreck of all my hopes, and who, at five years of age, had to look to me for the tender care a mother only can bestow.

The doctors recommended a change of air for the child. I did not hesitate, but resigned immediately my situation. Through the influence of some friends I obtained employment in an under-prefecture on the borders of the Loire; and I left Paris, on the first of August, with my little orphan, for our new residence at —.

VII.

I had been some weeks in —. The cares of fixing up our new home, my occupations at the office; and, more than all, perhaps, the fear of meeting indiscreet strangers who, reading my sorrows in my deep mourning, and sad looks, would have undertaken to console me—the very thought was odious to me—all this had kept me within the limits of the small town, or rather within that section of it extending from our humble home to the church and the Under Prefect's office.

However, one afternoon, as I left the office, suffering from a bad headache, I sought the refreshing atmosphere of the fields. The weather was splendid. It was on one of those beautiful afternoons in the beginning of October, pleasant and mild as a spring day.

My heart almost failed me when I commenced this, my first widower's walk. This clear sky, these caressing autumn rays, this serenity of nature so congenial with that of our souls—all these things which Eliza loved so much, served to remind me of my bereavement.

I made an effort to overcome this feeling. All my life, I thought, must now be 'a new life.'—I am alone now, and I cannot take a step without meeting her remembrance, so completely were our lives identified and blended. Must I allow grief to overcome me? must I refuse what Heaven sends me to strengthen my poor heart and help me to fulfil the duties of a father? Besides, where should I not find her sad and sweet image? I carry it everywhere with me!

I passed the town gate and walked out in the fields. I followed a pathway between meadows which extended right and left on a slightly inclined plane. A brook meandered across the meadow on my right, and although it was too far to hear its purling voice, the eyes could trace its course by the old willows which dipped their rugged roots in its bed. On my left I could see the Loire rolling its billows with that majestic slowness which, I confess, I prefer to the tumultuous noise of the Rhine or the Rhone, 'impiger luminous Rhodanus.' Further off rose the vine-cad hill.

Amid these softening influences of nature, I felt in all my being a sort of relief of which I was almost ashamed. But soon the incurable wound of my heart opened afresh, and my grief was only more poignant for this temporary relief.

The road turned at the corner of a field of wheat, and in its angle, under some old lindens, a pious hand had collected as a resting place for the weary wayfarer some large rough-hewn stones, which time had cushioned with a thick layer of moss. This rustic seat was inviting, and I threw myself on it to enjoy the beautiful spectacle of the setting sun. A few clouds gathered above the distant horizon, resembled at first snow capped mountains; then, they melted into golden flakes, which floated off in thin streamlets, and the sky assumed the resemblance of an immense 'velarium' of purple tint.

As I gazed and admired, I praised God for the splendor of His works, and I strove to check the tears that I felt rising from my heart to my eyes. Suddenly, I perceived a man dressed in the elegant and careless attire of the wealthy country gentleman, who was directing his steps towards me.

As he came nearer, a thousand confused memories rushed to my mind. He saw me, stopped, and, with unequivocal signs of joy, ran towards

me, whilst, springing from my seat, I rushed to meet him. In an instant we were clasped in each other's arms.

'Xavier!' I cried, 'my dear Xavier! By what chance—?'

He did not give me time to finish. 'By the simplest chance. My castle of Val-Thibault, is only three-quarters of a mile from here, quite close to the Loire. This is one of my favorite rambles, particularly on a fine autumn day. I like to saunter, book in hand across field and meadow, and to linger a few minutes on the seat under the linden, to see the sun set beyond my dear river. I am late to-day, but I do not complain; instead of the sun, I find my best friend.'

'Alas!' I replied; 'between the sun and me, there is an abyss, there is the gloomy night which has invaded my life!'

The sadness of my voice struck Xavier, who then noticed for the first time that I was clad in mourning.

'Pardon me, my poor friend,' he said, 'you have met with some terrible ordeal! What has happened?'

'I have not forgotten, my dear Xavier, that you have been my first comforter; and in my deep and unutterable affliction, I thank God for His paternal attention in conducting me towards you.'

'You speak of God; you are then still devout?'

'I try to be. Alas! were it not for the strength and consolation which faith gives, despair would have led me to the worst extremities.'

'Tell me your story.'

I narrated my sad story—sad since three months, after being filled, during ten years, with my aunt's tardy but lively affection, with that domestic happiness so soon vanished.

'And,' I added in conclusion, 'here I am, at thirty, condemned for the remainder of my days, to inconsolable sorrow; to bring up, alone, my poor little Maurice. Ah! how unfortunate I am! Or, rather, it is cowardly in me to speak thus, and you spoke more correctly just now, my dear Xavier, when you said that I was a much-tried man. But however hard for our poor nature, such trials, I know, are a grace of Him who chastises because He loves us; and I pray to God, that he will inflict a still heavier burden—! I can bear it—rather than permit my lips to grumble against His divine will.'

'Yes,' remarked Xavier; 'I can conceive that when one is like you, persecuted by fate, and stricken repeatedly in his dearest affections, religion should be a precious resource. Heaven guard me from ever seeking to rob you of these consoling illusions. As for me, I must confess that I have not yet reached that point. I am happy—I speak it with shame to one so unfortunate—so happy, that sometimes I am frightened at seeing my happiness so complete, and I tremble lest I should have to pay for it some of these days, principals and interests. God sends you here in good time, my poor Charles. I insist upon, if not sharing my happiness with you—I fear it would be impossible in your present bereavement—at least drawing from the overflow of my heart, that balm of friendship which poured over your wounds, cannot fail to produce some relief. My wife, who is an angel, will assist me, and doubtless with greater success.'

I answered little. Amidst all these protestations of friendship, the sincerity of which I could not doubt, I felt somewhat hurt at the complaisant manner in which he displayed his happiness before a poor broken heart like mine. I put on a good face, however.

'And diplomacy?' asked. 'Have you then bidden eternal farewell to the brilliant career in which you had already made such gigantic strides?'

Xavier told me how, in 1848, the new hands into which French diplomacy had fallen, quite disgusted him. He had since voluntarily shut himself up in the obscure, but after all very agreeable life of a gentleman farmer.

'I spend my days delightfully here,' he added, 'between my wife who, to a cultivated mind adds an amiable disposition, my children whom I educate myself, the Muses, which I worship discreetly, and the care of my estate. I have ever been fond of the country. We do some good in our neighborhood. We have some pleasant acquaintances, and in summer, our city friends, who have no country seat of their own, spend the hot days with us.'

He stopped short. I said nothing. He understood that, for the second time, carried away by his own sense of happiness, he had gone too far.

'Pardon me again,' he exclaimed pressing my hands. 'Come and dine with us, I shall introduce you to my wife, who already knows friend Charles by reputation. I am sure you will like her.'

I replied that Maurice was waiting for me;

and it was agreed that we would both come down next day to Val-Thibault.

What a misfortune, I thought, as I turned homewards; what a misfortune to be so happy outside of the truth. O that I could wake my friend from this sleep under the Upas-tree!

VIII.

On the next day I left the office a little earlier than usual, and taking Maurice by the hand, we started for Val-Thibault.

The poor child, who, since our arrival at —, had no other recreation than walking on the ramparts of the town, was delighted with this excursion. He soon let go my hand and commenced gamboling around me; running far ahead, and sitting on the sward until I would catch up with him, or making raids into the fields and bringing back enormous nose-gays of wild autumn flowers.

At each turn of the road, at each change in the varied landscape, if the clouds, guided by the rays of the sun, assumed a fantastical shape, or if a lark rose suddenly from the grass, with its joyful little cry, Maurice could not restrain his exclamations of delight.

Scarcely three months before, when he had seen his mother and two sisters carried away, the poor little fellow had shed bitter tears. He thought often of the dear departed ones; and night and morning he prayed for them. But, now, the carelessness of childhood had the upper hand. Maurice's lungs breathed a pure vivifying air; he felt free; he seemed, as it were, to take possession of life and nature altogether.

But all this was nothing compared to what awaited him at Val-Thibault. Bernard and Sigismund, who had inherited their father's charming disposition, seized upon Maurice at the gate, and took him with them in the park; they showed him in detail the barn-yard, the aviary, the pheasant-walk, the vegetable garden and the labyrinth. They made him trot on Mac-Yvor, their pretty Shetland pony; they dragged him in a microscopic dog cart; they let him fondle their tame rabbits, and made him intimate with 'Mahmoud,' the superb and gentle Newfoundland. The three friends—I might as well say the four, for 'Mahmoud' shared in their fun—rolled with delight on the green sward, and finally, went to play hide-and-seek in the hay-loft, as Xavier and I had done in aunt Ledur's garret.

When they came in to dinner, they were breathless, terribly hungry, friends for life, and happier than I can say.

But why not speak to you at once of Xavier's wife, Gabrielle?

Straight and charming creature, at first sight, a beautiful type of the wife and mother, but,—for who could examine her with the eyes of the Christian—very incomplete, notwithstanding her apparent perfection. She lacked absolutely and radically the 'unum necessarium.'

Albeit one could not imagine anything more charming than Mrs. de Zeltner. She was the worthy mate of the golden-hearted Xavier.—Both were handsome; and their beauty was not, as with so many others, a deceitful mask. Who ever saw them felt irresistibly drawn towards them, and a short acquaintance enabled one to discover in them treasures which at first sight, he would not have suspected.

Gabrielle's principal charm consisted in two qualities which complete one another, and the effect of which has always seemed to me irresistible: goodness and simplicity. God had made this soul rich, ardent, pure and upright; and, although the light of Christian faith had not so far penetrated it, nothing had been lost of that riches, that ardor, that purity and native righteousness.

Incredible fact, but of which we have many examples in this enlightened age, in the midst of the dazzling truths of the Gospel, Gabrielle had never felt drawn towards God. She lived, as concerns matters of religious faith, in as profound ignorance as the savage inhabitants of the most distant isles.

Whilst the children were playing in the park, our conversation had assumed a familiar turn.—With a woman's exquisite taste, Gabrielle, alluding to the terrible blows which had struck me, said precisely what was best calculated to comfort me.

There are various kinds of affliction. Some like solitude and silence; the condolences of strangers are odious to them, and even the sympathy of the most devoted friendship importunes them. Such was not my sorrow. I had so far felt it shut up within myself, but the relief I felt when opening my heart to those sympathizing friends, showed me that my grief was like the tears which choke us when we try to check them, but which, on the contrary, relieve us if we allow them to flow quietly—I do not mean if you purposely excite and provoke them—this convulsive sorrow has no relief.

When we had exhausted the subject, Gabrielle could not help exclaiming:

'And are you never tempted to despair? As for me, if I saw Bernard or Sigismund dangerously ill, I think I would lose my mind!'

'Despair,' I replied, 'is for a Christian the greatest of crimes; it is a horrible ingratitude, a distrust of God's mercy, a resistance to His adorable will. It is the crime of Cain and of Judas. It is the gate of hell—remember Dante if you do not the Gospel. No, by the grace of God, if my sorrow never leaves me, despair never approaches me.'

'I admire you. For me, I ask what could prevent me, if I were struck in my dearest affections, from losing all hope. It would certainly not be my conscience. I look upon despair as a misfortune, not as a fault.'

Then followed a conversation which became a monologue scarcely interrupted by Gabrielle's questions and exclamations. Her questions referred to the sweetness of religion, to religion itself, which Gabrielle had always looked upon as an unbearable cross, a besetting method.—They bore on the basis of our creed, on the character of Christian life, its engagements, and the help and light which accompany it. And these questions had as much ingenuousness as if they had been put by some ignorant Chinese to a recently arrived missionary.

Her exclamations on the beauty of the dogmas that I quoted, and on the marvellous harmony she discovered between this light which she perceived for the first time, and the secret aspirations of her soul, were full of candor and happy surprise; they had that hopeful fire of the neophyte, which rewards the missionary of the labors of years.

We formed a singular trio. Gabrielle had never heard the word of God, and a soul like hers could not remain calm in presence of such a revelation. I, who merely came to converse with sympathizing friends, could not cease wondering at the turn taken by the conversation, at the effect produced by my simple remarks on an intellect of incontestable superiority. I had never met with such complete ignorance of our dogmas, such eagerness in inquiring into them, such docility in following the star that guided it to the source of Christianity, as the Magi of old were guided to the cradle of the Child God.

As for Xavier, he said nothing. But he was, perhaps, the most astonished of us three. Gabrielle's sudden curiosity concerning matters to which she had always remained indifferent, surprised Xavier as much as my promptness in gratifying that curiosity. I even believe that, notwithstanding his perfect goodness, he felt somewhat annoyed.

'Bravo, Mr. Theologian,' he cried, 'you are still the Charles of old, who, at college, wanted me to spend my recess in the almoner's cell. Upon my word, I did not believe you so strong. Do you know that you have privileges which are denied our curate? When the worthy man visits us, it is understood that he will speak of his poor, or of the wants of his church, as much as he pleases, but he must take care not to tread the ground of controversy. It seems this prohibition does not exist for you.'

I was about replying that I had been urged by Gabrielle's questions; she did not give me time to speak.

'My dear Xavier,' she replied, 'do not jest, I pray. Mr. Charles has told me sensible and touching things. Would you wish that he should have been wanting in politeness, by refusing to answer my questions, or in love of the truth by avoiding to interrogate him upon matters which he knows, and with which I am unacquainted?'

After dinner, Xavier and I walked out in the park, to smoke our cigars. I told my friend how charming I thought his wife.

'She lacks something to be perfect, according to your ideas,' he remarked, 'and you find Gabrielle singularly ignorant on religious matters.'

'You may be sure she will not long lack that something,' I replied. 'As for that ignorance, it is certainly surprising in a woman, but shows all the better Mrs. de Zeltner's sincerity.'

'Shall I explain this ignorance to you?' asked Xavier. 'There is here, as the philosophers would say, a psychological phenomenon worthy of being studied.'

I learned from Xavier's narrative that Miss Gabrielle de Saint-Eudes was the grand daughter of a renegade religious. A moderate member of the revolutionary Convention, and subsequently a baron of the empire, Mr. de Saint-Eudes had never forgiven God and religion for the apostasy of which he had been guilty towards them. He had given his only daughter—Gabrielle's mother—a profoundly Veltairian education. This daughter and her husband having both died young, the old renegade attempted to apply the same system to his grand-daughter's education.

Like Talleyrand and Fouché, Mr. de Saint-Eudes possessed both wit and skill, and all that was required to make impiety engaging. He used all these intellectual resources to raise an