

Choice Literature.

JOSEPHINE FOUGERE.

AN ALPINE STORY.

CHAPTER I.—IN THE TOWER.

On one of the farthest points of the French Alps, where they slope to meet the Jura range, a gray rock rises, solitary, above the meadows and the forests; detached on three sides, it touches the mountain at only one point, towers above the flat country and commands a boundless outlook. On its summit stood, formerly, the castle of Fierbois, of which nothing is left to-day but a ruined tower open to the winds. Under its crumbling walls is hidden part of a roof and a side wall, now falling to pieces. Twenty years ago this was the house of René Fougère, the most daring poacher in the country; he was a poacher from necessity, by taste and by nature; active, full of boldness, he frightened the watchmen, but himself feared nobody. People thought him a wicked man, but he wished evil only to those who opposed him in his one passion. He was by no means a quarrelsome man or a thief; as proud and as indifferent as a Spanish beggar, he lived apart, fearing nothing and needing nothing. Patient, untrifling, he watched, night after night, on the frozen snow for the hare as it came out of the woods, or, alone in the hunt, during whole hours awaited the savant herd of wild boars. Adventures and dangers were his element as the air is the bird's for him to hunt was to live. But it was a poor, hard life. The poacher's wife tasted not its charm, and shared only the misery which it brought.

Geneviève's nature was timid and tender; the violence of Fougère had broken her spirit, but had not separated her from him. René exercised his force of will only against material obstacles; he could not battle with himself, and yielded without a struggle to his fiery temper. Geneviève, on the contrary, had strength only to obey, to love, to serve; she trembled before her master, but had he wished to kill her she could not have helped loving him. To account for her husband's cruelty she accused herself of imaginary faults; she did everything in order not to believe him in the wrong.

"It is the wine which makes him so bad," she said when, having sold his game, he returned without a penny, his eyes bloodshot, his voice harsh and trembling. She made no complaint either to him or to others, but when the drunkenness was passed she turned toward him a look more eloquent than words, without bitterness and full of hope. "You are better than you seem," the day will come when you will be a changed man," said the sweet confident look.

By way of reply to Geneviève, Fougère would rise, kiss her roughly, and whole years of misery were then forgotten. Except on the head of the house scolded there was but little talking in this home. The silence of the forests penetrated the cottage. From their habit of living alone, he in the woods, she in her domain, and both far from the world, it came that when they were together they were silent.

Twice a great joy, followed by a still greater sorrow, had come to the cottage: two beautiful children had been given to Geneviève, but both had been taken from her; they had died of the same disease, one after the other, and Geneviève was left poorer, more desolate, than ever. Some good women from the village tried to comfort her when they saw her going to the cemetery to plant ivy on the two little graves. But she hardly replied to their words of pity, gently bowed her head in thanks, shut her sorrow in her heart and returned home to bear it alone. Geneviève seldom went down to the village; she did not at all like to have people interested in her, even to pity her, and feared, above all, to hear René accused. How could she defend him? She knew so little what to say! Hence she avoided all society. "She is the best wife in the village," people said to Fougère when they saw the slender peasant woman, poor, yet neat, with the sweet, pale face lighted by those blue eyes, whose charm, once seen was never forgotten. Geneviève thought no more about people's opinion of her than a violet thinks about the sweetness of its own perfume.

Weariness, sorrow and poverty had already worn wrinkles in her brow when for the third time she could press a baby to her bosom. It was a little girl—so pretty, so bright, such a darling! The mother's heart trembled with fear as well as with joy as she grew attached to her little one. "Will she live? Won't she live?" Geneviève was always asking. The winter when the little Josephine was born was the happiest time in Geneviève's life. She now took courage again when she saw that the child was strong and hearty, and was growing as naturally as a daisy in May. In loving the baby Geneviève had grown young, and sang as she rocked the cradle. When she waked the little Josephine heard a gentle voice speaking to her, saw a smiling face bending over her, thus she soon learned to smile and never forgot how to do so.

In the spring she was so bright, so rosy, and already so gay, that René too loved to take her in his arms, and said to himself, as he held her above his head, "You are worth a boy to me, little one." All this does not mean that the poacher provided better for the household, that he drank less or that he treated his wife more kindly.

When the little Josephine had reached the age which her brothers could not pass, it seemed to Geneviève that she was given to her for the second time. "I shall keep you now, my lamb; you are mine now—you are mine!" repeated she kissing her in ecstasy.

Josephine did not understand, but answered with a decided "Yes."

As she grew up the little girl fulfilled all the promises of the baby. Fearless, her father's daughter, she had inherited from Geneviève great tenderness of heart, and a lung to her mother; but she soon had guessed what Fougère was to Geneviève—sometimes a protector, more often a tyrant, thus she looked upon him with distrust, and did not become at all attached to him. She shook her little fist when he made her mother cry, but this sign of precocious boldness gratified her father's pride, instead of making him angry.

"She is like me," said the poacher to himself.

At seven the little Josephine could count to a hundred, tell a policeman from other men, could tie up the bundle of sticks and hold the distaff. At nine she knew how to read to sew and to knit, but her education never went further. Restive with her father, she obeyed her mother's gentle voice without contradiction; but it was rather by the example of her daily life than with many words that Geneviève taught her child.

One December day the little Josephine found herself alone in the cottage. The snow had filled all the holes in the old roof; the trees stretched their shining branches towards the sun; the sky was blue and the little Josephine happy. She sang to herself all alone, her nose pressed against the little panes, watching the frost-flowers melt under her breath. She was warm in her carefully-patched, heavy dress, and she hummed softly to keep herself company: "My mother has gone, my mother is coming back; my mother has given me a pretty red apple. I have hidden it in the cupboard; it smells very good. My mother told me, 'I will make you five fritters for Sunday; you will be ten years old then.' Ten years and a whole apple!"

The little girl ran to the cupboard to pat the ripe fruit; she held it under her nose, then put it to the tip of her tongue, very much wanting to eat it. Still, she did not bite it, but quickly shut the closet door and went to sit down by the fire, where three glowing logs made a pleasant heat.

"The soup is warming," sang the little Josephine: "you will eat it all alone, my dearie, and afterward you shall go with your pitcher to bring water from the little lake under the ice. The soup is warming, warming," sang the little Josephine, watching the cloud of white vapour which rose from the black kettle in the still blacker chimney. Suddenly she stopped: a cry of distress, a sharp, despairing groan, had broken the silence. The child ran to the door, yet could see nothing but the sun glistening on the frost. "Mother!" she called. A second cry, longer, more full of pain, was the only answer.

"It isn't father or mother," said the little girl. "I never heard anything like it. Could it be a wolf? No; my mother would not have said, 'Go down and bring the water, if a wolf were there behind the door.'"

Josephine ran out and looked about, here and there. She had not gone twenty steps when a great black creature, with flaming eyes, bounded toward her. How loudly her heart beat! But the animal soon became quiet. No, it was not a wolf; it was a dog, a big dog, with rough hair. He crouched at her feet, imploring her, he legged with his eyes; he said in his language, "Come with me."

She followed him, and what did she see at a little distance? A traveller was lying motionless in the path, a shepherd from the mountains, doubtless, his clothes showed it. His left hand held a worn staff and there was an empty gourd in his right.

The little Josephine's pity made her forget her fear; she stooped down and looked into the stranger's face. He was very pale, and seemed asleep; the frost drops were glistening on his white beard.

"Are you dead?" whispered the little girl in his ear.

"No," murmured the old man. He had opened his gray eyes, and was looking closely at the rosy face which bent over him.

Josephine was no longer afraid, but she did not know what to do. "The wolves will eat you if you stay here," said she, after thinking a minute. "Come to our house; I know you won't do me any harm."

With a great effort the old man raised himself and sat up, resting on his hand. He leaned against the snow as against the side of a bed. Josephine put her head under one arm, his dog drew him by the other sleeve. The two together helped him to stand up, but his steps tottered.

"Come," said the child again, and she put the old man's hand on her shoulder. He let her lead him as if he had been in a dream. "I'll give you my warm soup and my red apple; come, only come, poor shepherd," said Josephine to encourage him.

The old man did not answer, but, once in the cottage, his dim eyes brightened, afterward, when he had eaten, the colour of life came back into his face. In her delight Josephine forgot that she was hungry herself.

When he had finished the old man called her to him and took her little hand in his own two. "I was chilled to the heart, but you have warmed me," he said; "I was hungry, but you have given me your soup. I have nothing in the world but this dog, my Faro; shall I leave him for you?"

The child blushed, opened her eyes wide, yet did not answer; she was so surprised. "But if you give him to me, who will take care of you?" she said at last.

"I am too old to be a shepherd on the mountains; I am going down toward the cities, to an asylum, to die under a roof. What would he do there, my poor dog? He is young; he will live a long time. I have trained him myself; he can watch a flock of sheep as well as a man, to learn how you must do as he does. If you will promise to take care of him always, I will leave him for you, little one."

The shepherd turned his eyes away from the fireplace, where the tired Faro was warming himself. "One must leave everything when one dies—everything," said he, bowing his head, "but God's love."

"I will take care of him; I will give him part of my fire, of my bread, of my soup—all that I have. We will take care of the sheep, we two; we will never leave each other. But you must stay here till my mother comes; my mother must see you."

"No," said the old man, rising, "no. The sky is growing black; if the snow comes before I have reached the plain, I shall be lost. Stay here, both of you; keep together.—Faro, there is your mistress, there is your mistress; forget me. I have no more sheep, no fire, no bread, nothing more to give you."

With his hand he motioned to the dog to stay near Josephine, without turning he walked through the cottage, and without looking back closed the door between himself and his last friend. Faro had obeyed; he remained at the little girl's feet, but by his cries called after his old master.

Geneviève came home at nightfall. When she saw the

black eyes looking at her from under the replace she screamed, and Josephine ran to her:

"Mother, tell me, tell me, is it snowing?"

"No, my lamb; the north wind is rising; but where did he come from, that dog that frightened me so?"

"Mother, listen: I was never so sorry for any one in my life. A shepherd from the mountains—he's the oldest man in the world, I'm sure—fell down in front of our door, under the holly tree, mother. He was chilled to the heart and was dying of hunger. I made him eat my red apple and my warm soup. The colour came back to his face; he was sitting where you are now. And, do you know, he gave me his dog. He went away all alone, the poor shepherd, saying, 'Faro, stay with her.' And Faro is mine, and I'm going to be a shepherdess. Oh, mother, how happy I am! See, he lets me pat him."

Geneviève was thinking, and hardly answered. She looked at the dog, which seemed to be of good breed. He was sad and gentle—so sad that he would not eat anything that evening.

When Fougère came the little Josephine was asleep. She dreamed of the old shepherd, as I imagined that she was leading a whole flock of little lambs through the valley. Her father and mother talked late and long; at the end the little girl's work was arranged: the next summer she was to be a shepherdess.

During the winter the dog grew very fond of the child. It was as if he had no one else, and he gave himself up entirely to her, and the child loved the dog; he was her playmate, her guardian and her best friend. When the new grass covered the bleak mountain-sides, when the bright leaves of the birches and the wild-cherry-trees in blossom tinted the woods with their fresh colours, one by one the sheepfolds opened and the flocks bounded, wild with joy, over the green meadows. As a beginning in her work, Josephine received from one of the villagers the care of five goats. She had to take them home when the dew fell, bringing them in before sunset. Five animals full of life they were, with wills of their own—full of mischief and pranks, not all good. At the sight of Josephine, so slender and small, they were all seized with a desire to roll her in the grass. First, the oldest came and showed her his horns. Without her dog the shepherdess would have been beaten twenty times and in many ways. But Faro understood goats well: one would have said that he saw these foolish ideas grow under the horned foreheads. With one look, one bark, he kept them from doing what they meant to do. With him no mischief was possible. With the gravity of a schoolmaster he led the flock carefully and slowly along the edge of the woods as they cropped the tender shoots.

While he managed the goats, Josephine spun and sang. When they climbed over the rocks, higher than the tower, higher than the sparrow-hawks that turned back to hover over the valley, Josephine, looking over the boundless plain, covered with streams as with a network of silver, asked herself many questions. "I wonder," she said, "if this is all the world? How much time it would take to go to the end of the earth! And where do the rivers go which are always flowing and never stop?" Then she watched a spider making her web; with her finger she broke it in two in order to see the work-woman begin over again; then she watched the army of the ants marching to their work like soldiers to the war.

Faro watched the goats, and in the evening the happy child went home to Geneviève, her head full of questions, her hands full of flowers, crying, "Mother, I've seen the whole world. How beautiful and grand it is!"

Geneviève answered neither yes nor no, finding the world hard and her path difficult; she only kissed the little girl and said, "God give thee a happy life, my darling!"

Thus Josephine grew in the sunshine, wind and rain, as the lilies grow all alone on the mountain-side. She was active and bright, slender but well formed, quick in her motions; her eyes were brown, very soft, a little wild, like a fawn's, she had the deer's timid grace and light step; naturally gay, her lonely life had made her thoughtful. During the day she had no one to speak to—no one but Faro and the docile flock, larger each year, which she led from one pasture to another.

Geneviève never told Josephine of her troubles; she carefully hid the grief which René caused her; before Josephine it was easy to do this. The little shepherdess went out at sunrise and returned at nightfall. When she came home, Geneviève, smiling, gave her her bread, nicely baked. It was the best hour of the day for both of them.

In a village each one has the reputation which he deserves. Without newspapers, everything is known, all that passes in a neighbour's house is seen, as if the walls were of glass. Even those of the tower were not thick enough to hide the virtues of Geneviève or the worth of Josephine and her dog as shepherds.

As to these two, they had become so skillful in all that concerns the management of sheep that more than one shepherd might have learned something from them. For this reason one fine Sunday a farmer from the mountains, in new suit and with frank and honest air, came to speak to Geneviève as they were coming out of church. The mother was very much astonished; she knew he was such a rich man. How did it happen that he looked at her?

"Is it your daughter?" he said, pointing to Josephine, who blushed under her bonnet.

"Yes."

"They tell me in the village that she is a wise little shepherdess."

"She has kept a flock since she was a little child."

"Will you let me have her with her dog to take care of my sheep this year? You know me well: I am Sylvan Bernard of the Cold-Acre farm; to get to it you go by Saint-Gildain and Beauterros."

"I know your name, I know the name of your place, but I must speak to my husband before I say yes or no. If you wish to engage my daughter as a shepherdess, come after evening service and ask her father, at the tower of Fierbois."

"I will come," said the farmer.

Two little Josephine hung down her head and pressed close to Geneviève.