



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XV.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, JULY 14, 1865.

No. 19.

ROSE LEBLANC; OR, THE TRIUMPH OF SINCERITY.

CHAPTER XI.—(Continued.)

On the day preceding that on which Andre's leave would expire, the Baron took him aside, and told him to leave the service, and to enter some profession more congenial to his tastes than the army. In the course of this conversation, he let fall some significant words, which caused the greatest agitation in Andre's mind, and added to a trouble, the effect of which on his spirits he had found it more and more difficult to conceal. During the first few days of his stay at the castle for the first time in his life, Andre had been perfectly happy; but this happiness was not destined to last, and before long he became miserable, and that from a cause which was soon evident to himself. Alice had appeared to him not only as the angel of his most cherished dreams, but as the earnest and the dawn of a new future, which entirely eclipsed the prospect of rustic retirement which had formerly been his idea of earthly happiness; and Rose, the poor little flower that has so long brightened the moral captivity of his obscure existence, no longer inspired him with any feeling save that of simple gratitude. 'What am I to do?' himself twenty times a day, ever since he became aware of the change that had come over him. 'What am I to do, or to think, or to say?' His natural impulse would have been to have recourse to Alice in this as in every other difficulty, sure that in following her advice, he should also follow the dictates of duty and of honor; but his present dilemma was one in which he dared not and could not consult her. During the last evening that they spent together he was gloomy, absent, and almost morose. His looks, his actions, and even his voice, showed that he was suffering from some acute mental pain. He passed a sleepless night, was unable to rise in the morning, and before long was seriously ill. At one moment he was thought to be in danger, and the Baron talked of writing to his family, but just as he was about to do the disease took a favorable turn, and he was soon pronounced convalescent. The Baron, who already loved him as if he had been his own son, was then able to give up his incessant journeys to and from Andre's bed side to Alice's sitting-room. He celebrated this happy recovery by a shooting expedition, in the course of which the old keeper, who had been faithful to his master through all the trials of the Revolution, and through long years of exile, seized the opportunity to touch upon a question which had begun greatly to occupy the minds of the Baron's family, as the Italians call those old servants who are almost the household gods of a great house. Andre's arrival had given them all the greatest delight. He bore a name which was very dear to them, and he was tall and handsome, and well made. They had also discovered in him a striking likeness to the pictures of Baron Charles de Vidal, who was reckoned the handsomest man of his day, and the greatest sportsman in the whole country. This was enough to excite a general sympathy for him in the place, and by one consent he was pointed out as the future husband of Madlle. de Morlaix, of whom nobody but a De Vidal was worthy in their estimation.

'How fortunate it is,' said the old keeper as he loaded his master's gun, 'that M. le Baron has a granddaughter of Madlle. Alice's age, and a grandnephew of M. Andre's! It seems as if God had arranged it on purpose.'

'Hold your tongue, you old chatterbox,' answered the Baron, giving him a friendly blow on the shoulder; 'and look after your hares and partridges.'

This was enough to make the good old man go off quite elated, to state in the servants' hall how he and M. le Baron had been talking over the marriage that was to take place between Madlle. Alice and M. de Vidal. On the strength of this news, the cook felt inclined to begin preparations for the wedding breakfast that very evening.

Ever since his illness, Andre had established himself daily on a seat near the turret where Alice spent her mornings, and pursued her various occupations, with a diligence and fervor which showed that she was actuated by some higher principle, and governed by a law more powerful than that of mere habit or impulse. Andre loved to watch her, whether reading, or writing, or working, as from time to time she raised her eyes to heaven, just as a child at its lessons looks up smiling in its mother's face. Himself unseen, he observed her actions and the varying expressions of her countenance. She was continually interrupted in her occupations; servants, children, poor people, all sought her when they wanted help, advice, or sympathy, but not a shade of annoyance or impatience ever crossed her sweet face. Late in the day she would come and sit beside Andre, and then she would read to him, or talk to him about the bits and the wants of the people of the surrounding country, as to one who would one day live among them. Sometimes she would relate to him the pious legends, or the historical traditions which were still preserved among them; and then, with gentle diffidence, intelligent kindness, and that genuine interest which is so rarely to be met with, and so impossible to assume, she would lead him on to recite some of his compositions, and to tell her of his literary projects, thus encouraging him to give a tangible form to ideas which till then had remained vague and undeveloped for want of the sympathy which could call them forth. Ah! if there be a natural quality which deserves to be reckoned a virtue, it is surely that which leads men to encourage in others all that may tend to sweeten existence, by raising the soul, by softening the character, and instilling the spirit of self-denial. How many an unkind word, cold glance, and cruel silence, will be judged with severity, on the same day that the mite of the poor, and the cup of cold water given for the love of God, will receive their reward.

Andre watched the days go by, and felt his strength returning with a sort of despair. He dared look neither into the past nor the future. Sometimes he would reproach himself bitterly with his involuntary unfaithfulness to Rose; then he would accuse himself of coldness and ingratitude, and try in vain to recall the vanished illusions of a transient tenderness long since departed. Rose now appeared to him only in the light of an obstacle to happiness, greater than any thing he had hitherto conceived, the bare idea of which transported him with a joy that he could not repress. For he felt that Alice was not quite insensible to feelings which he expressed almost every instant by the looks and words which escaped him in spite of himself. She seemed to appreciate the delicacy of a love that was both timid and proud; and in the proofs of friendship which she gave him, Andre thought he saw dawning signs of a feeling that one day might grow into love. As to the Baron, his whole heart was set upon effecting the union of his two children, as he called them. This marriage had been the object of his dearest hopes since the day when Andre first came to the castle, and he had at last decided upon speaking openly to him on the subject. This he resolved to do on the day before that on which Andre was to rejoin his regiment; accordingly, as soon as breakfast was over, he proposed a shooting expedition. 'Now that you are off the sick list,' said he, 'suppose you come out and help me to kill some game for the farewell dinner that I expect you to give to your comrades before you leave Bordeaux. When we come in, I will show you some letters and papers which relate to that affair. The Colonel tells me that he is pushing matters on as much as possible, and that he expects that you will very soon be at liberty to leave the service; but in the mean while, I want to talk to you openly about the future. At my age it is very hard to part with those we love, and we try not to lose a moment of happiness that must so soon pass away; my life is very near its close, and I long to be able to lie down and say, 'Lord I am ready; I have nothing more to do here below.'

Andre took the old man's hand and pressed it to his lips with the utmost respect and tenderness. While his uncle was speaking, he had turned red and pale by turns, and kept saying to himself in the greatest trepidation, 'What shall I answer if he should question me, and seek to probe the secrets of my heart?' His good angel suggested a very simple answer, one that has often smoothed greater difficulties than his—two words which solve many a complicated question—the truth.

CHAPTER XII.

'What a delicious soft air, and what a lovely blue sky,' said Alice to herself, as after seeing her grandfather and Andre start on their shooting expedition, she stepped into the garden, where the flowers seemed literally to enjoy themselves in the morning rays. 'I really think,' continued she, 'that a great deal too much harm is said of this world, and there certainly is happiness here below for those who love God and man, and the sky and flowers; and her beautiful open countenance looked almost as radiant as the blooming autumn roses which she was smelling with a delight that almost amounted to ecstasy.

'Mademoiselle, there is a man asking to see you; he is in the courtyard,' said a servant, coming after her into the garden. 'One of our people?' 'No; he says he comes from the neighborhood of Pau, and he insists on seeing Mademoiselle. He is not a peasant; and does not appear to be a gentleman either, but I think he seems to be a respectable person,' said the old servant, who saw that his mistress was a little doubtful as to whether she should see the stranger or not. 'If you think he is respectable, Pierre, you can show him into the hall, and I will come and speak to him in a minute.' She had the greatest confidence in the discrimination of old Pierre, who sometimes took her to task for admitting so readily all who came to her for help.

In front of the fireplace in the hall, and holding his hat in both hands, stood Henri Lacaze, for it was no other, waiting for the young mistress of the castle to appear. That he was very restless soon became apparent from his sudden and abrupt movements; he walked impatiently up and down the hall, sat down, got up again, drummed on the window panes with his fingers, never even casting a glance on the beautiful landscape that was before him. At length the door opened, and Alice came in, and inclining her head with the grace and dignity that were habitual to her, asked what was the object of his visit.

Henri gazed at her for an instant without speaking, and then said, 'I should feel more at my ease if Mademoiselle would please to sit down.' Alice took a chair, and motioned to Henri to do the same.

'No, I would rather stand, it is more seemly; and besides, what I have to say is very simple, and will not take long; I shall not detain you more than a few minutes. They tell me that Mademoiselle is M. Andre Vidal's cousin?'

'M. Andre de Vidal?' replied Alice. 'Oh, if it is to him that you wish to speak, it is very easy to send for him; he is out shooting with my grandfather, but they cannot be far off, for I heard a shot a moment ago.'

'I do not wish to see him,' said Henri, in an agitated voice; 'but you will do me a great kindness if you will undertake to deliver a message to him. It is asserted in all the country round about, that you are as good and as kind as the saints in heaven; that you bestow benefits on every one, and that nothing in the world would induce you to tell a falsehood. Therefore I hope you will forgive one who comes to you to know the truth. Tell me, then, Mademoiselle, is it true, is it, it cannot be true, that Andre Vidal should be going to marry any other than Rose Leblanc? If it is wrong to ask you, I entreat you to forgive me, but I must know, for if it is not true it will break Rose's heart, and I promised before God to make her happy, and a promise made to God must be kept.'

Alice had turned red and pale by turns during this speech. How many different thoughts and mingled feelings chased each other through her mind, and stirred her inmost soul, while this stranger was so boldly putting a question to her of which she had never dared to acknowledge all the bearings even to herself! In spite of the efforts which she made to conceal the pain that she felt at words which she could not not believe to be sincere, anxiety and distress were expressed on every feature. A keen thrill of pain almost made her heart stand still, for the first time, and almost without her knowledge, she loved, and loved with her whole soul, with all the tenderness and devotion of her nature, him whom her grandfather had chosen to be her future husband, and whose generous impulses and loveable qualities had been developed by the influence of a few days of happiness, as flowers expand under the sun's genial rays in spring. And now, wounded pride which seemed almost like remorse, a fear of betraying herself, the feeling of suspicion, which weighs so intolerably on those whose youth is full of present happiness and of hope for the future, entered and took possession of her heart, and her embarrassment became almost insupportable. But in souls that are really Christian, there is one feeling that predominates over every other, which governs every action, even the most trifling, and holds the most violent and unlooked-for emotions in subjection—the sense of duty, that watchful and unyielding ruler, whose law is all-powerful, and from whose dominion nothing can escape. Often when thinking of the dull and desolate life, whose wearisome monotony Andre used to complain of, had Alice wondered to herself whether so attachment, no love had ever softened his bitterness of spirit, and cheered his loneliness. The name which Henri had just pronounced, brought to her mind the young girl she had seen at Pau and at Betharam, and she recollected her lovely face and her winning and graceful ways, and a voice within her seemed to say, 'It is she.'

Henri was awaiting her answer with an anxiety which approached to agony.

Having paused for an instant to collect herself, Alice said, with great calmness and gentleness, 'I do not know whether I ought to answer a question which I do not see that you have any right to ask, but I am willing to act with the same openness and simplicity which you have shown towards me. M. Andre de Vidal is not, as far as I know, engaged to be married.'

'What, not to Rose?' exclaimed Henri, relievedly. 'He has been living in this house with you for more than six weeks, and has never told you that he is engaged to marry Rose?' 'Oh, God! it is as I thought; the man is a liar!' 'I cannot listen to you any longer,' said Alice, with a beating heart and colorless face. 'If you have come here to complain of M. de Vidal, you must address your reproaches to him, not to me; and she rose to leave the room.'

'Forgive me, Mademoiselle, I entreat you, forgive me. I am a boor and a ruffian; Rose always told me so, but in pity for her, in pity for me...'

'Is she your sister?' said Alice, touched by his grief and earnestness. 'No, she is not my sister, though we were brought up together; she is more than that, if possible; she is more like my child, since the day when God in His goodness made use of me to save her precious life, and I swore to make her happy. And this man who has stolen her heart away—to whom she has given the love that was once mine—this man, who promised to marry her—does he dare to make sport of us, to cast her off, to despise her, now that she loves him and loves me no more? No, it is not possible; it would be too infamous.'

'You loved this young girl, then?' said Alice in a choking voice. 'Did I love her? do not I love her now?' exclaimed Henri vehemently; and his hands clenched convulsively a little bag which he held out to her. 'This is the money that is to procure a substitute for the man that she loves. These are the fruits of the long sleepless nights, when she used to wear out her eyes with work and crying. You may count the money easily, but you will never count the tears that she has shed while earning it.' And he threw the purse on the table.

Alice opened it mechanically. 'Did the poor girl really get all this money by her work?' she exclaimed with emotion.

'She had earned just a quarter of that sum,' answered Henri, in a constrained tone; 'when she fell ill, and was in danger of death; but God did not call her to Himself this time, and when she recovered she found the money that was required to make up the amount already in the purse.'

'Oh, it was you, then,' cried Alice, with the deepest emotion, 'it was you that put it there—you that loved her? Oh, what an example!' she added to herself. After a moment's silence, she said, 'Is it really quite true that my cousin is engaged to marry this young girl?'

'As true as the truth,' replied Henri, taking up his hat and stick.

'And she is called Rose?'

'Rose Leblanc, niece of M. Dumont of Jurancou.'

'And she sells fruit at Pau?'

'Yes; and it was all through going to sell that cursed fruit that the mischief was done.'

'If I do not mistake, you were at Betharam on the sixth of September. We prayed together at the foot of the cross on the Calvary.'

'Ah, I fancied your face was not quite unknown to me: it was on that very day that we were in such danger: There was a landslip just as we were coming down the mountain side towards Choroze.'

'I remember,' cried Alice. 'They told us of it that evening, at Pau.'

'Rose lay in my arms as if she was dead when we reached the only spot where there was a secure footing. It was then that I made the vow that I told you of. It is very simple.'

'Yes,' replied Alice inaudibly, 'it is very simple; but, at the same time, it is the most sublime thing I ever heard of.' Then, having thought for a moment, she added, 'is it long since Rose began to love Andre?'

'It is very long since she ceased to love me,' answered Henri, in accents broken by such acute and evident suffering that Alice could scarcely bring herself to question him further. She forced herself to proceed, however; for she felt that not only her own happiness, but Andre's prospects, the fate of the poor girl who loved him so faithfully, and perhaps even of the noble heart whose sufferings and heroic self-sacrifice she so well knew how to appreciate, depended on the frankness with which she should deal with him.

'You will forgive me,' she said, trying to steady her voice, 'if in Andre's cause, and that of her whose happiness is dearer to you than your own, I ask you whether you consider that this marriage would be really a suitable one;—and whether you are certain there exists on both sides such a deep and true love as will compensate for the disadvantages of a match that is unequal in point of birth and education?'

'Unequal do you call it?' exclaimed Henri quickly. 'A common soldier, without fortune and without position...'

hands, instead of jumping for joy as she used to do at our village feasts, as I expected to see her do. Have I not wrestled and fought with myself, and made violent efforts to control the passions that rage within me, and to forgive this man, who has trodden upon my heart, and who thinks no more of destroying one's happiness than if he were crushing a spider? and now, because he is a gentleman, forsooth, and has rich relations who are willing to own him at last, he thinks he may set every thing at defiance, and break his word to Rose. No! he shall marry her. He must make her happy, I say, or he will have a desperate man to deal with;—desperate, do you understand? Because if Rose were to be unhappy, I should go mad, and then perhaps I might kill him.'

Alice looked up in his face in terror. His features were convulsed with rage and grief, and he seemed to have lost all control over himself. She rose and took leave of him with great gentleness, saying—

'I will execute faithfully the trust that you have committed to me; and, if necessary, I shall not fail to put forward Rose's claim to Andre's love and fidelity; but I do not doubt that there is enough of affection and gratitude in his heart to render my poor words unnecessary. Farewell. You may trust in me.'

'I do,' murmured Henri, in a low voice, as he bent over the hand that she held out to him.

Alice's face was calm, and there was no tear in her eye; her voice even had not failed her as she pronounced those last words; but, when the door was closed, and she was alone with God and her guardian angel—on her knees, with folded hands, and eyes raised to heaven, she made the sacrifice of her hopes of earthly happiness, her poor heart torn with grief, but her soul filled with the peace that passeth all understanding, which the world cannot give, nor the world take away!

CHAPTER XIII.

It often happens in the midst of this life, that when there is a question of making some great sacrifice, there are circumstances mixed up with it which complicate our sufferings, and make the performance of our duty much more difficult. For those who may truly be called Christians, sufferings that are merely personal have compensations which almost change their nature; but when, by making a sacrifice, we give sorrow to another person, or deprive those we love of their happiness, their hopes, or the dreams in which they love to indulge,—of that which brings the smile to their lips, and relieves the sadness or the monotony of their lives,—then indeed the trial is hard to bear, especially for those who possess the rare gift of really caring for the feelings of others. This was the case with Alice. The scattered joys around her seemed a necessary condition of her existence. It was her delight alternate, if only for a moment, the pain or the sufferings of her fellow-creatures; to brighten the sad face of one in trouble; to cause the aged and the blind to rejoice or an ailing child to smile. It was in the performance of acts such as these that she placed her chief happiness. She loved to feed the birds, to bring dying insects to life in the rays of the sun, even to revive the drooping flowers by carefully watering them. Her loving and devoted nature baled with delight whatever could procure a moment of pleasure or of consolation for others. And now she sat thinking, with her head clasped between her hands, and turning over in her mind every means she could devise for softening to her grandfather the impending death-blow to his dearest hopes, and this without allowing a murmur to escape her, at the loss of her prospects of happiness. She knew how entirely the Baron was set upon her marriage with Andre, which would have secured to his name the old domains and traditions of his family. She observed that since Andre's arrival, he had seemed to take a new pleasure in life, and to interest himself about a thousand things for which he had long ceased to care; and his delight at the idea of the speedy realization of his hopes, betrayed itself in almost everything he said and did. Like a ray of the sun after a stormy day, it had come to brighten his old age, and to soften the bitter memories of the past.

'And now it is all over,' said poor Alice sadly to herself, with a troubled brow and an aching heart. 'There will be an end to his pleasure in turning over the family archives; to all his plans, to the secret he used to pretend to keep from me; and to the half-expressed anticipations which I used to interrupt with kisses. If he would only make Andre his heir, without thinking of me; but, that I know he will not consent to do. At all events I shall tell him that I do not intend ever to marry. But if Andre marries that poor little Rose, he will have nothing more to say to either of them. However, happen what may, he must marry her, since he has promised to do so; and it would be very wicked to say to him, from this time forward, "There never was a more touching proof of love than this purse, consigned to the hands of the poor girl who loved me..."'