



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XVII.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 1867.

No. 28.

EUSTACE; OR, SELF-DEVOTION.

CHAPTER IX.—Continued.

Something of the ridiculous seemed now to be blended with poor Mrs. Maxwell's fit of anger; and I felt anxious to terminate a scene which was becoming exciting to Margaret, and painful to myself; and willingly followed the former, who beckoned me to the inner parlor, the folding-doors of which stood open.

"Now, Minnie," exclaimed the good lady, "I hope, as you are some years older than poor Maggie, you will prove somewhat wise; do you not see that she is acting a very foolish part; trifling with her own feelings, and those of my son; and what for, I should like to know; for nothing that I can see, but because it has pleased God to afflict her with a bad brother. Why, girls," she added, "where is your sense; there is a skeleton in every house; I wonder if all of us knew our neighbors' affairs, where is the large family which has not a black sheep amongst its number; and why, I should like to know, are the innocent to be punished for the guilty?"

"Mrs. Maxwell," I said, when I found that I could speak, "you do both Margaret and myself injustice; she is acting with true heroism of soul in remaining disengaged till it shall please God to remove our unhappy brother from this world, or till we find he has left England again, which will probably be the case. Then Maggie will be free; but, oh! I added, "do remember that while things are in this unhappy state we can look and hope for no happiness, for we feel no security."

"No," she said, "I should think not, indeed; when you both act as you might only be expected to do, were you fettered to bad husbands."—Then returning to the room in which Margaret had remained, she kissed her, telling her she should see her again shortly; and hoped she would think over all that she had said, and allow her to receive her as a daughter.

Margaret was overcome; she could only return the kiss, and express a hope that these clouds which overhung her prospects would soon clear away, and she might be enabled to meet the family of her friend as in old times.

Far from satisfied, our good friend left the cottage; the worthy soul could not comprehend the depth of high feeling which prompted Margaret to pursue this step; not so her son, he declared to me afterwards that he had valued, as it deserved to be valued, the high principle which had led Margaret to break off her engagement with him, though he himself was the sufferer hereby.

CHAPTER X.—THE OLD CHATEAU—A FEMALE TYRANT.

"Minnie, dear, I have a favor to ask of you," said Margaret, the morning after the little meeting I have spoken of had taken place. "You will grant it if our little funds will allow of the treat I am meditating."

"Willingly, darling," I replied: "I do not think hitherto we have any thing to reproach ourselves with; as far as indulgences beyond our means are concerned, we can have no right to term ourselves extravagant."

"Dare we venture on a long journey, then; a very long journey, mind, for people of such slender means as ours; can we manage to pass a few months in the sunny south of France, Minnie?"

I paused a moment, almost doubting if we could; then I bethought me that change of air was better than doctor's bills, and I unhesitatingly replied—

"Yes, Margaret; when shall we go? shall it be next week?"

"Can it be possible that we can arrange so speedily?"

"Without doubt," I replied; "I draw my quarterly allowance in a few days; meanwhile pack up all that is necessary; we will discharge the maid, lock up the house, and leave it to take care of itself, as houses in country villages always can do, at least the little village of Ashdale I can answer for;" for the honesty of its good people was almost proverbial.

"Then we will see the Maxwells first, Minnie," said my sister; "and while we are away, when he finds the house shut up and that we are quite gone, it—if Edgar should come here again, people will say we have left England, and he will think no more of us; every clue will be lost, for Arthur has solemnly pledged his word that he will never again tell him where we are; and then, when we come back, Eustace and I may marry without fear, if all intercourse with Edgar be for ever cut off, and he probably have left the country."

From the moment that I assented to Margaret's request, a change came over her; her step became more elastic, her smile as of old, her cheek began to assume a more healthful tinge; I knew that she was happier.

I wrote to Mrs. Maxwell; I told her what we had decided on doing; our decision met with the approval of our kind friends, provided, they said, Margaret were more flexible on her return, and accordingly we made our preparations with all possible despatch, and accompanied to London by Eustace, bade farewell to England until the following spring, when we hoped to return under more favorable auspices. A pleasant journey was ours; our hearts were lighter than they had been for some time, and we arrived in the province of Languedoc one lovely September evening, just as the setting sun shed its rosy light on the luxuriant foliage of the trees, each bearing its beautiful autumnal hue. At a small way-side inn we put up for the night, till we could look about us, so as to locate ourselves more comfortably. Far in the distance, partially embosomed by trees, stood an old chateau, the windows of which were lighted up by the beams of declining day. A lovely scene lay stretched around us; to the right a small church, its grey walls overgrown with moss, its time-worn tower covered with ivy, the last rays of the sun casting a red tint on the cross which mutely beckoned man onwards to a happier world. A fragrant smell from an orange-grove reminded us that we were in the sunny south, whilst the murmur of distant waters told us that we were near the banks of an extensive lake. Wearied as we were, we could not resolve to retire to rest till we had explored a little around the immediate neighborhood, therefore, after partaking of some rather sour wine, with bread, milk, and dried fruits, we sallied forth for a short half hour, to enjoy the calm beauty of the evening.

There was something so novel in our journey to the south of France, unknown and alone as we were, that the very originality of our position gave an additional zest to our enjoyment. As for myself, I had arrived at that sober age when woman may be allowed to travel by herself;—moreover, we had had so many trials to encounter in our path through life, that travelling thus unprotected and alone, seemed to me a mere bagatelle.

But the old chateau claimed a greater portion of our attention than any of the beauties around us. It appeared in some parts to be falling to decay under the hand of time, yet the main portion of the edifice seemed still in tolerably good preservation: one wing of the building appeared, however, as though perfectly dismantled, whilst the curtained windows, and the sound of a sweet voice accompanied by the harp in a manner which showed that the musician was not destitute of some considerable amount of musical skill, told that the chateau was still inhabited. We stood and listened, entranced by the melody of that sweet voice, and I have endeavored, as well as I could, to render the words into English.

Ah, swift the shades of eve now fall,
Over hill and over dale;
And Luna with her silver pall
Covereth wood and grassy vale.
Ave Maria, in this hour
Shield us with protecting power.

Night's darksome banner is unfurl'd,
Whit' Nature Nature sinks to sleep,
And all in gloom hath clad the world,
Save those who wake to watch and weep.
Ave Maria, 'tis the hour
When most they need thy love and power.

Myriads in the azure sky,
Glittering with the diamond's light,
Shines the pale star gloriously,
Illumining the heavens bright.
Ave Maria, star of the sea,
Oh! pray for us who call on thee.

The voice was hushed, and a few chords seemed struck at random; then the fingers swept over the strings, and a few bars of a beautiful and melancholy prelude were played, a note of which we occasionally lost, as ever and anon the autumnal breeze rustled through the thick foliage of the trees, when suddenly the sweet sounds were marred by a wild shriek, which rung through the old chateau. Then all was buried in a profound silence, and with a thrill of horror running through our veins, we hastened from the spot, wondering and conjecturing but in vain, as to the cause of that most melancholy sound. The moon had risen and the heavy September dew had fallen, and feeling chilled as well as weary; I became conscious how very foolishly we had acted in thus prolonging our stay. We arrived, however, in safety at the small inn at which we had engaged beds, and were shown by mine hostess into the best room her house afforded, in the ample stove of which a large fire, according to our directions, diffused light and warmth around, for it was drawing towards the close of September, and soft as was the air in this genial atmosphere, I felt that precaution was necessary, as much as those might feel, who more than doubled the years that had passed over my head.

The inn was not more than an English half-mile from the chateau which had so deeply interested us, and as I stood at the window gazing thoughtfully out on the wide expanse of country which lay bathed in such perfect rest, my eyes

chanced to fall on the spire of the village church, which, rising out from amid the trees which embosomed it, was at that moment flooded by a line of silvery light; I bethought me of the chateau and the beautiful effect of the moonlight as it rested on its half ruined turret, and turning to Madame Roland, I inquired whose was the old chateau which I had seen about half a mile from the inn; I thought I observed a little hesitation in the woman's manner, as she replied, "It is the chateau of the Marquis de Villecourt, his only daughter and her stepmother are living there; Mademoiselle de Villecourt's intellects are somewhat deranged; and such melancholy shrieks are at times uttered by the poor thing; the marchioness lives there in the most perfect retirement, devoting her life to the care of her stepdaughter."

"Indeed," I casually remarked; "she is doubtless a very amiable woman, then; is the daughter very young?"

"She is a stepdaughter, and was ten years old when her mother, the late marchioness, died," replied the hostess.

"Her father married his second wife a few months after the lady's death; he was many years older than the present Madame de Villecourt, and died soon after his wife had given birth to a son, which still lives."

"And the young lady," said Margaret, her mind, as well as mine, recurring to the songstress we had that evening heard.

"Ah, mademoiselle," replied the woman, "she was very fond of her mother, and she little liked her father's marriage with 'la belle Anglaise,' her governess, whom he married so soon after her mother's death."

"An English lady," I ejaculated, almost involuntarily.

"Yes, mademoiselle, and you see the young lady was always delicate, and had all her own way while the good lady, her mother, lived, and could ill brook the control of her stepmother, who brought her from Paris to live with her in yonder old chateau, which is not fit for people of their wealth to live in; Monsieur le Marquis never resided there, it is in a ruinous state, and fit only for the dwelling of bats and owls."

As Madame Roland uttered these words, she left the room, and Margaret and myself sat down to talk over what we had heard, in a true spirit of adventure, determining to explore the neighborhood of the chateau on the morrow, and to discuss the merits of a cold capon, some light wine, fruits, and white bread, before taking our rest.

CHAPTER XI.—OUR FIRST DAY IN LANGUEDOC—AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

We rose early the next morning, after a sound night's rest, and, having breakfasted, made our way to the little church of St. Roche, in order to hear mass. Our devotions concluded, we immediately, as by tacit consent, turned our steps in the direction of the chateau. The country around was beautiful; large patches of pastureland lay on either side, whilst here and there rose some step acclivity, rich in the vegetation which grew on its brink, and clothed with many a wild flower; while beneath lay buried some peaceful valley, with humble habitations scattered around, and here and there, dotted thickly, peeping through the trees, the white villas of the wealthier class. As we advanced up the road which led to the chateau, these habitations became fewer in number, and the scenery more romantic; whilst beyond rose the Pyrenees, in gloomy grandeur, frowning, as it were, on the soft features of the scene beneath. The building appeared more ancient than when seen by the waning twilight of the previous evening; nor did there appear to be much care bestowed on its preservation, or any pains taken to keep it in neatness and order, for the courtyard was overgrown with rank weeds and nettles, whilst the green moss crept up around the stone pillars which supported the gateway. Whilst we yet stood lost in surprise at the scene of desolation around us, a lovely girl of some eighteen years of age stepped forward, and regarding us with an air of melancholy curiosity, passed on. There was a restlessness in her look which distressed us as you met her gaze; it seemed to me as if there was indeed a weak intellect within that beautiful form. Margaret had seated herself on the trunk of a tree and was making a sketch of the castle, whilst I regarded, with no small degree of interest, the movements of the young stranger; but now, emerging from one of the ruined arches, appeared a woman of perhaps thirty years of age, of a style of beauty rather commanding than pleasing, and features the expression of which, though correctly beautiful, were more calculated to inspire fear than love. She was tall, well formed, and rather embosomed than otherwise; she passed me with a slight glance, and her eyes then fell on Margaret, and, for a moment, she hesitated. I thought I had seen that face before; was I dreaming? No! surely long years since, when a girl at Chalot, I had gazed upon a similar

countenance, differing, indeed, from that which I now beheld, yet allowing for the lapse of fifteen years, save that a harder expression was over the face, it was identically the same.

Those large full black eyes seemed as if they could read the thought of others, the nose was quite aquiline, the teeth gleamed through the parted lips like rows of pearls; but the small mouth, ever and anon compressed, was correct in its beauty, and yet gave a severe expression to the features of that superb beauty. Ere she had walked fifty yards from the spot on which we stood, she returned, and lengthening her promenade to the gates of the chateau, she again turned and faced us, this time regarding myself and Margaret alternately with an earnest and steady gaze.

"Pardon me," she said, as she approached me, "but I do think we have met before in very different scenes to these. Are you not the daughter of a gentleman, who is, or was, curate of the village of Chalot, in the west of England?"

"Yes, madam," I replied, while Margaret threw down her pencil and listened in mute astonishment; and I added, "I have indeed seen you before; I remember your face, but quite forget whom I have the honor of addressing."

"You will remember me, perhaps, as the niece of Mr. Percival—Catherine Vivian," replied the lady. "I should not have remembered you, for sooth to say, though a poor compliment, you are fearfully altered; but Margaret has the same face as she had when she was a mere child. I remembered her from her striking resemblance to her father; but pray come home with me, if you are so interested, Margaret, in sketching my dreary old mansion, I am sure you will be pleased to wander at your ease through its gloomy corridors and spacious halls."

We both willingly accepted the invitation, and accompanied the Marchioness de Villecourt, once spoken of as Catherine Vivian, to the home she had spoken of so slightly.

I noticed that just as she entered the portal of the chateau, she turned and called her stepdaughter by name, and that her tone of voice as well as her manner, was at once arbitrary and imperious.

What a contrast between the mother and daughter! The one haughty in manner, proud of the rank to which she had successfully aspired and obtained, swept in, her style of almost masculine beauty, void of every feminine grace, and if those almost chiselled features spoke correctly by the expression they gave to the countenance, endowed with a mind capable of anything harsh, so that it could but gain its ends. Eulalie de Villecourt was small in stature, slightly but gracefully formed, her complexion delicately fair, her hair of that rich golden hue which we rarely see save on the head of an infant, the features perfectly regular; but the deep-blue eyes wanted, indeed, the expression which gives life, and soul, and animation, to the whole face; yet there was something indescribably sweet in the general contour of the countenance—such a holy calm and such perfect repose seemed to dwell thereon that a painter might have made a study of that face, thrown more expression into the eyes, and have taken it for the picture of a Madonna.—Through noble corridors and spacious apartments, grand even in their decay, we wandered, attended by Madame de Villecourt, and followed timidly by Eulalie, who seemed desirous to attach herself to Margaret, but who appeared nervously apprehensive, when any remark, however commonplace, was addressed to her by her stepmother, not at all to my surprise, for, far from any word of endearment being used, coldness and a repulsive harshness, alone was observable.

At length we reached the gallery in which were hung the portraits of ancestors of the noble house of Villecourt, and we lingered long, pausing before each ancestor of the illustrious line of nobles, some clad in full armour, while many a fair daughter of the house appeared in the dress worn at the period in which she lived; till coming down to our own times, we stood before the portraits of a man in the prime of life, and a young woman whose features exactly resembled those of Eulalie, save that they bore the expression that was wanting to her, we knew that we gazed on the portrait of the first wife, and involuntarily our eyes fell on the face of Eulalie, whose eyes were humid with tears. On the right side of Monsieur de Villecourt's portrait, hung that of the present Marchioness, in all the pride of her beauty, and in the full prime of woman's existence, when girlhood and its teens have some ten years passed away, and the form has become rounded in full maturity, and when, though it has lost the grace of youth, it has a charm peculiarly its own.

"The last Marchioness," said Madame, "a poor, pale, sickly thing, who was never well, weak in character, Miss Herbert, as she was feeble in body—it was a happy release, both for Monsieur de Villecourt as well as for the poor

lady herself, when she died." Then suddenly turning as the sound of a step struck upon her ear, she stooped to embrace a beautiful boy, the very counterpart of herself; and perhaps about eight years of age. "This is my son, Eugene, Miss Herbert," she said; "but we have been long enough looking at the portraits of these dead worthies of the house of Villecourt, let us return to the one suit of rooms which I have tried to make habitable."

I cannot express what I felt, for I knew each word this cruel woman uttered inflicted a pang on the gentle heart of Eulalie; nor felt she ashamed that I should be a witness of her tyranny, for turning sharply round as we entered a room fitted up as the boudoir of some fairy palace, and assorting ill indeed with the 'tout-ensemble' of that ancient edifice, she exclaimed angrily, "how now?—in tears again! I shall insist on your remaining in your chamber, if you will not conquer this absurd exhibition of feeling on every occasion."

Eulalie's tears only flowed afresh at this unmerited reproof; she said nothing, however, but left the room; and I noticed that the boy bounded after her, and that when called back by his mother, he appeared both sullen and angry.

I could not avoid hazarding a remark. "Perhaps," I said, "Mademoiselle de Villecourt remembers her mother? I noticed that she wept when you alluded to her death."

"She was a spoiled child, Miss Herbert," she replied, "humored in everything, so that her affliction is almost insupportable. After we left Chalot, my mother and myself spent several years in Paris, where I became acquainted with the late marchioness, and when my mother's death took place, and I was left alone in the world, she invited me here very frequently, for she was a woman of such a disposition that she could not bear solitude."

"Ah, Catherine, Catherine, you should have said, when I was left alone and penniless, I entered the family of my benefactress, as governess to her child."

This was my inward thought; I remembered Madame Roland's story, and I knew that the Vivians had been a family in needy circumstances, aided much by their relation, Mr. Percival, and with no means of their own, save the proceeds of a trifling life annuity belonging to the late Mrs. Vivian.

However, this cruel woman, for such I felt certain she was, proceeded as follows; the bareness of her heart betrayed itself in her own words: "Truly, I had but a dull home in exchange for the gaities of Parisian life; sickness often makes people very exacting, and between the fancies of Madame de Villecourt, and the difficult task there was in keeping her spoiled child from her sick room, there was much to put up with. However, in the course of time she died, and I left the chateau, but only for a short time; for Monsieur le Marquis offered me his hand and brought me back to this gloomy old ruin as his mistress. He has left me by his will sole guardian of both his children till they come of age. I do not think Eulalie will live very long—if she were to die, I should immediately return to Paris; otherwise, until I choose to part with Eugene from under my own eye, I shall remain in this seclusion. I must tell you, however, that if Monsieur de Villecourt left me much power in my hands, he was brutal and suspicious enough to take care to tie me up from making any new engagement; for I have only the possession of this unrestricted power, on condition, forsooth, that I do not marry till the minority of these children has expired, and thirteen years must pass," she added, with a deep sigh, "ere one of them will be off my hands."

As she spoke thus, she surveyed her splendid figure with a look of satisfied complacency, as she faced a full-length pier-glass which was before her. Ah, Catherine, do you not remember that that those raven locks will, at the best, have here and there many a silvery thread when thirteen years shall have passed away! Oh, woman, woman, it is indeed well for those young creatures that their father in this proviso acted with at least a little caution. At this moment Eugene asked his mother, might he take the young lady, so he designated Margaret, into the ruined turret, he would like to show it to her.—She unhesitatingly yielded her assent.

I fancied there was a hidden meaning beneath the boy's words. Ah, mother, take care! if that boy lives, he, the only thing you ever truly loved, will mar all your schemes, and, in the hands of a just God, will become the instrument of retributive justice.

"Eulalie seems so timid," I said, "so retiring. I should not suppose you would have much trouble with her, especially as she was not quite eleven years old when her mother died. I suppose you sought to win her affections; a stepmother must have a difficult part to play."

"Indeed, I never troubled myself about the matter," was the reply. "I did my duty by her,