



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XXIV.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, JUNE 5, 1874.

NO. 42.

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ISABELLE DE VERNEUIL; OR, THE CONVENT OF ST. MARY'S.

BY MRS. CHARLES SNELL, Author of "Helen and Florence, or a Month's Holiday at Rockcliff Castle."

CHAPTER IX.—(Continued.)

"Most Blessed Virgin, save and defend us!" said Cecile.

"I do believe Euphemie is in the garden," said Eugenie.

"In the garden!" cried Sister Therese.—"Surely she would never have carried her disobedience as far as that! And she well knows how strictly our holy Mother has forbidden pupils to remain alone in the garden."

"There she is yonder beneath the trees," added Cecile, "where she has taken shelter. How very imprudent!"

Euphemie Leriche had it appeared sought refuge under the old elms, which were already bending beneath the violence of the squall.—The loud thunder pealed like a volley of artillery, and the voice of the young girl calling for help was lost amid the crash and din of the elements. Trembling with terror, the pupils assembled in the work-room abandoned their occupations to rush to the window in order to watch their disobedient and headstrong companion, and the Sister Josephine, who knew only too well the danger to which she was exposed, rose hurriedly from her seat, and in a very short time the bell, which always called the gardener when any unforeseen event happened at the convent, was heard clanging on the air. Believing that some terrible accident had happened, he started off at once and ran rapidly towards the house; but before he could reach it the pale and trembling figure of Euphemie attracted his attention. He rushed towards her, but just as he was about taking hold of her to carry her away, a sudden stream of lightning, that seemed to blast the sight, shot across the heavens, followed instantaneously by a terrific clap of thunder, which rent the clouds and illumined with a lurid glare the windows of the school-room, while shriek after shriek escaped from the lips of the terrified children. It almost blinded the old man, who had been struck to the earth, and some time elapsed before he could either speak or move, but when at length he recovered sufficient consciousness to look around him, the noble tree lay a shattered ruin on the ground, while Euphemie was extended pale and insensible at his feet.

On hearing the bell, the Mother St. Euphrasie had joined the children and nuns, who had all taken refuge in the large school-room. This admirable woman soon succeeded in banishing the extreme terror that had taken possession of every bosom; but it seemed as if the storm had spent its fury in the terrific bolt hurled against the ancient elm, for from that moment its violence abated. On Jerome's entrance, she called the Sister Therese, and after despatching the gardener for the doctor, had the inmate form of the young Euphemie carried to the infirmary. Happily, however, the imprudent girl had sustained no serious injury, and although her headstrong disobedience had nearly cost her her life, yet, by the mercy of God, she was saved, and gradually recovered her senses. But while all hearts were turned to the Lord and rendered humble

praise and thanksgiving to Him for all His mercies vouchsafed unto her, Eugenie alone did not appear to remember the extreme anguish and terror of those who had witnessed the fall of the tree and her subsequent fainting fit. A few hours repose and great quiet were of infinite service to this foolish child, and the next day she was able to rise at the usual hour. The unselfish manner in which Jerome had risked his own life to save hers did not meet with one single word of grateful acknowledgment from her; and although she had been told that to him she owed her rescue from a deadly peril, she paid not the least attention to it; and when, later in the day, she passed before the good old man, who was busily occupied with his work, she took not the slightest notice of him.

"Ingratitude is one of the most despicable sentiments which corrode the heart of mankind, to the exclusion of every other grace," said the Mother St. Euphrasie, after listening to a few words of a conversation that was going on between Cecile, Euphemie, and Isabelle. "Happily, however, Jerome neither expects gratitude nor any token of it from Euphemie; he knows that he only did his duty in saving her, and that, if he looked for a reward at all, he knew that he would receive it in that world where all great and daring deeds meet with a just recompense. Go, my children, and pray to God and to our most Blessed Lady, implore the intercession of Mary, and ask them at the foot of the altar to give you kind and feeling hearts, and that meek and humble spirit which is one of the principal ornaments of the true Christian, and to render you worthy of deserving, by the affability of your demeanor, alike the affection and confidence of the poor and the kindness and sympathy of the rich."

The bell announcing supper was heard at that moment. The evening prayer succeeded, and by nine o'clock the pupils of the establishment were all buried in profound repose.

"The workmen are coming early to-morrow morning to remove the old barrier of the cliff, which is to be replaced by a handsome iron railing eight or ten feet high," said the Mother St. Euphrasie to the Sister Josephine, as she made her nightly round through the old house.

But the next day it poured in torrents, and a violent wind prevented all approach to the cliff. The bad weather lasted for some days, and the eve of the feast of the Ascension arrived and nothing had been done. But the stormy wind had blown down the decayed palisade, and nothing now remained to guard the edge of the dangerous and rocky cliff.

CHAPTER X.

At length the important and solemn day broke, but the weather had not changed, and one might have thought that, for the last week, November, with its sombre and gloomy days, had taken the place of the brilliant month of May, for heavy gusts of wind whailed round the old convent, flooding the long corridors with their wild and inarticulate moaning, and tearing off in their mad fury the thatched covering of the out-buildings. The convent chapel was beautifully decorated with the choicest produce of the flower-beds, which the old gardener had carefully tended and preserved from the effects of the wind and rain by erecting little tents formed of matting over his favorites, and by half-past five those parents and friends of the young communicants who were desirous of witnessing the ceremony were all assembled in the sacred edifice.

Isabelle de Verneuil was ready in good time. Her simple white attire suited well with the modesty of her looks and behavior, and she contrasted admirably with Euphemie, who, short and stout, seemed literally buried beneath the weight of her rich dress. Almost always our feelings take their tone from the thoughts that occupy our minds; and while Isabelle, who had entirely forgotten self in that solemn hour, received with a true and fervent devotion the Bread of Life, Euphemie, on the contrary, let all her ideas dwell on her beautiful dress, which was to serve for the balls, concerts, and plays to which her silly, vain mother had promised to introduce her during the holidays.

On beholding her dear Isabelle kneeling at the foot of the altar, Madame de Verneuil could not restrain her tears, but they were tears of happiness. Two years previously she had found this young child neglected and, as it were, abandoned in her husband's house. At that time she herself was only nineteen, and on her first arrival at G— she began to feel that she should only find sorrow and trouble in her new home instead of the happiness she had looked for and prayed to obtain. Notwithstanding her disappointment, she fully understood that a real and serious duty lay before her; but it was only on becoming herself a mother that she comprehended it in its fullest extent. The little neglected daughter of the Baron, thus become her own, called for unceasing care and attention. M. de Verneuil's second marriage having been arranged

and concluded in a distant department, Isabelle fortunately had never heard any of those foolish tales of wicked step-mothers which so often frighten the children of a widower, and consequently received her father's young wife with the greatest pleasure, and had soon learned to feel the warmest affection for her. She found in that young and amiable woman not only the most kind and affectionate mother, but one who could sympathize sincerely with herself; and the child, who had never known the love with which a good mother watches over the well-being and education of her children, and who had never been the object of that anxious solicitude which distinguishes most parents, now found herself surrounded by a careful attention and a motherly tenderness to which she had never been a stranger.

Up to the time of her father's marriage Isabelle had had no other companions but the women who waited and attended upon her; under these circumstances, it will not appear astonishing that she barely knew how to read or write. But the real state of the case being properly laid before her by her young step-mother, she had eagerly accepted Madame de Verneuil's offer of studying with her for three months before going into the convent. During the time that had elapsed since her arrival at St. Mary's her improvement had been considerable; but reflection had caused her to blush for her ignorance, and being really desirous of repairing the lost time which could not be recalled, she had given herself up to study with a steadiness of purpose quite surprising in one so young, and had applied herself so well to the various lessons of the kind-hearted Sister Josephine, that in a very short time she had won, and deservedly so, the affection and regard of her indulgent mistresses.

We have said that Madame de Verneuil wept on beholding her step-daughter at the foot of the altar; but those were tears of happiness and gratitude, for she then understood more fully than ever, that in the accomplishment of a serious duty, however painful it may be, there is an inward satisfaction, very sweet to those who experience it. On witnessing the expression of holy joy that illumined the young girl's lovely face, her own fair and youthful countenance beamed with gladness; her eyes were fixed on the young communicant, no wandering thoughts distracted her attention, and she felt that she had done her duty conscientiously and rigidly towards the once neglected child. At length a pause in the service caused her to raise her eyes towards her husband, but he saw her not, for large tears filled his, and, kneeling on the marble floor, the man of the world had given way to a deep emotion, and inspired by the majesty of Christ's religion, his whole soul had elevated itself towards the God of all power and might, in praises and thanksgivings for all the goodness and mercy vouchsafed unto him.

At ten o'clock High Mass was celebrated, at which all the pupils attended. Some few having asked and obtained permission to dine with their parents, left with their mothers on quitting the chapel, but Isabelle remained at the convent, being desirous of passing the remainder of the day in prayer and meditation; all, however, were to meet again at Vespers, as M. Beauregard had expressed a wish to see all the communicants at that service.

The storm still raged in its wildest fury.—The sea, lashed into frenzy, sounded terrifically, and dashed its spray far up over the jagged cliffs on to the lawn beyond. By some misunderstanding Madame Leriche's carriage had not waited for her, and when the bell rang for the pupil's dinner that lady was still at the convent.

"Where is my daughter?" she asked, as she opened the parlor door and perceived a lay-sister passing along the passage. "She has disappeared for more than half an hour."

"Madie Leriche has probably gone to the linen-room to take off her veil and fold it," answered the Sister Claire. "At any rate, there is the dinner-bell, and she will, I dare say, come down with the rest."

"But she does not dine here," continued Madame Leriche, in a vexed tone; "she is going home with me."

"In that case I will go and fetch her at once, Madame; and while you are waiting please be seated," said the nun, advancing a chair as she spoke.

But Euphemie was not in the linen-room, neither was her veil folded with those of her sister communicants, and the Sister Agnes had not seen her since the morning.

"She has probably gone to show herself to the children in the granary," said the nun on her return.

"Gone to the granary!" cried Madame Leriche, in an angry voice. "Surely no one ever went into a granary dressed as she is! Do be kind enough to call her, Sister, and tell her that if she does not come down directly I shall go home without her."

The Sister, who knew very well that Euphemie would not return to school after that day, but she replied:

"Although we call it a granary, yet it is not one in reality; but, as I do not wish to detain you, Madame, I will go and look for the young lady."

The apartment called "the granary," at St. Mary's, was a large handsome room, composed of four small chambers, of which the separations had been thrown down. Six elegant white stone columns, with painted ivy twining round them, supported the ceiling, and the walls were covered with a handsome paper representing the history of Joseph and his brethren. Swings, skipping ropes, battledores and shuttlecocks, and games of all sorts, were to be found in this room, and on wet days most of the pupils spent there their hours of recreation. Two nuns were always present at those times, and it was strictly forbidden for any one of the children to go up there in school time.

The Sister Claire went slowly up the wide staircase, but, on reaching the granary found it empty.

"What can have become of the troublesome girl?" she asked herself, as she descended again to the parlor.

This question had already been asked several times in the school-room without receiving a satisfactory answer; and the words, "where is Euphemie?" were repeated by each young girl, as she joined the group of pupils preparing to enter the refectory.

"Dinner, young ladies," said the Sister Therese, who perceived that the bell had made no impression on the usually hungry children.

"But where is Euphemie, Sister?" cried they. "Where can she be?"

"Is she not gone home with her mother?" asked the nun.

"She cannot be gone, Sister Therese, for Madame Leriche is still in the parlor."

"Well, never fear, if she is lost she will be found again;" and, with these words, the nun, preceding her young flock, led the way to the refectory.

Before the conclusion of the repast, it had been ascertained beyond a doubt that Euphemie was not in the house. The Sister Claire, being unable to find her, had informed the Mother St. Euphrasie of her disappearance, and that lady had gone immediately to the parlor, where Madame Leriche was still awaiting her daughter with an impatience difficult to describe. Without being able to explain it to herself, a feeling of anxiety had taken possession of the heart of the good Superior, and an ill-concealed agitation began to be visible on her face. Fearing to alarm the mother of the missing girl, she turned away, and, calling the Sister Josephine, asked her to what cause she attributed Euphemie's absence.

"Let us go ourselves," she added, "and visit the classes, the sleeping apartments, and the granary. Of course, in weather like this, it is not possible that she can have left the house."

And the two nuns quitted the room, leaving Madame Leriche alone in the parlor.

"If my carriage were but here," said that lady to herself, "I would go home, for it is very dull and stupid to be kept waiting like this, and it would punish Euphemie as she deserves."

But at that moment a distant noise, similar to the far off echo of a terrible cry, borne on the wings of the wind, reached that vain and foolish woman. It was a mournful sound, softened by distance it is true, but it announced that some unforeseen event had taken place, and it appeared to have been heard by all the household, for a confused sound of voices, of doors opening and shutting, penetrated into the quiet parlor, and shortly afterwards the sonorous clang of the alarm bell was heard booming on the air.

Madame Leriche heard it. But why does she turn red and become the next minute pale as the driven snow? Why does she tremble, and why do her knees bend and give way beneath her, so as to force her to seat herself on the nearest chair? What is the sound of that bell to her? Has not her carriage just arrived, and is she not about leaving the convent with her daughter?

But the noise came nearer and nearer. The voice of the alarm bell, heard amidst the roaring of the wind and the wild dashing of the waves against the jagged cliff, had stricken with terror all the inmates of St. Mary's, for it was only in moments of extreme peril that it was ever rung, and the nuns, pupils, and lay Sisters had all rushed into the large school-room, for in that weather and in such a storm, it was sufficient in itself to unstring their nerves and send their blood freezing to their hearts.

"What is the matter? Why is the alarm bell ringing?" asked the nuns one after the other.

The terror of all was at its height. The

children told each other that the convent was on fire, and cried as they surrounded the nuns, Isabelle, Cecile, and Eugenie, pale and trembling, held each other by the hand and stood by the Superior, who vainly tried to calm the agitation, so rapidly increasing in the room.

A short time elapsed, which appeared more like years than minutes, and then M. Beauregard was seen taking the way to the cliff. The venerable priest was accompanied by two men in the garb of sailors, and all three seemed to struggle with difficulty against the force of the wind, which considerably impeded their progress. Then only, and as if for the first time, a frightful presentiment seemed to flash across the mind of the Mother St. Euphrasie, and turning towards the nuns, who, surrounded by the pupils, were standing at the other end of the room, she cried, in a voice of agony:

"The cliff! The cliff!"

The Sister Josephine understood at once, whispering the Sister Therese, told her that all the pupils must be taken to the granary, in order to leave the ground floor at liberty.—A word from the Superior, and the young girls all disappeared, leaving only the Sister Josephine and two elderly nuns with the Mother St. Euphrasie. But this state of sorrowful suspense was not to be of long duration. The windows of the school-room looked across the lawn, but the barrier had been blown down, as we have already said, but there was nothing to be seen on that side, for the cliff rose high, precipitous, and perpendicularly above the low sandy beach to the height of thirty or forty feet, and there was no possibility of descending thither from the convent. Suddenly a footstep broke the mournful silence that reigned around; it was that of a lay Sister, who, pale as a spectre and her eyes bathed in tears, opened the door. The Mother St. Euphrasie rose hastily from her seat and immediately left the room, with a sign to the two nuns, who instantly followed her. But who could imagine the painful scene that awaited them? The Superior followed the Sister in silence, passed before the room where Euphemie's mother still waited, and stopped at last with her companions in the hall. It was a terrible moment. A sharp, piercing cry rose above all other sounds, which, reaching the parlor, caused Madame Leriche to open the door and to take a few steps into the large vestibule.

But why does she suddenly stop? Why does that consuming and intense anxiety take possession of her soul? A few steps further and all her blood seemed to freeze in her veins; mists and vapors swam before her eyes, her heart ceased to beat, and, unsupported by any friendly arm, she fell heavily to the ground.

On a sort of litter, her splendid lace-covered dress in shreds, her beautiful satin petticoat and other garments dripping with water, lay the death-like and inanimate body of Euphemie Leriche.

CHAPTER XI.

Our young readers must now permit us to retrace our steps, and take up the thread of our tale at the moment when leaving the chapel the pupils had re-entered the school-rooms of the convent.

From the very earliest days of her sojourn at St. Mary's, Euphemie Leriche had manifested the greatest curiosity concerning the cliffs, and had more than once expressed an extreme desire to pass through the barrier.—Notwithstanding the immutable decree pronounced by the Mother St. Euphrasie that no pupil should ever approach it, and the representations of her companions, Euphemie had often been met wandering alone in the gardens in the close vicinity of the forbidden spot, and always seemed to prefer that particular part of the grounds for her solitary walks. She had been punished several times for her disobedience, but nothing had availed to banish from her mind the resolution she had taken of exploring the edge of the cliff the instant a favorable opportunity occurred.

The day fixed for the celebration of the first communion was the one chosen by this disobedient girl for the gratification of her insatiable curiosity; and without giving a single thought to the enormity of the fault she was about to commit in violating the rule established by the kind and indulgent Mother St. Euphrasie, and without a moment's reflection on the holy ceremony in which she had borne so solemn a part, she took advantage of the pupils' return from chapel to slip away and hide until they had all passed into the convent along the covered passage that led from one to the other. A glass door in one of the smaller rooms gave access to a path but little used, which wound through the shrubberies. Choosing this way in preference to crossing the lawn, over which the school-room windows had an uninterrupted view, she darted down the path, turning round occasionally to make sure she had not been watched, and soon all traces of her lace dress and long white veil were lost to view. She soon reached the barrier, or rather the remains of it, and passed rapidly across the decayed