

A FRIEND OF THE LITTLE SISTERS.

The Hon. Violet Frant was visiting her cousin the Duchess at the Little House of Loretto in the Bow Road.

Bow associates itself with grime and poverty and meanness, but the house of the Little Sisters had been a country house, and it still had its few acres of garden surrounding and isolating it from the seething, ugly world beyond.

The Duchess, by the way, was not Duchess, but Reverend Mother to her little kingdom. There were several of the Little Sisters who had left their titles behind them in the world as well as she.

Madame la Comtesse were forgotten in Sister St. John of the Cross and Sister Magdalen. You might see a lady who could trace her ancestry back half a dozen centuries picking an old mattress to pieces, or cutting garments for the old people out of discarded garments of benefactors.

This time Miss Frant's stay at the Little Sisters' extended to quite an unusual period. The Duchess had an idea that the young lady had expected her lover to follow her and make his submission, but if she had expected that, it did not come about.

The Duchess, watching her young cousin, saw that there was a cloud upon her beauty. She looked sad when she was abstracted in thought. There were purple lines about her beautiful eyes; she was languid and confessed that she did not sleep well of nights.

"The East End does not agree with you, Vi," the Duchess said one day. "You are not looking well. Why not write and say you have changed your mind about some of these invitations you refused? Why not go to the Riviera for Christmas with the Warringtons? Or why not go down to Great for Christmas?"

"I should be all alone. Papa has arranged his Christmas holiday, excluding me, since he knew I meant to spend it with you. He goes to Vienna first, to the Ambassador, then into Bavaria. What should I do with a big empty house at Christmas? And the servants would be put out. They are looking to enjoy their Christmas without any one to wait upon."

"And where does Anthony Hamilton spend Christmas?" "My dear cousin, I do not know. Mr. Hamilton's movements do not interest me."

"Ah, I am sorry, Vi. I don't see how you can help being interested, though." It was most irritating to Miss Frant that the Duchess would not take her invitation to the Carmelites seriously. It was as bad as papa, who never protested but went on making arrangements for the future, for Violet's as well as his own, which left the Carmelites out. It was not in her dream of the spiritual happiness that should make up for the lost earthly happiness that the Duchess should join with papa in ignoring Vi's vocation.

The month was December. It was too cold for the garden, except for the brisk constitutional which the Duchess insisted upon. She did not feel at all brisk, but in the walk round and round the garden she was accompanied by one or other of the Little Sisters, who kept her up to it. The place was less cheerful than in the old times, when she had talked with the old ladies and gentlemen and derived much pleasure and amusement from their oddities.

She was less interested in her friends among the Little Sisters. Somehow it had been different when she had come for a brief visit, and the world had lain, smiling its invitation to her, beyond the gates of the House of Loretto.

As the days grew to weeks and Anthony Hamilton made no sign, her heart was really sick within her. One day in a passion of grief and resentment she had sent him back his ring; she had not in the least meditated such a strong measure as that when she had run away from him to the Little Sisters.

Sisters and their charges. She was very beautiful—fair and tall and gracious, with what her lover had called "everlasting eyes," deep, shining eyes of dark gray. She was always beautifully dressed, being one of the flower-beds of the world. She had a rich man, and grudging his only child nothing. She had always gone to the best houses in London for her clothes. She would not have known how to do otherwise. In her silks and velvets and laces and satins she was extraordinarily exotic in the house of the Little Sisters. She was so too precious and too remarkable in the East to be allowed to go out even with a Little Sister; so while she stayed she had perforce to take her exercise in the gardens.

She was a constant delight to the old charges of the Little Sisters. The old ladies would finger her garments and calculate their cost; the old gentlemen would blink at her as though the sun had dazzled them and make her pretty speeches. They all knew her, many of them from her exquisite childhood, and they loved to see her come and go, doubtless her beauty making to go to the unconsciously the bright spot in a life of safety and shelter indeed, but the flat lands of old age, without color, without adventure, sure that this brilliant young creature supplied.

Miss Frant had no idea that the Duchess had had a letter from Lord Pelham. She would not have liked the allusion to her charming self. "Vi has got a bee in her bonnet that she wants to go to the Carmelites," he said. "She has been driving Anthony Hamilton to too tight a rein. The lad is well enough—wonderfully unspoiled, considering how the women run after him. Vi wants a saint for a husband. I am not sure that I want a saint for a son-in-law. A decent fellow is good enough for me, and I am satisfied with Anthony Hamilton. Send her back in a better frame of mind. This talk about vocations worries me—unnecessarily, I am sure."

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She secluded herself a good deal in the nun's cell which had always been her bedroom when she visited the convent. Concessions had been made to a couple of rugs put down, linen sheets and white woolen blankets, where a Little Sister would have had sheets of the coarsest and other people's worn-out blankets. There was a looking-glass for her special behoof, a wicker easy-chair; a fire was laid in the grate so that she should not sit cold.

She left the fire unlit even though it necessitated her wearing her fur. She rolled up the rugs and touched the bare floor with her feet. She sat on a penitential chair while she read over to herself the "Spiritual Exercises" of St. Teresa and St. Francis de Sales "On the Love of God."

She blamed herself in feeling cold and miserable, and felt injured when Sister Martina descended upon her with instructions from Reverend Mother to dress herself. She objected to the delight she provided for her even while her soul revolved at the food the Little Sisters ate and thanked God for. She would have liked a diet of the most austere, so long as it was dainty. The Sisters, eating the coarsest, less inviting portions of what was given to them for their charges, filled her with something that was almost disgust.

It had been a fine, open, mild December to this. A few yellowed leaves shook upon the hedges in the convent garden. The Little Sisters were grateful for the mild weather, because it was so hard to keep the old folk warm when it was very cold. When the cold came there would be a crop of funerals at the Little Sisters'. The old bedridden folk, despite all that could be done, died easily of the cold, the fire having gone out in their old bodies. So the Little Sisters, who had their affection for the old people, thanked God for the mild winter. The thrushes and blackbirds were beginning to sing, although winter was a week ahead. The old people grumbled no more than usual when they crowded about the fires, the coals of which had been begged by the Little Sisters, even sifted by them out of heaps of ashes. And Miss Frant took no harm from the cold, imposed austerities, which, as she said to herself, were preparing her for the Carmelites.

She was making a new gown for herself with unheard-of difficulty with much pricking of fingers and many blunders—a gown of black nun's veiling, the most nun-like straightness and skimpiest.

"Better let Sister Bernardine help you," the Duchess had said. "Even a nun's habit requires fitting." She had surprised Miss Frant at her task, to the girl's discomfort; and her ego had twinkled in the shadow of her veil.

"I had to get something," Violet protested shamefacedly. "I was like Madame Louise of France, who, when she went to the Carmelites, had no simple dress in her wardrobe to wear, cleaning the pots and pans, than a perfectly plain, tight-fitting gown of rose-pink satin, with all my fine frocks when I think of how you and the old people are clad."

"Don't hate them, Vi. The old people like them so much. I believe we do. Your gay gown, now, with the grey velvet hat and the white ostrich plumes gives me positive pleasure, although I have had my silver jubilee as a Little Sister. You are our one peep into the world, my child. And St. Francis de Sales was of the opinion that ladies should dress according to their station. Lord Pelham's daughter should dress beautifully—which you do, Vi. We shall have no delight in this black sack of yours."

The Duchess would go on believing her to be a worldly, without a real vocation for the Carmelites. Violet had a feeling that the Duchess even thought that she started overlong with them. All the world would be coming to town after Christmas, at least a considerable portion of it. There would be Ministerial divisions and parties. Was Lord Pelham to be left without his hostess? The Duchess let a word fall now and again which betrayed her thought that Violet should be by her father's side and not occupied with making frocks against the Carmelites. Violet was hurt about this; she had looked to the Duchess to help her with her father.

Letters followed her to the Little Sisters—worldly letters sometimes—which jarred upon her mind. A letter from Lady Grisel Beauclerk, a smart and rather frivolous young matron, brought a disturbing element into her thoughts. A sentence of it troubled her more than she could have thought possible.

"Anthony Hamilton is 'epic' with Mary Trefusis," it ran. "My dearest Vi, praying is all very well, but why not come back and fight for your own?"

Mary Trefusis was not a negligible rival. She, too, was of the old religion—a charming girl, who was like a light in the world. Violet had had for her a young girl's admiration for an older one. Why, Mary Trefusis could drive such a one as Violet Frant completely out of the heart into which she chose to enter.

She began to wonder if she had not been a little too unyielding, too certain of herself, too priggish, too pharisaical. Papa had said she was. He had almost lost his invariably good temper—Lord Pelham sat at life like the spectator at a good play—in rebuilding her attitude towards Anthony Hamilton. He was very fond of Anthony Hamilton, who was in the Foreign Office, and thought well of his future. And she knew the Duchess bore with her as one does with a forward child. If it was true about Anthony and Mary Trefusis, then she would have given him up with her hands. Why could she not have been more patient? She had expected too much of Anthony. Every one had said so. Was she to be wiser than papa and Cousin Grangetrade?—that is to say, the Duchess. Why, what was coming to her? Some sharp grief began to ache in her. Was it possible that she wanted Anthony just as he was—no impossible perfection, but just Anthony?

Now the pall settled down with a suddenness. It was a cotton-wool fog which presses on all the senses with an unblinking force. In a cotton-wool fog one cannot hear, one cannot see, one cannot breathe; there is something terrifying in the way in which the familiar landmarks are blotted out. Where you could have found your way blindfolded, you are absolutely lost at sea.

All London was paralyzed; all the streets were suspended under the immense pall of fog, and Sister Louis and Sister Imelda were out questing.

There was dismay among the Little Sisters. How were they ever to get home? They had gone far afield, into the West End, where Sister Louis and Sister Imelda were well known. Sister Louis' brogue and her blue eyes and her smile coaxed gifts from the most unlikely quarters. She was a true daughter of Erin and a superabundant energy and enterprise. Once she had driven home a pig, offered her in jest, from the cattle market right across London; had built a sty herself to house him, and had regret when he fattened and had to be sold, because he had become a pet and very knowledgeable.

The fog was an unusually dense visitation, and the Little Sisters, who were given to accepting all that came as in the day's work, and something sent by the good God might be pardoned for their perturbation. Besides, Sister Louis was driving a new horse in the little covered way, on that was known so well up and down London streets. He was not so wise as old Dobbin, who had been put out to grass for the remainder of his days. Dobbin would have found his way home through the fog as he had done before. But now Sister Louis would have to depend on herself, guided by the wonderful instinct of the dumb creature.

All day the Sisters prayed for the fog to lift, without answer to their prayers. It thickened. The House of Loretto might have been in the midst of a great desert. There was a strange sense of silence, of aloofness from all the world. The short afternoon changed to evening. The lights had been lit all day. All day the curtain of the fog had hung in the rooms, blown hither and thither when a door opened like a substantial thing. With the coming of night the fog took on a new terror. It was unheard of that a Little Sister should pass the night outside the House of Loretto. Five o'clock came, 6, 7, and there was no sign of the two questing Sisters.

The old people were all on their knees praying for the safe return of the wanderers. The Sisters were murmuring prayers to themselves as they went to and fro about their duties. There was a hush and a consternation over the evening meal which the Duchess tried to lift by cheerful and sober talk.

Suddenly in the midst of the meal the bell of the hall door clanged. All the Little Sisters were on their feet. For once discipline was forgotten. Sister Matthew, the portress, ran with her clanking keys. There was a hurry, a bustle, a happy confusion, and the two missing Sisters were in the midst of the rejoicing throng.

Old Simon, who had been a coachman in his mundane days, had taken charge of the horse and van, so that Sister Louis was free to tell all her adventures. Sister Louis was as talkative as Sister Imelda was taciturn. Sister Imelda could only turn her black eyes up to heaven and wave her hands in the air. The narrative of their adventures lost nothing in Sister Louis' telling of it.

They were not famished; oh, no, they were not at all famished. That dear angel from heaven had fed them luxuriously before piloting them through the fog. "That dear angel?" Yes, Sister Louis would tell Rev. Mother all about it. When she had told all, they could judge whether the Lord had not sent an angel to their help or not.

They had been in Piccadilly when the fog had swept down on them, and they had made their way by infinitesimal degrees down St. James street and into Pall Mall. In Pall Mall the clubs were showing great lights, which only made indistinct patches of luridness through the fog; but here and there the police were guiding the traffic by means of flare-lights, and urinals were rushing hither and thither with torches offering to take foot passengers across the streets for a penny.

Half-way down Pall Mall the new horse came to a full stop, terrified, poor beast. He was Irish bred and had never beheld such a thing before. Sister Louis had got down and was trying in vain to induce him to move. She was illumined by one of the flare-lights. Suddenly a young gentleman came, as she conjectured, from one of the clubs—or from heaven perhaps—and he had a rose in his coat. As for his garments, words failed Sister Louis to describe how he was clad as the lilies of the field.

He had run to Sister Louis' assistance, had put her back in the wagon and taken the horse's head. The horse had yielded to his persuasions. Step by step they had walked through the world of dirty cotton-wool, with a golden sun over the hills of the wagon could not see their benefactor, but they went steadily on. Now and again his cheery voice came back to them out of the darkness. He had a dear voice, said Sister Louis, really and truly like an angel of God.

Somewhere, when the flare beyond the darkness was very great, the wagon stopped and the gentleman came back to them. He asked them to wait a second or two. Presently he returned to them, bringing them hot coffee and the most delicious food they had ever tasted. Really and truly, the food and the coffee might have come from heaven. And they had been chilled to the bone and ready to faint from fear.

The dear angel had led them every step of the way to their own door. At the gate he said good by, lifting a top hat, the polka of which had impressed itself on Sister Louis, despite the fog. He had—Sister Louis opened her hand; she had—been forgetting—he had thrust something into her hand. She opened it. A Bank of England note for ten pounds!

"Ah, blood yet tells!" the Duchess said, looking mighty pleased, while Sister Louis asked if it was not likely that the clubman from Pall Mall was not an angel of heaven.

The House of Loretto prayed every day for this new benefactor, who was to be in the bed-roll of the Sisters forever and ever. The Sisters were still divided as to whether he was mortal man or supernatural. He had grown in Sister Louis' account of him till he looked like the Archangel Michael. He was that tall, Sister Louis said, indicating some eight feet of height, and forgetting how the fog magnifies tall men as trees walking.

The fog lasted nearly a week that time, and was long remembered for the paralysis of life in London town. It lifted at last, and the wind blew like May. Vi's black robe was washed—with the aid of Sister Bernardine. It did not become her. She had not the relief of the nun's white coil. In the little greenish glass, which was in the convent afforded, she looked like a ghost. She could not help comparing herself with that radiant creature, Mary Trefusis. She was really genuinely disappointed. She had expected something quite different when she looked in the glass. She had forgotten that the glass was almost deliberately unkind—an ill-colored thing, with the quicksilver gone in patches.

There was a tap at the door. A gentleman to see Miss Frant. Violet's heart gave an illogical leap, then dropped to a sober pace. It would be, of course, papa. Papa had promised to see her before he left town. She had a momentary hesitation about her dress, then decided not to keep Lord Pelham waiting. In his leisure way he was, as might be expected, uncommonly busy. The Panhard probably was panting at the door to carry him back to Downing street.

She ran downstairs and into the austere brown-paneled parlor of the Little Sisters. Against a brown window shutter she saw a gracious head—not papa's. All of a sudden she forgot that Anthony was a worldly, not serious enough for one with her ideals and traditions. She forgot Mary Trefusis. She forgot the Carmelites.

"My darling, what have you been doing to yourself?" cried Anthony's dear voice, for which she had been pining, starving, dying all these sad days. She was in Anthony Hamilton's arms.

Never before surely—at least in the occupancy of the Little Sisters—had such a meeting taken place in the austere brown parlor, with the picture of an anguished saint for sole ornament. The reconciliation was complete. There could never again be misunderstanding between them. Lord Pelham had sent Anthony Hamilton flying in a wild panic to the House of Loretto because of the story of the vocation to the Carmelites. Now, when was she coming back—to day, to-morrow? He wanted to see her out of the black things in which she looked adorable, dreadful. His sister Hilda was in town and had sent her messages. She was to come to Hilda till Lord Pelham returned to town.

While he whispered he had slipped a ring on her finger. They were looking into each other's eyes in a quiet rapture. The door opened and they fell apart. There was a delicious smell of French coffee as Sister Louis came in carrying a tray. The Little Sisters were genuinely hospitable, and their cooking was dainty when it was not for themselves. The coffee was accompanied by French rolls and a little pat of honey-colored butter.

"Reverend Mother sends her compliments," she began as she put down the tray, and then uttered a little shriek. "It is our young gentleman!" she cried, running to Anthony Hamilton and shaking him vigorously by the hand. "Our young gentleman. The convent benefactor." Sister Louis had been praying that his name might be revealed to them, if, indeed, he were not St. Michael.

Some of the Little Sisters were rather disappointed that it was Anthony Hamilton and not St. Michael who had rescued Sister Louis and Sister Imelda in the fog. But after all, there was enough of the marvelous in the fact that it should have been the fiancé of Reverend Mother's cousin to satisfy most of them.

Miss Frant took the revelation of her lover's hidden act of kindness with characteristic enthusiasm. In fact, swinging round the other way, she was inclined to set him on a pedestal, for which position Anthony Hamilton had no inclination. She asked herself rhetorically how she had dared to look upon him so worldly and unsuited to her seriousness, till she saw that she was making her lover unhappy by her humility—a mood which stirred her father to cynical amusement and set the Duchess' eyes to dance in the shadow of her veil.

London was robbed of one of its great weddings that year, for by special arrangement the marriage of Lord Pelham's daughter with Mr. Anthony Hamilton took place in the private chapel of the Little Sisters. The spectators were almost limited to the Little Sisters and their "old ladies and gentlemen," and the breakfast cooked by Sister Pilge was a revelation to the few guests from the outside world, who had not known that the Little Sisters numbered a great culinary artist as well as a great lady among their numbers.—Katharine Tynan in the Catholic Weekly, London.

MONKS AND NUNS.

A SCOTCH PRIEST CONVERT ON SOME MARVELOUS PROTESTANT PREJUDICES AND THEIR SOURCE. Preaching recently before a large audience of non-Catholics at Motherwell, Scotland, Rev. H. G. Graham, a convert, said: "I am going to give you a little information to-night about those mysterious creatures called monks and nuns, concerning whom Protestants as a whole believe—I do not say all Protestants, because there are some more educated

and charitable, less blinded and credulous who do not believe; but, taken as a whole, I suppose it is correct enough to say that Protestants do believe—the following things about monks and nuns: 1. They are selfish, lazy, unsocial, dirty and sour.

2. They are useless to society, and are simply cut off from the world all large, which they were meant to serve and to enjoy, and ought to come out and get married straight away.

3. They are supremely unhappy, having either been forced into "nunneries" against their will or entered when they were too young and innocent to know their own minds, or fled in them in a moment of fanatical enthusiasm, perhaps disappointment in love, and are now kept prisoners, barred in like criminals in a gaol or birds in a cage, and are dying to get out, having discovered their terrible mistake, and can only get out by "bolting" or "escaping" without leave.

4. They are made to go through the most horrible and disgusting penances and humiliations, and are forced to eat worms and live mice and swallow rats' tails and lick the ground. In short, are tortured in the most inhuman manner by cruel mother abbesses and Sister superiors, and, indeed, if they are not careful, are liable to be (as many have been) either walled up alive or lowered through a hole in the floor to a subterranean dungeon which is a necessary apartment in every well regulated convent, institution, and there left to waste away in inches and die of hunger and thirst as the discovery of their skeletons afterwards abundantly testifies.

5. Children under the frightful rule of these male and female monsters are generally starved, filthy, sweated, illiterate, reduced to skin and bone and disease of body and soul.

6. Lastly, not to expand the matter at too great length or to overdo the picture—though indeed it might be difficult to do that, for there is nothing too terrible to be believed about the slaves of Rome—I say it is the common belief—there is no use blinking facts or trying to disguise from ourselves people's real opinions about us, though perhaps not all would be bold enough to avow what they are thinking—it is the common belief that monasteries and convents are sinks of iniquity; that that is the reason why the inmates object to their being inspected and live night and day with closed doors.

Now, my dear non-Catholic friends, there are only two remarks which I shall make about all this, and then I shall dismiss it once and for all, and these are (1) that I do not altogether blame you for believing this and (2) I have not the slightest intention of controverting it. I mean that, though I know it is all false, I do not mean directly to refute it, because such a task is not within the scope of the lectures that you are kind enough to come here and listen to.

TAUGHT IT FROM THEIR CHILDHOOD. And first of all I say I do not blame these people for believing all these terrible things about monks and nuns, because they do not know any better. They have been taught it from their childhood; it is in their blood; they have imbibed it with their mother's milk. They have read it in all their books of religion, catechisms, school books, histories, books of travel, tracts, Sunday magazines and dictionaries. They have been taught it by all those who ever taught them anything, ministers, missionaries, teachers at day school and Sunday school, fathers and mothers, Bible men and Bible women. And they liked to believe it; they were disposed to take it all in; it was congenial and pleasant information for them; it was part and parcel of that hideous system of superstition and tyranny called Romanism, from which their gallant persecuted forefathers shed their blood. How then could they possibly believe anything else? Would it not have been wonderful if they had not believed it all? Then they have for the most part, these people, never left their own country or gone abroad, or had the opportunity of seeing for themselves if these things were really so. I consider this as much to do

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