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## THE TWO PATHS.

(From the French of Madame Bourdon.)

11.—(Continued.)

This union, which was regarded by the world as so fortunate, remained for many years unalloyed by sorrow; the death of Count de Vanvres was the only event which caused even a ripple on the calm surface of her horizon. Suddenly, however, a dark cloud arose, and a thunderbolt was hurled from the previously unclouded sky. Fabien d'Erouard was attacked by typhus fever—that terrible disease so fatal to the young, and which usually selects the most healthy and robust for its victims.

A few days brought him to the verge of the grave, and Anna beheld the fearful pallor of death diffuse itself, like a dark veil, over his loved countenance; she heard the wandering words of delirium issue from those lips which had ever breathed sounds of music for her ear; she trembled as she watched his eyes wandering vacantly from object to object, and saw that he was totally unconscious of her presence. When the fever was at the greatest height, a priest was called in; he prayed by the side of the unfortunate dying man; he administered Extreme Unction; but Fabien died without a lucid interval being granted him to make peace with that God Whom he had so often and so grievously offended, without recognizing either his wife or child. 'The Son of Man came at the hour when He was least expected.'

Anna was completely overwhelmed by this sudden and unexpected affliction; she could not bring her mind to believe that the husband whom she almost adored was actually taken from her—that she was alone—that she should never again in this world behold his loved countenance, hear his sweet words, or tell him in turn that he was all in all to her. No thoughts of Heaven or future bliss calmed her woe; all was darkness, doubt, uncertainty, despair. Her child, it is true, remained; but he was too young to comprehend her grief.

Sorrow is often a real blessing; it recalls the sinner to the arms of God, and makes him cry out, with David, 'Thou hast afflicted me in mercy, O Lord!' but in other cases, alas, it produces only despair and rebellion against the Divine Will. Anna must unfortunately be classed with the last. Her grief became outrageous; she was furious in her invectives against the Lord of life and death, Who had snatched away her husband; her unsubdued heart was filled with poignant regret, to which she gave vent in bitter complaints and insolent murmurs. One moment you might behold this unfortunate woman—the sad example of folly and weakness—in a state of excitement and anger, and the next plunged into the depths of depression and despair. Her tears were unaccompanied by the slightest feeling of sweetness. Not a ray of hope illumined the darkness of her mind; it was engrossed with thoughts of the past alone. She demanded with vehement gestures the restoration of Fabien to life—to health—to strength. She besieged Heaven with obstinate impatience; but her fruitless prayer might be compared to the stormy billow which foams and dashes in vain against a hard rock; grim Death would not release his victim to such a plaintiff.

### III.

Worldlings are ever pitiless, and the heartless through among whom Anna lived predicted that such violent grief would be but of short duration. The judgment was, however, erroneous; for the remembrance of those happy days, which were for ever lost, continued to overwhelm her with deep sorrow long after outward mourning was cast off and her customary habits resumed; and these feelings of sadness prevented any desire for contracting second marriage.

She had always had a decided taste for study, and now took it up with great vigor, in hopes of filling the dreadful vacuum in her heart. She endeavored to enkindle in her mind enthusiasm and ardor, first for one philosophical system, then for another. She tried to take interest in poetical and imaginary theories, or those projects of reform which arose and made a noise for the time in the circle of her immediate acquaintance. She then devoted herself to German philosophy, and, like Fourier, fancied she had discovered new worlds. She excited her imagination by the best-written and most fashionable novels of the day; she undertook journeys to distant lands—visited Athens, and thought of Pericles; she saw the Forum, and the names of Cicero and Cæsar gave her a momentary feeling of enthusiasm. But, alas, she visited Jerusalem, Gethsemane, and Calvary, without awaking in her heart a spark either of love, compassion, or gratitude.

Amidst the tumult of the world, literary excitement, and journeys to distant countries, years passed by. She was no longer young; her passions were less strong; but her heart was almost as sorrowful and lonely as in the first days of her sad bereavement.

It is true she had her son, whom she loved

with passionate fondness. In childhood he was most interesting and precocious; in youth a young man of the fairest promise. But no sooner did he come in possession of his fortune, than, casting off all control, he gave full indulgence to his naturally strong passions, and laughed at the idea of the smallest restraint. Behold the effect of an irreligious education! Even his mother was alarmed at the disorderly life he led, and at the dreadful extravagance by which he was both ruining his health and wasting his youth. Those detestable and sensual maxims in which she had formerly delighted, such as, 'The young must be young; crown yourself with roses; enjoy yourself;—became hateful to her when she perceived that they were partly the cause of the profligacy and bad conduct of her son. When she entreated him to turn from this dangerous path, to reflect, and not to cast away the best years of his life and the affection of those he loved, or to prostitute his naturally fine feelings, he silenced her by a jest or a sceptical word.—She did not possess the slightest influence over him—how should she, indeed? It is God alone who gives holy authority to fathers and to mothers; and had Fabien ever seen his mother adore God? A being who never bows her head in humble prayer must soon lose all maternal authority.

It was the end of the Carnival, and morning was at length beginning to dawn after a long night, during which the streets of Paris had been the scene of the most frightful debauchery imaginable. Anna that evening had received a large party; and after the departure of her guests, not feeling inclined to retire to rest, whittled away the hours and amused herself by reading a dissertation written by a fashionable author, who was desirous not only of abolishing Christianity altogether, but even wished to prove that our Saviour never existed at all. The mischief which such writings usually produce among the ignorant was in this case a little obviated by the dryness of the subjects, which few persons would examine into. Even Anna could not fix her attention, or prevent herself from half slumbering over the book, particularly as she was oppressed by an unaccountable feeling of solicitude concerning her son. He was not come in, and although this was no uncommon occurrence, yet her heart was filled with undefined but sinister forebodings. The confusion and noise in the street, the wild cries and shrill laughter of the masqueraders, grated painfully on her ear. She went to the window and raised the curtain. The first glimmerings of the gray dawn cast a dim and gloomy light on the lamps; fatigue and want of sleep, joined to the melancholy subject she was perusing, increased her anxious feelings. The street was covered with thick mud, and filled with groups of debauchees. Packmen, Jews, boys with sparrows or white mice, shepherds and shepherdesses, were crowded together, looking pale, disorderly, and hideous in the morning twilight. Anna turned away her eyes with feelings of disgust; but at this moment a sound struck upon her ear, and caused a momentary thrill through her frame. It was the clear vibration of the church-bell ringing the Angelus.—'Ah!' she exclaimed mentally, 'it is Ash Wednesday; in former days, I used to go with my mother to church, and kneel at the foot of the altar, while the priest pronounced those words which remind us that we are but dust.—Poor dear mother! she thought we should rise again after the sleep of death. She was deceived, alas; but the error was a sweet delusion.'

She continued to indulge these sorrowful reflections in silence; but the sound of carriage-wheels, and the opening of the hall-door, recalled her mind to the point from which she had started. 'There is Fabien at last,' said she. 'How tired he must be! Unfortunate youth! this life of dissipation will kill him at last, and I shall be a second time bereaved.'

She went into a small sitting-room which overlooked the court, and saw, as she expected, her son's carriage.

'He will go to bed,' said she to herself, 'and I shall see him later. Poor fellow! every one likes him; he is courted by all.'

A servant entered, and said, 'A priest wishes to speak to you, madame.'

'At this time in the morning! Well, never mind; I suppose it is to beg. Let him walk in.'

She sat down by the fire without remarking the consternation depicted on the face of the servant. She took out her purse; for, amidst all her faults, she still possessed that virtue which her mother had so warmly inculcated both by word and example—charity. The door opened a second time, and an old priest entered without being announced.

'I suppose you are come about some subscription, reverend sir?' said Madame d'Erouard, anxious to rid herself of such an early visitor.

'No, madame,' answered the good priest;—'but may the God of charity reward your

kind intentions. I am, alas, the bearer of sad tidings.'

'Concerning my son?' she exclaimed, starting from her seat as if struck by an invisible hand. 'Do you speak of my son Fabien?'

'I come at his request.'

'Where is he? Is he not just come in?'

'It is I who came in his carriage.'

Her countenance became deadly pale, and her voice scarcely audible from emotion as she asked.

'Where is he?'

'My child,' said the good old priest, 'accept the bitter cross which God sends you; lay it submissively at His feet.'

She looked at him: terror were depicted on her countenance, for she understood all.

'He is dead; I know it,' she exclaimed.—'How?—where?—speak!'

'In a duel, this morning—after a great supper. I was passing by, on my return from attending a dying person—I heard groans—I saw your son—I hastened to assist him—he was sensible—he had time to confess—and God has, I hope, shown him mercy.'

Speechless with horror, Anna waved her hand, and motioned the good priest to say no more, and to depart. He was loth to obey; but she arose, and with that frightful calmness of manner which is sometimes produced by the first shock of grief, returned to her own room, repeated herself, and again cast her eyes on the book which she had been previously reading.—It was the last work of Lamennais. Her eye fell on sentences such as these: 'Shall I tell you what this life is? The shadow of a thing which is not. A sound which comes from no place, and has no echo. A sneer of Satan's hurled into space.'

She read these abominable sentences mechanically, and said aloud,

'All is over. With life all ends. Ah, how dreadful!'

The servants whom the priest had called entered the room a few minutes after, and found her on the floor quite insensible.

### IV.

Anna did not die. Grief consumes, but does not kill; and although the idea of suicide sometimes haunted her diseased brain, yet the thought of the publicity and shame attached to such an act arrested her steps when tottering on the verge of the dark abyss. Disgusted with every thing, and like the wounded fawn, seeking in vain for alleviation in change of scene and place, she resolved to leave Paris, and visit Vouvray, which she had never seen since her marriage. This project was no sooner formed than put into execution; and the poor lonely sufferer re-entered her native hills, which she had left so joyously, in silence and alone, on a beautiful afternoon in April. It is difficult to express what she felt at beholding that deserted place, filled but a few years previous with happy faces; it appeared like an emblem of herself, a short time since so happy, so gay, surrounded with loving and loved friends, and now heartbroken and alone. She recognised everything; for each event of her childhood was deeply impressed upon her mind. The rays of the setting sun tinged the windows of the Castle, and cast a bright light on the green shoots of the young trees in the plantation; the turf was mottled with thousands of daisies; cheerful voices were heard in the fields proceeding from the shepherds and vine-dressers, who were busily employed, the former in tending their flocks, and the latter in pruning, manuring, and tying up the vine-trees. The prospect was, as in former days, cheerful and bright. But the heart of Anna was sad; the beauties of nature no longer produced sensations of delight and gratitude; they no longer possessed the power of enlivening her pale countenance, or of producing a smile of gladness, thankfulness, and trust. She entered the house hurriedly, without even casting her eyes over the park which was most beautiful, and adorned with clumps of lilac, then in full bloom; or stopping a moment to breathe the fresh air, which was deliciously scented by the wild violets and other flowers with which the surrounding woods were filled. The house alone which had been so long uninhabited, looked dismal and gloomy, and harmonised with the feelings of the desolate and bereaved widow who sought within its walls refuge and solace in her sorrows. She had no idea, poor unfortunate creature, of seeking comfort where alone it is to be found; she had neglected and forsaken God in the day of prosperity, and in adversity she was without hope or comfort. But God, Who is good and merciful, is ever ready to give us new graces, and desires nothing so much as to see us turn from our evil ways and repent. He had heard the prayer of the dying mother of Madame d'Erouard, and in answer to that prayer had sent these afflictions, knowing that nothing else could in the slightest degree bow down her proud spirit. They had their effect: she was indeed humbled and miserable; but something more was required to make her cast herself, with a truly

penitent heart, into the arms of our Father in heaven, Who rejects none who have recourse to Him.

Madame d'Erouard did not leave her room for many days; she had selected it on account of its isolated position, and remained there in solitude. Her only companions were the pictures of her husband and son, which she contemplated in turns; sometimes she read a few pages of the books which she had brought from Paris, but they no longer pleased or interested her.—She admitted no one, and did not even open a letter; she sat with downcast eyes, and motionless, for her heart was a prey to deep despair; she was without a tie on earth, or a hope for heaven; and her mind was filled with gloomy remembrances of that happiness which once was hers, and the restoration of which she demanded with frantic impatience,—vain wishes, fruitless prayers, which, like vapours, evaporated, and left naught within her outstretched arms. The thoughts of that mysterious hereafter, which she endeavored, but in vain, to disbelieve, haunted and filled her with terror. Although the infidel denies, yet he cannot banish doubt; while the true believer already enjoys by faith what he hopes for.

The remembrances connected with the place of her birth likewise recalled the long dormant feelings of love for her deceased mother, and she even at times envied the firm faith and complete confidence in God which was felt by that truly wise woman, which made her death so calm and happy, and gave her the certainty that He would be true to His promises. She resolved to visit her grave, and left the Castle immediately for that purpose. The countess was buried in the village churchyard, in the midst of the poor whom she had loved so much during life, and the peasants in whose welfare she had ever felt such warm interest; her husband was laid by her side, and their graves were marked by white-marble tombstones, and two Gothic crosses. Anna was surprised to find all kinds of flowers planted round these graves; clusters of the sweet violet, early roses, ranunculuses, and the yellow narcissus, gave undoubted proof that this spot was tended with constant care; two beautiful honeysuckles were entwined round the crosses. Anna involuntarily knelt down, although she neither could nor would pray. Her long pent-up tears, however, flowed unrestrainedly. Bitter, in truth, they were; but they relieved her oppressed heart.

The sound of heavy footsteps roused her.—She raised her eyes and recognised an old man who was the head and gravedigger of the parish when she left home thirty years previously. True, it is true, had somewhat altered his face, but not sufficiently so to prevent her knowing him, although he appeared totally unaware that she was the fair young girl who used to pray and weep over the tomb which contained the remains of her beloved mother.

'Can you tell me, Gaffer Snooks,' said she, 'who planted these beautiful flowers round the tombs of my father and mother?'

The old man looked up. He did not in the least make out who she was; and the question appeared to puzzle him.

'Who?' said he, in a grumbling tone; 'why, who can it be but that stupid old thing, Nancy Gaspard, who will always come here to plant, to weed, and to say her beads.—She has done so for more than thirty years that she has, a foolish old creature. No one but her would have continued all these years.'

'Nancy?' exclaimed Madame d'Erouard.—'Poor, good creature. I had almost forgotten her. Where does she live, Gaffer Snooks?'

'Live? Why, in the old cottage in Hind Corner, down there. She is living there alone now.'

'I will go and see her,' said Anna inwardly.

She gathered a branch of the cypress which grew near the graves, gave a trifle to old Gaffer, who touched his hat, took it, growled out a slight acknowledgment; then she went down a little path which led to the cottage. This path she instantly recognised, and it recalled to her mind every scene of her childhood as vividly as if they had taken place but yesterday. She soon saw the cottage, which was old and almost hidden by thick mantling ivy, and by vine-branches which were just beginning to burst into leaf; the bright green shoots enlivening the dark tint of the ivy. A barley field, an orchard—in which a cow and three goats were grazing—and a small kitchen-garden, constituted the worldly possessions of Nancy. The cottage-door was open; and as Anna stood on the sill, she recognised some of the old furniture as being in use when she knew the Philibert family in her childhood; it was made of walnut-wood, and appeared to have been preserved with the greatest care. A plaster-of-Paris image of the Blessed Virgin, and a few roughly-colored prints, constituted the sole ornaments of this humble dwelling. The adversity of subjects among the prints was curious, and you saw at once that some were the choice

of a woman, and others that of a soldier; for there hung side by side the picture of a renowned general and that of some great saint. A spinning-wheel stood in the chimney-corner, which Anna remembered well. The room was empty; but the back-door soon opened, and an elderly female, carrying a jug of milk, entered. She stopped, and looked surprised; not in the least recognizing the lady in deep mourning who stood before her.

'Nancy,' said Madame d'Erouard, 'do you not know me?'

She started, and exclaimed, 'Is it really you, madame? dear, kind lady. I knew that you were come to the Castle; but I had no hopes of seeing you. I asked for you many times, but was told that you would see no one.'

'I have never forgotten you, dear Nancy.'

'And I have prayed for you night and morning. I prayed for you as fervently as I did for my own husband and son. You have had such trials; and God has not left me without my share; but your saintly mother always told me that God afflicts those whom He loves best.'

'Ah, beloved mother! my first grief was losing her. You know, Nancy, you know that I am a widow, and that I have lost my only child?'

'I know it, dear lady; and I have wept for you. I know how hard it is to be deprived of those we love. I say my beads every week for the dear ones you have lost: I beg God to grant them eternal rest.'

'You pray, Nancy? Oh, how happy you are to be able to pray.'

'Ah, dear madame, if I could not pray for those whom I have lost, grief would soon kill me—it is my only comfort. When I pray for my dear father and mother, for my beloved husband, and my dearest son Felix, I feel the full assurance that God allows them to know that I am thinking of them, that my soul is united with theirs, that I love them as dearly as when they were with me; and that feeling gives me comfort. I could pray night and day with delight for those whom I have lost.'

Anna answered not. She could not help envying this poor woman, who, in the midst of affliction, had found her anchor of hope and comfort in Heaven. At last she said, 'You likewise have lost a son?'

'I have, the only son God blessed me with.—Such an excellent young man. He was a soldier, and followed his regiment to the Crimea. He died of the cholera, in the hospital of Va—'

'Of Varna?'

'Yes, of Varna. O madame, he died like a saint. He sent me word that he regretted nothing on earth but me; that the thought of leaving me behind was the only cloud which cast a shade over his happiness in going to heaven.—He was so good, so pious! I can fancy I see him in heaven with those among the blessed who were soldiers on earth.—St. George, St. Sebastian,—whose lives you dear mother used to read to us. I pray for him, and he prays for me.'

'And you have no other child?'

'Pardon me, madame; I have one daughter, whom I called Virginia, after your worthy mother, my loved and lamented benefactress. She was, like her, good, gentle, and pious. At the age of twenty she entered the Order of the Sisters of Charity. She is now far away; but I know that she is happy, and constantly employed in doing good. Can I be grateful enough to our Lord for having called my child—a poor peasant like me—to be His spouse. It is a great happiness for me.'

'But you are left alone without a child to take care of you in your old age.'

'That is true; but time is short. I am no longer young. In a few years, perhaps in a few months, I shall be called to rejoin my loved ones in the blissful mansion of our Father who is in heaven. Do you not remember, dear lady, what your mother used to read to us out of the New Testament,—'That eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, what God hath prepared for those who love Him?'

'And you do not fear death?'

'I cannot say I do not fear it, madame—my sins give me cause for dread; but, you know, we serve a good Master: therefore, when I feel alarmed, I cast myself into the Sacred Wounds of Jesus; there I find consolation, and am cheered by the firm conviction that He will not allow me to be lost, but bring me to eternal bliss.'

'How happy you are, Nancy, in possessing this firm belief.'

'Ah, dear madame, your prayers must be infinitely better than mine; you must love God incomparably more than I do; because your knowledge is so much greater, and you are aware the more He is known, the more He is loved.'

Anna sighed. She pressed the hand of Nancy and answered:—'When you pray, pray for me.'