

Choice Literature.

JOSEPHINE FOUGERE.

AN ALPINE STORY.

CHAPTER VII.—HAPPY TIMES

As soon as the grass was green around the cottage, and when the hawthorn blossomed out again among the ruins, Josephine took Benedicte out and led her to sit in the sun. Like a flower that had grown in the shade and had been suddenly brought into the sunshine, the child rejoiced in the pure air and the light, which she felt without seeing. She drew long sighs of contentment, and often cried out with joy, for she could not express in words all her happiness in living. She stretched out her hands to the sun to seize his warm rays; she wondered at everything, and patted even the grass that grew at her feet.

Josephine never wearied of Benedicte. In order to make her talk she often asked, "Do you like to be up here?"

Then the little face would turn toward the loving nurse rosy with joy, and the sweetest smile would spread over the child's lips. Too happy to talk much, she stretched her arms toward Josephine and answered with a kiss.

Gradually, a lively penetrating spirit was awakened in the little one. Her mind, naturally reflective, had never been distracted by the changing scenes around her, but until now the circle of her ideas had been very narrow:

"I wish I could see my father; I want to catch the cat when she runs away. I would like to go down there if Scolastique did not scold. I would like to be as the other children whom I hear running about the street."

Because Benedicte had always stayed at home a sickly languor had benumbed her spirit. Josephine's love opened for her a new world. Happiness, spring time and health, coming altogether to the feeble child, made her faculties blossom. As the light found its way into this young soul she was thrilled with joy and astonishment, like the butterfly when he comes out of his prison. To Benedicte everything was mysterious, everything was wonderful; it was for Josephine to answer all her questions. Since the child had always lived in darkness, it was not easy to describe in words what seeing eyes saw. Still, she must explain to Benedicte everything that she could not feel, from the blue mountains at the edge of the horizon to the golden fly that buzzed in the sunlight. A single word set the child to thinking; the least sound excited her curiosity. First she asked, "How is it made?" and then, "Why?" One of the doors of her spirit was close upon the outer world; the others opened all the more readily. She was always on the alert; her mind was always awake.

Josephine was very careful to occupy this thoughtful little mind hungry to know and understand. During the winter, while she spun, Josephine had time to think, and her mind had been made stronger and her knowledge more clear by reading the book her mother had left her. Soon she learned to tell Benedicte about what she read there. The child, delighted, was never weary of listening. Her soul was a white page where Josephine's words were written, never to be effaced.

Josephine could not gaze long enough upon the child. She seated her on a mossy stone, and there the little girl sat without moving, her hands crossed, happy, absorbed in thought, listening to the slightest noises, breathing with delight the balmy air and bending a little her pretty head, which the floating curls encircled with a frame of gold. There was wanting only the light in the closed eyes. Josephine had never seen a face that she loved so much, except that of Genevieve, her mother.

"My Benedicte," she thought, looking lovingly at her, "God has sent you to me as He used to send angels to the suffering, with messages of mercy. Only these did not stop; they only passed, while you—you have come to live with me."

"Listen: I hear something singing," said the little girl one fine day in May, when Josephine had led her to the edge of the wood that the goat might crop the grass.

"It is the linnet, darling," answered Josephine: "he is perched on a slash quite near us. He is singing to his mate while she sits on the blue eggs; there are three of them in the nest hidden under the fern."

"Did you sit here to hear it sing when you were little?" "No; when I was as old as you are my mother put a little spade into my hands and led me into the fields. 'Work, darling,' she said: 'we are never too young or too old to work; we must work to earn our poor living.' Thus my good mother spoke; it seems to me that I can hear her yet. But you—you will know nothing about work, because you are rich."

"Yes, my nurse told me so. Josephine, do you know what a lawyer is?"

"It is a man in a black coat who shows people how to buy and sell."

"And he shows people how to give away too: Dennis told Lisette so. Well, when I am grown up I will have him come, and I will say to him, 'Lawyer, give my fields to my Josephine.' Then you will be rich too."

"No, no, Benedicte, you must not do that. You need your hand, poor innocent child: You cannot earn your bread yourself. But feel my hands; they are hard already; they are what give me wheat."

"Josephine," said the child, dreamily, "does everybody in the world work?"

"Yes, except the beggars, and children whose fathers are very rich."

"Did they work in that beautiful garden you read to me about?"

"Yes, darling. God told Adam to take care of the trees whose fruit he ate."

"But you told me they did not have labour and sorrow then?"

"No, it was only after he had disobeyed God that Adam's hard life commenced. Labour was easy and pleasant before that."

"Until when must we labour?"

"Until we enter into the other paradise."

"Will that one be as beautiful as the first?"

"More beautiful. We shall see God always, and we cannot disobey Him then."

"Josephine, I don't want to disobey; it is too sad a thing?"

"Yes; but come, darling, it is evening now; the sun is sinking into the west, and the mist is rising over the plain; we must go in."

"Yes, I hear the oxen and the carts coming back, and the men are singing as they go home. My father never sings. Do you think it is Scolastique who makes his heart so sad? She is wicked, Josephine."

"Don't speak evil of your stepmother, little Benedicte."

"She is not my mother; she is not beautiful; she is nothing to me," cried the child, flushed and excited.

"Your father has taken her for his wife; you ought to respect and honour her. Have you seen her, so that you can say she is not beautiful?"

The child stopped with a little pout, and in the end she hid her face in Josephine's lap and said, "I don't want to love Scolastique, but I love my Josephine"; and she drew a fold of the young girl's dress over her head.

Whenever Josephine had to go out she left the little blind child to Faro. Faro was a good dog, faithful in his love, which he did not throw away, devoted to his masters, but terrible against his enemies, bravely enduring hunger, cold, wounds and fatigue. He had a true soldier's heart; as brave against the wolves as he was pitiful and gentle toward the weak, he felt that he was born to help the helpless. He was large and strong, well built, and covered with rough, almost black, hair. His bearing was calm and deliberate, as befits those who know their strength, but who use it wisely. It was to this brave creature that Josephine left the care of Benedicte when it was really necessary for her to go out. As soon as Faro saw the child rise and stretch out her hands to feel her way, he was at her side to keep her from falling down or from going near the fire. He watched over the blind child as he used to watch over the new-born lambs when he was a shepherd. He feared everything for her, and was quiet only when he saw her seated in her little chair. Then he would come and stretch himself in front of her, put his large head in her lap and let her pinch his ears and pull his whiskers as long as she wanted to.

The two were alone one evening when Josephine came in from the fountain. Benedicte called her with a mysterious air. "Listen," she said, in a very low voice, pointing toward the cracked ceiling: "there are two up there, hidden in the garret."

"What do you mean, Benedicte?" cried Josephine, alarmed, "are there people in the house?"

"Don't be afraid," answered the child, gayly: "they are not thieves, they are pigeons—two at least, who have come into your house. I heard them coming as soon as you went out. I listened to them a long time rustling their wings and cooing as my father's pigeons do. If they are still now, it is because they have gone to sleep."

Josephine grew rosy with joy. "Truly, you bring me good luck," she cried, kissing the little girl. "All the good things come with you. Belle first, then flour, white enough for a king, and now the two pigeons, who are going to build their nests here perhaps; and I shall have a dove-house. Yes, darling, you have brought me good luck. Sorrow and poverty went out when you came in. Ah, why can't I keep you always?"

"Josephine," said Benedicte, thoughtfully, "why are you not my mother?"

"Why, darling, because I am Josephine Fougere."

"But don't you take care of me as if you were my mother? I'm sure that if I had known my own mother I could not possibly love her any more than I do you."

That night Josephine slept little; wide awake she was thinking about building the dove-house. Before daylight she was up; she opened the door and slipped out. The pale moon was going slowly down in the sky gilded by the dawn; only the song of a bird broke the silence of the valley—no noise, no motion near by. The doves were sleeping peacefully under the mossy roof. Josephine was fully determined not to let them get away, but how could she set about keeping them.

Josephine is skilful and ready; in a moment she has found the way. She places some sticks against the wall; she steps on these; then, on her hands, she slips past the dormer window, under the gable of the roof. There she sees her two prisoners nestling in the shadow, pressed close together, wing to wing. Josephine unites her apron and throws it over the sleeping birds. She holds them tight, and does not let them go until she puts them under her basket, which, overturned, serves as a cage. The rising sun shows her a pair of turtle-doves, such as she has never seen; beak and feet of coral, plumage glancing with a thousand tints, one would have said that they had been dipped in a rainbow. Their first fright passed, they did not seem afraid.

With coquetish grace they spread their wings, polished their beaks, cooed and looked at each other; then, turning their heads, raised to Josephine a half-curious, half-fearful glance. Josephine could not contain herself for joy. She was still looking at them when her father came home from the woods. He was tired and wet with dew. He had killed nothing the whole night long. He stopped in front of the cage, and, leaning on his gun, looked at the newcomers.

"A thousand thunderbolts! Where did you get those birds? I know," he cried suddenly; "it is a pair of young turtle doves that have escaped from the pigeon-house at Bancanay. We don't see that kind anywhere else; it is a rare species. Give them some corn."

Without waiting for an answer, and without taking off his boots, the poacher threw himself on the bed, and before long was sleeping soundly.

In the next room the breath of morning came through the open window to blow around Benedicte's face and to waken her softly. Gradually she came to consciousness of life; she heard the familiar sounds of morning. She heard a bee

buzzing against the glass; she followed Josephine's brisk step as she went about the room with a quick hand restoring order and neatness. Finally, Benedicte, astonished at Josephine's silence, opened her eyes and turned her head towards her. "Josephine, I am not asleep," she said, in a coaxing voice; "why don't you speak?"

Josephine bent over her, and, without answering, kissed Benedicte on her forehead.

"Josephine, have you lost the pigeons?" asked the child suddenly.

"Yes, truly I have lost them," replied the young girl.

"Still, I caught them, held them and put them into a cage. There they are, the prettiest birds I ever saw, yet I have lost them. Listen, Benedicte. If you were not blind you would see in front of us, in the plain, a castle so large, so high and so wide that all the people in the village could easily find shelter under its roof. In the country around feed more animals than we can count, as many wild as tame, both in the meadows and in the woods. One woman owns all these. The doves have come from her house. Alas! and I must go to carry them back to her."

"But, dear," objected Benedicte, "she is rich; she must have more doves. But you—you are poor, and haven't any at all. Do you think that she would be very much poorer if she lost one pair?"

"You must not speak so, Benedicte; don't say those naughty words that answer to the wicked thoughts in my heart; don't tempt me! God forgive me! I want to start at once; I want to go before my father wakes up, to carry back to the lady of Bancanay the doves which she has lost. Get up, darling," said Josephine, more quietly; "put on your stockings quickly, and let us go. If we don't, your Josephine would be a thief. If I wait an instant I shall lose courage."

Whilst she spoke Josephine tied a white muslin cap over her silken braids and arranged it carefully. Her heavy blue dress was out at the elbows and thin at the bottom, but what could she do? She tied a serge apron around her slender waist to hide the front of her worn dress. She wished that her short skirt was long enough to cover her pink stockings and wooden shoes, the only new things she wore. Then she looked at herself in a bit of looking glass which served as the family mirror, and which was taken out of the closet only on Sundays and holidays.

Josephine buried in the ashes the kettle of hot soup. "Stay there," she said to Faro, who was lying between the fireplace and his master's bed. Then she went out of the house, leading Benedicte with one hand, and with the other carrying the doves in her apron. She felt relieved ever since she had resolved to go; her conscience was at rest.

"Your father is cutting his clover in the meadows," she said to the little girl, "and I am going to take you down there and leave you with the haymakers. They will take care of you while I am gone. Don't you hear them sharpening their scythes and don't you smell from here the odour of the new-mown hay?"

In the still air their voices came up to Josephine, who, light as a mountain-goat, climbed down with sure foot, Benedicte on her back and the doves on her arm. She seated the little girl on the pink, freshly-cut clover after having first placed her in care of the haymakers. Then she went on to the brookside, between the flower-besprinkled meadows, to a place where a bridge crosses the river in front of Bancanay Castle. Twelve o'clock struck as she came; she was warm, but the shadow of the great trees fell thick and covered the path with its thickness.

Josephine stopped to take breath; she sat down at the foot of the wall to look at the doves for the last time. Bending over the basket, she lifted a corner of the white linen that covered them, and looked a long while at her prisoners. Then, tired of this, she bent lower still and softly kissed one of them. "How pretty you are!" she said with a sigh, longing to have them.

At this moment a slight noise in the leaves above made her raise her head. A smiling, mischievous face leaned over the top of the hedge. "To whom are you speaking?" asked a child's voice full of mirth.

Josephine, confused, rose quickly and went away without answering; she walked close beside the wall until she reached the gate of the park. But already a graceful little girl dressed in white, stood behind the gate waiting for her. Her eyes beaming with mischief and fun, she watched her coming.

"Why didn't you answer me? No, you cannot pass," she said, with a tone of pretended authority. The shy child folded her pretty arms over the bundle of guided spears which formed the gate.

Josephine, outside, dropped a curtsy, saying, "Excuse me, pretty miss, saving your respect, I was speaking to the birds, and am very much ashamed that any one overheard me." Here Josephine dropped a second curtsy.

"Yes, I will excuse you, and I want to open the gate for you myself. Enter," said the child, with an air of comic seriousness. With a great effort, rising on tiptoe, she reached the bolt and succeeded in slipping it back, when, at this noise, a woman rushed out frightened from the house.

"You here, Miss Isabel? But what are you doing? Mercy! what would the countess say if she saw you calling the passers-by to open the gates of Bancanay for them?" cried she, excitedly. "What do you want?" said the woman, looking crossly at Josephine.

"Nothing," said Josephine quietly. "I have come to bring back a pair of turtle-doves which have escaped from the lady of Bancanay. She will take them if she knows them."

"Open the gate," said the child, impatiently.

As soon as the gate swung open on its hinges, the little girl rushed up to Josephine, peeped in between the cracks of the basket, and, clapping her hands and dancing about, cried, "Yes, there they are; those are truly my doves that flew away yesterday. Come—come quickly with me: I want to take you to mamma and to show you my dove-house."

Without waiting, Isabel ran away through the shaded avenue that led to the castle. With her basket on her arm Josephine could hardly keep pace with the pretty feet that fled so fast. From time to time, the child stopped, turned