

Choice Literature.

JOSEPHINE FOUGERE.

AN ALPINE STORY.

CHAPTER IX. Continued. "BE THOU FAITHFUL."

Josephine found herself standing in the lower hall of the Black Eagle, in the warm air full of the delicious odour of pea soup. The landlady took Josephine's chilled hand and led her into a little niche cut in the stone under the mantel piece. Josephine thought she was dreaming, but without saying anything let the woman do what she would.

"Here, my poor girl, this is for you," said the woman as she passed her a plateful of soup. But hardly had Josephine finished, when sleep, not to be resisted this time, seized her. She dropped her head and slept soundly. "She seems tired enough, poor thing!" said the landlady, looking at her.

"The wolves! fight them, haro!" cried Josephine, waking with a start.

"Don't be afraid, dear," said the landlady, smiling kindly. "You thought were in the woods, and must have had a bad dream, I think."

"That's true. Alas! I am forgetting myself. I have no time to sleep; I have far too much to do." Hastily thanking her landlady, Josephine rose and went away. As she went down the main street she saw several old ladies, calm and wrinkled, sitting in their windows and knitting peacefully. "Have they ever had such troubles as I have? Shall I rest some time as they are doing?" the young girl asked herself. "But why should I complain? My father has escaped from death; what does it matter if I am tired?"

After a few steps she came to the doctor's house. With his feet on the andirons he was reading his paper while he drank his coffee. "Good-morning, my good girl," he said, bowing with a smile in order to make her feel at ease. "Let us see: what news do you bring from the tower? Benedict, the little blind girl, has no more need of my visits, I hope? Do you know that you are as good as a doctor to put a sick man on his feet in two days?"

"Ah, sir, my father has broken his leg, and is suffering so much that it is pitiable to see him: I beg you to come and dress it and heal it."

The doctor's face grew very long. "I have been out this morning already," said he slowly; and his eyes wandered from his fireside to the snow-clad fields, to return to the bright flame that danced in front of him. "Fierbois is very far off," he added—"too far to go there and get back before night: I will go to-morrow."

Just then a young woman opened the door and came to lean on the mantelpiece just in front of them. Her expression was so gentle and kind that Josephine took courage again when she saw her. "My father has already suffered the whole night; must he suffer during another? Ah, sir," she cried earnestly, "if you are afraid that I have not the money to pay you for your trouble, as soon as my father is well or dead I will give myself to the lady there to be her servant as long as she wants me."

The doctor still looked into the fire without answering; the lady went to him and laid her hand softly on his shoulder.

He turned quickly toward her. "But, my dear, you don't know that I am tired out, that the roads are dreadful; you don't know that it is into a wild country on the mountains where I must go; it is not one visit they ask, but ten at least. You ought to know how busy I am; but everything conspires against me—everything, I lead the life of a slave, and you don't understand."

The young woman did not reply, but she turned toward her husband a sweet, beseeching look, more eloquent than any words. The doctor threw down his paper and rose. "Come," said he suddenly, "I will go; I will take you home, Josephine. I am going to harness now."

"Sit down and warm yourself before going," said the mistress of the house. "No, thank you, my good lady; since the doctor has been so kind as to offer me a place in his sleigh, I will wait for him on the old bridge. I am going to run with this bag to a place near here." Josephine dropped a curtsy and went out, but as she was putting on her wooden shoes in the hall she heard through the open door the doctor's voice, which said, "You are better than I, Mary; I am a selfish man."

At the police office Josephine could change her wolves' heads into silver pieces: it was bread earned by her bravery. She reached the bridge just when the doctor's sleigh, well lined with fur, and drawn by his spirited horses, drove up amid great ringing of bells. The doctor nodded, and Josephine climbed in, excusing herself and making herself as small as possible. The bells began to ring again, and with out speaking the travellers flew over the road to Fierbois.

The doctor was smoking and Josephine dreaming. "How, then," she thought, "can any one be cold or tired in driving about seated on these fine sheepskins?"

As the doctor left his sleigh at the village inn, Josephine was the first to reach the cottage. Before going in she stopped, her hand on the bolt, her ear against the door: for the first time in her life she heard Fougère groan. Her fear passed and she went in.

"I am thirsty," said René sharply.

"Here are a pitcher and a glass."

"It is brandy that I need."

"The doctor is coming, father: I cannot leave you."

"You must go: start!"

Josephine began to tremble. To defy her father a second time would be worse than to battle with the wolves. She dared not answer. She knelt behind the end of the bed and asked help from above.

Fougère did not see her. "Go, daughter," repeated the poacher in a harsher voice. "Do you hear me?" He raised up on his elbow: his anger was excited by the fever.

"Listen, father: I think he is coming."

Some one knocked: it was the doctor, who came in. Fougère, his face contracted with helpless anger, looked at

him as a wounded fox looks at the hunter who enters his den. "Have you had a fall?" said the doctor, coming near the bed.

Fougère was silent; shutting his teeth, clenching his fists, his anger shot forth in sparks from under the heavy eyebrows.

Josephine hastened to the doctor: "Take this chair, sir: his fever oppresses him, and he is suffering so he cannot speak."

When he could no longer endure the doctor's gaze, Fougère closed his eyes, secretly cursing Josephine for having opened the door to the stranger.

"Has he had a fall?" asked the doctor again. To avoid answering, Josephine went softly to another part of the room, leaving the wounded man in the doctor's hands, and from a distance she watched the doctor's face while he examined the wounded leg. His face became more and more grave. "Water," said the doctor, "and linen."

Not a cry, not a moan, betrayed the wounded man's suffering while the doctor did his work.

"There is only one thing for you to do," said the doctor as he finished. "I can think of only one thing to do: that is to go to the hospital."

"To the hospital, never!" Fougère raised himself quickly. A wave of anger passed through his whole body. "Never!" he repeated. "To die like a woman on a bed in the hospital, that will never be the thing for me, doctor;" and he looked the doctor straight in the face. "It is because you cannot help me that you want me to go away," he added in a lower tone.

"You don't know what you are saying," said the doctor in a severe tone of authority. "Know that your wound is so serious that you must have an operation at once. You must consent to lose your foot or to await a slow and painful death here."

When he heard these words Fougère grew white. Josephine felt herself sink. "It would be better to die: I could do nothing if I were lame. Yes, it would be better to die!" These were the poacher's first thoughts. Yet love of life battled against despair and finally gained the victory. "It is here that I want to live or die," said Fougère after a moment's silence. "Can you not cure me here?"

"Yes, surely I can perform the operation here," answered the doctor, "but who can give you the care you need?"

Josephine, standing in front of her father, read in his face an unchangeable determination. "I," she said.

"Young girl, you have no idea of what you are taking upon yourself. The burden is too heavy for your shoulders; your strength and your courage may not hold out long enough."

"He wishes it; it is my duty," answered Josephine simply.

"It is decided then? You wish me to come here to perform the operation?" Fougère nodded. "Above all, not a taste of brandy; be careful about that," added the doctor, who had judged of the poacher's habits from his face.

Josephine, very pale, with clasped hands lifted her beautiful eyes to heaven, repeating, "It is too hard for him, poor father; it is too hard!"

"Never fear: he will feel nothing, for we shall put him to sleep," said the doctor with assurance.

"No," said Fougère; "no one shall do anything to me when I don't know it or when I cannot see it, and I want to have it soon. I cannot endure this torture: to-morrow I want to be dead or well."

"Things will not go on so fast as that. No, no," said the doctor, shaking his head. "No, to-morrow you will be neither dead nor well; to-morrow I will come to perform the operation. Then try to be calm." The doctor went out.

Fougère was silent, shut up with his dark sorrow, but when night came the fire of the fever was rekindled in his veins and his tongue was loosed. He seemed to feel the wolves' teeth in the torn flesh. As he looked at Josephine at the head of the bed, pale with anxiety, he thought he saw Geneviève come forth from the grave. All things were mingled together in his confused brain. "They are there!" he cried suddenly; "they have smelled me. I see them." Raising himself, with haggard eyes and outstretched arms he pointed to the fireplace, where several logs were nearly burned. "There are two there in the shadow. Do you see them? They are looking at me; they are watching my fire, that is dying out and the flame is getting low. Geneviève, put on some more wood. Cut that brush, beat off those branches: but this wood is green, and it smokes. The flame is falling; their eyes are coming near. See them coming! Geneviève, I am thirsty; give me something to drink. Oh, your hand is cold: I feel it on my forehead; but you are still. Geneviève, you cannot speak, you are dead."

Thus in agony more terrible than that of death passed the long winter night. But Fougère could not die; the wolves would not stop devouring him. Geneviève was deaf to his despairing cries. He saw her always, mute and deaf as he had seen her in her last sleep.

The wounded man's cries froze Josephine with horror. It was in vain to speak to him, to touch him; nothing could calm his delirium, nothing could quench the fire of his pain. When the dawn came Fougère grew more quiet, and Josephine, worn out with weariness, fell asleep, her head resting against the bed.

A little rest had lessened the sufferings of the night when the doctor came, followed by his assistants. His first care was to send away the young girl.

Master of himself and stronger than the pain, Fougère endured the operation without a complaint.

"You are a brave man," said the doctor when the dressing was finished; then worn out by loss of blood, the wounded man fainted. In the next room Josephine was praying as she waited in terrible anxiety. They now called her to tell her what she must do for her father. "She is a nurse new to the business, but she will do her task well, although she is young," said the doctor to his aids as the three went away together.

Josephine remained alone by Fougère's bedside. When she saw her father become suddenly as weak as a little child, she felt for him a tender pity. "Has he no more blood,

since all anger is gone? How still he is! yet he is still alive. I would rather he would be cross, I would rather he would beat me, than to have him die before my eyes."

Although Fougère no longer scolded, he did not die. Josephine had but one thought, to make her father well—but one care, to nurse him properly. Tirelessly she watched over him.

One day she had to leave him; it was necessary to go to the village for supplies. She could only ask Leonora to take her place at the bedside. The crazy woman did not need to be urged. When she opened the door and saw Fougère lying still at the end of the room, a mischievous twinkle shone in her eyes. She laughed and said, half aloud: "He is lying there, the man who used to run faster than a deer. He has fallen, the man who used to cut down the oaks. Now he is lying in bed at noon, the man who used to sit up all night. And this is Fougère the poacher, who is sleeping with his eyes open! The hares will meet together and dance around the house when the wind tells them that René Fougère cannot move from his bed."

René was listening, although he did not let her see that he heard.

"And you used to call Geneviève lazy, you lazy man, in the times when she worked hard and you rested in the tavern after you had stayed long enough in the woods! Tell me: is it laziness that keeps you there so quiet? Answer, answer, René Fougère!" she cried in a shrill voice that made the sick man's blood tingle more than the stroke of a whip would have done. He lay still, with his face turned toward the wall. "Grass above his head and a stone at his feet: that's what he must have—that's what he is waiting for, the mighty René. He pretends that he is asleep, but it's that that he's thinking about. Yet a little while, a very little while, and he will go, and the bells will toll for him. The bells will toll, but nobody will cry—no, nobody."

Fougère remained quiet. The crazy woman could not rouse him; his anger was quenched.

Then Leonora's mind turned to Josephine: "The good girl said, 'Go up to our house, Leonora; go up quickly, and be sure not to go away till I come back. My father is very ill; you must take care of him, Leonora.' Then she went away; she is so polite and so gentle. She is a good angel, that girl; she drives away the evil and brings the good. One day, when she found me crying, she laid her hand on my shoulder, and I felt that she loved me. She said: 'Silver and gold have I not, Leonora, but I will pray for you.' That did me more good than an apronful of money. Then I said to her: 'Never fear, dear; if you go to sleep beside René's bed, Leonora will watch for Leonora never sleeps. And when night comes, and while the others are dreaming, then is the time when her eyes open wider and when she sees her dead come to life.'"

Worn out with pain and weakened by his wound, the poacher was no longer himself. He let Leonora mock him or Josephine take care of him without minding either. He lay quiet and silent during whole hours. Josephine was troubled by this strange calm. She dared not ask the sick man: "What is the matter, that you are so changed?" One day he called her "my daughter" in a tone which was almost gentle.

"Here I am, father," she replied, full of astonishment.

"My child," he said, "you tried to do the best thing for me when you saved me from the wolves' teeth, but now what can I do without my leg, lying here too weak to move? It would have been better, believe me, to have let me die than to keep me here tied to this bed, to pine and suffer, nobody knows how long. Do you know how long? Is it for the best of my life?"

He sighed so deeply that Josephine's heart was almost broken as she heard him. She turned away her eyes from the pale face, so worn with pain.

"Josephine," he said again, "give me something to drink. I do not threaten you, but you see I am dying from exhaustion. I must have some brandy; you will kill me if you don't give it to me."

"Father, I would rather give you my life than this terrible drink, which would inflame your wound and set your blood on fire. The doctor has forbidden it; do you not wish to get well?"

"I haven't strength enough."

"God can give you strength without brandy."

"Never fear that I shall harm you, Josephine. I see that it is my blood which flows in your veins; I see that you would rather be killed than yield. I am at your mercy, alas! You treat me like a child: you do what you will with me."

"Oh, father, what did you say? You break my heart. It is to make you well, to give you a longer life, that for the first time I disobey you. Forgive me;" and she began to cry beside the bed.

"It is to suffer the tortures of the grave before my death, this life. Is it really I, René Fougère, who am dying of fever and that like a bird caught in a snare? Open the window, Josephine: I want to smell the air from the woods. Alas! when the leaves come back and the shade grows thicker under the branches, René Fougère can no longer watch beside the traps. I am dead—dead while I am alive! When the back loses his horns he hides himself; he feels that his glory is gone. He waits: he does not show himself again, till his crown has come back. But if he breaks his leg he knows that he must die, either by hunger or by the teeth of the wolves; and I—I am waiting for death, but it does not come. When I had my two feet no man in this mountain could run faster than I. I left the best gamekeepers behind—the old Rémy has tired himself out in trying to catch me—but to-day I stop without being tired and I lie down before I die. Cursed be the hour when I was born! Would that my mother had strangled me in my cradle before I had breathed the air of the forests and had walked freely in the green woods? Daughter, what would you have done in my place if your father had been caught in a trap and the wolves were all around you? You would have loaded your gun, held it to your throat and discharged it."

"As truly as I am your daughter I would not have done it. I would rather have been eaten alive by wolves than to have committed self-murder and sent my soul straight into