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THE DEBT OF FRIENDSHIP.

(From the French of Eugene de Mergier.)

When I entered college—it is near forty years since—I had already a warm friendship, or rather, a passionate affection for one of my young comrades, Xavier de Zeltzer.

Shall I tell you the origin of this juvenile passion?

I was yet an infant, in my nurse's arms, when my father and mother died, almost simultaneously. I had, alas! neither a grandfather nor a grandmother; no brothers, no sisters, nothing that resembled a family.

The distant relations to whose care my infancy was committed, never showed me much affection. I would have been happy in the possession of even a dog, that I could have loved and caressed—and I had it not.

When I was seven years old, I was sent to the boarding-school of Mr. Brindejone, which I left five years later, to enter St. Louis college.

Being of a very bashful disposition, I was continually tormented and laughed at by my schoolmates. Even the teachers, although I seldom gave them occasion to punish me, seemed to take pleasure in scolding me. If it was in the hope of driving bashfulness out of me, they were certainly mistaken.

I was therefore, as long as the week lasted, as completely unhappy as a boy could be.

When Sunday came, my unhappiness did not cease; it merely changed its form. I then became the prey, for twelve hours running, of the most painful and dire 'ennui.'

On Sunday morning, at nine o'clock precisely, an old servant called for me at the Brindejone Boarding-school.

I can see him now, this honest but terrible Rigobert, with his long, lank arms, not unlike a grasshopper's legs, his spindle shanks, that reminded me of a pair of stilts, his owl eyes and crooked nose. Methinks I hear his drawing voice, solemn and harsh, like the voice of a sheriff reading a death-warrant. I can even hear the tinkling noise of his watch-guard, which he had a habit of shaking abstractedly, as the jailor does the bunch of keys hanging to his belt.

Rigobert never smiled; he never spoke to me first, except in cases of urgent necessity. When I questioned him, his answers consisted invariably of the most discouraging monosyllables. He conscientiously believed it his duty to hold me by the hand from the time we crossed Mr. Brindejone's gate, until we arrived at my aunt's door. When at last we reached the suburb Du Roule—my aunt lived in that gay locality—my poor fingers were bruised as if they had been crushed in a vice.

My aunt, — I called her thus, 'reverent æ causa,' for, in fact, she was only my cousin seven or eight times removed, — my aunt, then, Mrs. Ledur, was not a bad-hearted woman, far from it. She had even given proof of great generosity by providing for the entire expenses of my education. But she was as stiff as a Life Guard, as cold and severe as an old judge, and, above all—poor woman, it was not her fault!—she was frightfully ugly. When I commenced studying mythology, I could not help picturing to myself Medusa's head, or Nemesis, the avenging goddess, under any other features than those of my aunt Ledur.

It was, then, into this dread presence that I was conducted every Sunday morning, by Rigobert's vice-like hand.

'Good morning, aunt,' I would say, falteringly, 'how do you do?'

'It matters little how I do,' she would reply, almost invariably, and her voice seemed to me both thundering and screeching; 'it is you, little boy, about whom I must inquire. How have you behaved during these eight days?'

My only answer was to draw from my pocket the week's report, and hand it to my aunt. As a general thing, it was as satisfactory as could be desired. For, thank heaven, I have ever been diligent; and, perhaps as a compensation for what I suffered at school, my teachers, who liked me after all, treated me kindly enough in their reports. They knew, besides, before what a Rhadamanthus I had to appear weekly, and they always gave me good marks.

Unfortunately, my Sunday judge could only be satisfied with 'very good.' If my report happened to be marked only 'good,' my aunt knitted her brows, called me an idle drone and a worthless scamp, and threatened me with criminal prosecution. She quoted the names of the most hardened villains, and ended by predicting that I would end my days on the scaffold.

However, this examination ended, my aunt resumed her natural voice, which was merely creaking, and said, 'go and play.'

Go and play—that was easy enough to say! But what kind of amusement could one find in this dulllest of houses.

As we see sometimes water oozing from the walls on thawy days, so did wearisomeness seem to ooze from every pore in my aunt's house. I cannot imagine a barrack, an hospital, a work house or a jail, with more desolating aspect than this same house of my aunt presented.

The immense rooms seemed almost bare, with their large wardrobes, secured with heavy locks, and the old arm-chairs upon which the hand of time had left its unmistakable mark, giving an almost uniform tint to their worn out gildings, their round-headed brass nails, and their faded tapestry designs. There were also a few family portraits, but they were hung up so high that I could not recognize the subjects and distinguish the magistrate from the officer, or the latter from the holy canon or the rosy cheeked dame, except by getting upon a table and twisting my head out of joint.

Yet the study of this uninteresting gallery was one of the liveliest pleasures my aunt's house afforded me. I had not a companion with whom to play and romp; not a toy with which to while away the long hours; not even a bird to listen to, or a cat to tease.

My only amusement, then, consisted in the contemplation of those pictures, which never aroused the least interest in me; or in wandering through the long suit of rooms, computing the number of cracked panes in the sash-windows, and comparing it with that of the sound ones, and asking myself with terror, whether my life would always be the same, and if, when I would be twenty years old, I would have this monotonous ordeal to bear, not every Sunday, but perhaps every day in the week.

Some will object that the monotony was interrupted by breakfast and dinner—the true criterion of holidays, according to certain school boys. If you have a nice breakfast, an excellent dinner, what do you care for the rest. You digest the first while expecting the second, and the remembrance of this one will last you the whole evening.

Unfortunately, I had no more disposition for gormandizing than for idleness; and neither the Ostende oysters, the stewed kidneys, the 'paté,' and the Chablis wine, consumed at the mid day meal, nor the culinary talent displayed in the preparation of supper—for we had no dinner but a substantial supper at Mrs. Ledur's—could help me to bear the heavy burden of ennui, which had I known them then, would have made me think of certain personages of Dante's 'Inferno.'

If, at least, there had been a garden at my aunt's! For, I dare not give that name to a deep lot in which all sorts of weeds grew in liberty and where were piled in disorder some old rotten planks, a heap of bricks, two dilapidated stove pipes, and under an old shed—poor protection from the rain—the winter's supply of coal and wood.

Yet, such as it was, this lot afforded me some means of diversion, and I contemplated it with mournful regret, when a persistent rain compelled me to remain in doors all day.

II.

The year 1828 is a memorable date in my life.

A hedge divided my aunt's lot from the park of the adjoining mansion. But this hedge, seven feet high, and very thick, was as great an obstacle as a stone wall for an eleven year old like me.

In the summer all I could see of the park was the top of the highest chestnut trees. But sometimes, in October, when the leaves had all fallen, I could catch a glimpse of the green sward, of sandy walks, of evergreens and autumn flowers.

One bright spring day, I was listening to the gay carols of the birds in the green foliage of the park; through the thorny hedge there came a sweet fragrance of violets which intoxicated me; I compared the slavery of my life to the freedom of roaming through those shady walks, on that velvet sward which I knew to be so near me, and my heart grew heavy, and I felt an irresistible longing to penetrate, otherwise than in thought, among the marvels of this terrestrial paradise. But how?

I noticed under the shed an old wheel barrow; I have already mentioned the firewood piled there; my plan was promptly conceived.

'Ah!' I thought, 'I shall carry out my aunt's wood near the hedge, and pile it up in a sort of pyramid, not unlike,' I added, with Virgil still fresh in my memory, 'to the funeral pyre which Dido ascended to await death.'

No sooner said than done. In less than two hours my pile was constructed. I pulled the wheelbarrow to the top and stood up on this snaky crowning piece of my edifice.

My eyes were dazzled by the novelty and beauty of the sight that greeted them. Clumps of magnificent rare trees, studded a veritable

meadow, through which meandered paths covered with sand as fine and brilliant as that of the sea shore. The finest varieties of flowers here were grouped with artistic skill, there spread in borders, entwined in their tendrils the trunk of the maple trees, or mingled their bright colors with the snowy whiteness of marble steps leading to a sort of terrace. Violets, blue and white periwinkles, the delicate wild jaynaths, the fragrant May-hily, and even the humble bell-flower, enamelled the soft, green grass with their varied tints. I was delighted.

But how much greater my delight, when I discovered, quite near by, a straddle on the thickest limb of a Judea tree, in full bloom, a little boy of my age. He smiled and said:

'Will you come and play with me?' Without giving me time for reflection, he crawled to the end of the limb and beckoned to me to step on the hedge, the thick and almost matted foliage of which hardly gave way under my light weight. Then, he added:

'Catch hold of this branch, now of that lower one; now let yourself drop on the grass.'

I obeyed implicitly. My little neighbor, as a squirrel, was on the ground before me, one second only, but just in time to catch me by the hands, as slipping on the grass, I was about falling, and, 'horecos referens,' maculating with green my new chestnut-colored pantaloons.

I have said that I was bashful, but this hand some boy was so amiable, his large blue eyes were so gentle, and I read in them so much desire to please me, that I felt quite at home with him.

He asked me my name.

'Charles,' I replied.

'And I, Xavier. Who is your papa?'

I made no reply.

'And your mamma? Does she live on the other side of the hedge?'

My eyes were filled with tears. I thought what a misfortune it was for me to have lost my parents, and that, if Xavier looked so amiable and gay, it was doubtless because he had a kind father and fond mother to love him, and no aunt Ledur to torment him.

I felt, however, that I must reply. I had, besides, so great need of loving some one, that I opened my heart fully to Xavier. I told him all I knew about my parents, whom I had never seen, and how miserable I felt at Mr. Brindejone's, and what sad and monotonous Sundays I spent at my aunt's. Finally, I told him how much I desired to have a friend.

'I will be your friend, Charles, if you wish,' said Xavier. 'I am very happy, and I would like to share my happiness with somebody. Will you be that somebody?'

I embraced him, and thanked him with all my might.

Xavier, in his turn, told me his story. He was an only son, much beloved by his parents, the Marquis and Marchioness de Zeltzer. They usually spent the winter in their fine hotel of faubourg du Roule, and the summer in a magnificent chateau, in Touraine, on the picturesque shores of the Loire. This year, however, to Xavier's great regret, the family would be detained in Paris the whole summer by business of importance.

Whilst thus exchanging our confidences, we were strolling arm in arm, like two old friends.

'You must come to see me every Sunday,' he said.

'I will never dare ask my aunt,' I replied.

As I pronounced those two words, 'my aunt,' I suddenly remembered that it was nearly four hours since I had left my much feared relative. She must be very uneasy about me, and consequently not a little angry. I trembled at this thought. I explained the cause of my terror to my new friend.

'I shall go with you,' he remarked, 'to obtain her forgiveness, and also, her permission to let us see each other frequently.'

Hurrying me along, Xavier then ran to the hotel, threw himself in his mother's arm, and told her how he had just made my acquaintance; he ended by asking permission to accompany me to Mrs. Ledur's house, to obtain my pardon from that lady, and make arrangements for our future Sunday meetings.

His request was promptly granted, and we hastened back to the Judea-tree, from which we reached the hedge, thence the wood-pile, and from the wood pile the back lot. Having successfully performed these various feats, we went into the house to see my aunt.

She had had visitors, and had not even noticed my long absence.

Xavier made her a polite bow, and in a very pleasant way, narrated what had happened.

'I hope, madam,' he added, 'that you will permit Charles to become my friend, and let us see each other frequently, every Sunday, for example?'

I expected my aunt would say no. Whenever I had asked her anything she had always

given me a peremptory refusal, without a second's deliberation.

Well, Xavier was so charming, his manner was so respectful, and, at the same time, so unembarrassed, that the young orator gained immediately Mrs. Ledur's favor.

'Willingly, my young gentleman,' she replied, and her voice was wonderfully softened. 'My nephew could not be in better company than yours, and lose something of his awkwardness and stiffness of manner.'

To be brief, let me say that Xavier became my best, my only friend. With him, joy entered into my life, and what is more incredible, into my aunt's house.

When Xavier was there with me, a whole afternoon, those large rooms, which I had all ways thought so gloomy and sad, appeared to me as full of light and life, as the park itself.

Even, if we had done nothing but walk through those rooms; my friend telling me how kind his father and mother were, or describing the beauties of their castle of Val-Thibault, I, listening or amusing him, in my turn, with all sorts of stories about my boarding school, in which he seemed to take a lively interest—to my astonishment, for every thing connected with Mr. Brindejone's establishment seemed to me horribly unpleasant—ereen, I say, if we had had no other recreation than these familiar chats, it was a happiness which changed my whole existence.

In truth, when I say that whatever came from Mr. Brindejone's was unpleasant to me, I only speak of the period that preceded my acquaintance with Xavier: for, after this, I gathered sufficient strength on Sunday, to last me the whole week. However painful my trials from Monday morning to Saturday evening, I bore them with courage, for I remembered that nothing could prevent me, on the coming Sunday, from spending the whole day in company of my friend.

Then, he had such funny ideas, my good Xavier! He was always ready with some new game. Sometimes we would play at hide-and-seek, discovering innumerable and hitherto unknown nooks in the whole house, from the back lot, to the old garret, where the rats had long remained in undisturbed possession. Then he would invent stories—his vein was inexhaustible in this respect—in which intervened as 'dramatis personæ,' the old pictures, formerly so uninteresting, but to which, thanks to Xavier, I was becoming strangely attached. But the back lot offered him the best material for a variety of amusements, in which his lively imagination, his skill, his daring, which approached rashness, his obliging and invariably gay disposition were displayed under the best advantage.

Meanwhile, the summer was passed and we were fast approaching the month of October. I have said that Xavier's parents were detained in Paris that year, by important business. His regret at not going to Val Thibault was tempered by the thought that we would not be separated at the commencement of our friendship.

On the last Sunday but one, in September, I had scarcely arrived at my aunt's, when I ran over to Xavier's. Taking him by the arm, with that important air so readily assumed by boys of our age—we had scarcely completed our twelfth year—I told him I had just learned that I must enter the Louis-le Grand College.

'I shall only go out once every two weeks,' said I, quite sadly; 'and what is worse, it appears that I must spend one of those two days of liberty, at one of my uncles' who lives at Courbeville, and who wishes to relieve my aunt of part of the trouble occasioned by the poor orphan.'

Xavier, here had one of those impulses, worthy of a loving and sympathizing heart like his, which I could never forget, even if I were to live a hundred years.

'Well!' he exclaimed, 'I too, will go to Louis-le-Grand college. We can then see each other every day, which will be better than on Sundays only.'

'But your parents, will they consent?'

'Oh!' he replied, with a roguish smile; 'papa always does what mamma wishes, and mamma does all I wish.'

Xavier was, in fact, a spoiled child, but one of those children so happily gifted, that if one succeeds sometimes in spoiling their temper, one seldom succeeds in spoiling their mind, and never their heart. Nothing had been spoiled in Xavier. His parents, it is true, gratified all his wishes, but he never wished anything unreasonable.

Here, what Xavier desired was comparatively reasonable. For, as much as there may be said against a college education, Xavier, brought up at home, by parents who were not Christians, and who would have chosen teachers of their way of thinking, ran more risks of remaining ignorant and becoming sceptical and corrupt, than he would in the college atmosphere, where good and evil live side by side. At college, there were some chances at least, that Xavier, with his happy disposition, would follow good

rather than evil; at Louis-le-Grand, particularly, where my aunt knew that there was an excellent almoner. Madame De Zeltzer was deeply grieved at Xavier's proposition. She finally acquiesced, however, and it was determined that we should enter college, together, on the following week.

III.

The year 1828 is memorable for me for an event of still greater importance than the conquest of a friend as Xavier. It was during that year that I learned to love God.

When on entering college I found myself under the spiritual direction of the Abbe Yran, the almoner of Louis-le-Grand, I may say that I did not know God.

I had learned my catechism at Mr. Brindejone's, but pretty much as I had learned arithmetic and geography—as one learns a tedious lesson. Nobody had ever spoken to me of God in such a manner as to penetrate my youthful mind, and above all, my soul, with some serious idea of that Great Being; never had I been taught to love Him.

Alas! it is on their mother's knee that Christian children hear for the first time, and learn to esp the elements of religion. I had never known the happiness of sitting on such sacred knees? My aunt, a worthy Christian withal, but neither very enlightened nor very fervent, was satisfied if my weekly reports bore the remark 'very good' under the head of 'Religious Instruction.' The thought never entered her mind to question me for the purpose of ascertaining whether I understood what was taught me, whether I realized that, from the humble belief in and courageous practice of those doctrines, depended my happiness in life.

Abbe Yran's principle was that friendship is the key of hearts. Whenever a new scholar entered college, the good almoner's first care was to become his friend. He sought to gain his confidence, to make him catch a glimpse of the beauty of religion, of the strength and consolation it brings with it. Alas! even at twelve years of age, who is there who does not need to be comforted.

Unless the child who saw this venerable priest for the first time, had had already his mind or his heart corrupted, he was conquered. The Abbe had succeeded in his preliminary operations, he had a hold on that soul, and was not long winning its affection—love begets love.

Words cannot express how much he was beloved, this good Father Yran. Every one respected him; and, strange to say, I have never heard, even our worse college boys urge against him the reproach so seldom spared to the most pious priest: 'He is following his trade, he is paid to preach all this to us,' etc.

As for me, I have already said that I had not been spoiled with too much tenderness; save my friend Xavier, nobody had ever spoken a loving word to me. I fell an easy prey to the zeal of the good almoner.

I shall never forget my first interview with this holy man. Methinks I see him now, meeting me at the door of his room, taking me kindly by the hand, and making me sit near him on a sofa. He kissed me as a father would his child, and addressed me a few questions, to which I replied unresistingly, for I felt that they came from a loving heart.

'Poor child!' he repeated frequently as I told him the sad neglect in which had passed my early infancy.

He was evidently moved by my recital of my intimacy with Xavier; and, when he learned that my friend had renounced the unlimited freedom and many comforts of home, for the restraint and confinement of college-life, merely to be with me, he exclaimed:

'He is a noble hearted child, and God will not let him perish.'

He questioned me on my religious knowledge, and discovered easily that it was very meagre, and not at all of that kind mentioned by Bossuet, which 'turns to love.' He then remarked with a kind smile:

'We shall learn over our catechism, my dear friend, and we shall, above all, learn to make use of it.'

I did not quite understand what he meant by this, but my heart was so well taken with him, that I was delighted at the thought of seeing often a man so good and amiable.

I became one of the most constant visitors of our dear Almoner, during play hours; and I may say that whilst he never gave me lessons, properly speaking, during these interviews, he taught me religion. I learned to love it, to attach myself to it, as the center of all things, and to make it the rule of my acts and of my judgment.

Great had been my happiness when in the midst of my loneliness, Xavier had offered himself to me, and had peopled with his friendship, the dreary solitude of my heart. But how much greater when, thanks to good Father Yran, I knew God and His religion; when I felt, as