

of anything better represented them) on Nicholas Nickleby, had never once seriously contemplated the possibility of his being of a different opinion from herself in the business. Miss Squeers reasoned that she was prepossessing and beautiful, and that her father was master and Nicholas man, and that her father had saved money and Nicholas had none, all of which seemed to her conclusive arguments why the young man should feel only too much honoured by her preference. She had not failed to recollect, either, how much more agreeable she could render his situation if she were his friend, and how much more disagreeable if she were his enemy; and doubtless, many less scrupulous young gentlemen than Nicholas would have encouraged her extravagance had it been only for this very obvious and intelligible reason. However he had thought proper to do otherwise, and Miss Squeers was outrageous.

"Let him see," said the irritated young lady when she had regained her own room, and eased her mind by committing an assault on Phib, "if I don't set mother against him a little more when she comes back."

It was scarcely necessary to do this, but Miss Squeers was as good as her word; and poor Nicholas, in addition to bad food, dirty lodgement, and the being compelled to witness one dull unvarying round of squalid misery, was treated with every special indignity that malice could suggest, or the most grasping cupidity put upon them.

LA MERE DES SOLDATS.

I had very often heard of the person who bears the above appellation, and yet, during years of residence in and frequent visits to Paris, it had so chanced that I had never seen her. However, I determined not to go again without making acquaintance with her, and, in October, 1829, I accomplished my purpose. I set off for Montmartre with a friend, who was to act as guide and master of the ceremonies, and leaving our carriage at the *barriere*, we slowly proceeded up the hill.

It was one of those days so frequent in autumn, when gleams of sunshine break through heavy masses of clouds, and cast partial lights over the landscape. Paris and its environs appeared like a vast panorama, and we often turned round to contemplate the scene which we were leaving behind us. The gilded dome of the Invalides rose in the gray atmosphere with independent brightness; St. Genevieve and Notre Dame served as beacons to direct us to the spots which most interested us. The castle of Vincennes rose from the plain, and the dense black cloud above, threw over it a gloom which was well adapted to its history. One broad solitary beam illumined the darkness, and shot across the fading tints of a beautiful and distant assemblage of trees. The light alone would have attracted our observation, but it was like a ray of glory over the cemetery of Pere la Chaise, and the last loved being there deposited seemed to be hailing us as we stood. The fairest, the best, the pride and joy of all connected with her, had vanished from us in the perfection of youthful loveliness; and at this moment her heavenly countenance, her extraordinary talents and acquirements, her unvaried and universal benevolence, her resignation to her untimely fate, all rushed upon our recollection, and our hearts were too full to speak.

But the living soon awakened us from our reverie, and we silently gained the village. It had no beauty to induce us to linger in it; and, having heard that *La Mere* was often to be seen at the confessional in the church, we bent our steps thither. A poor decrepid female most officiously besprinkled us with holy water as we entered; but the object of our search was not there, and Monsieur D. left me to examine the interior of the building, while he tried to gain information concerning her residence. The church of Montmartre is not beautiful either in decoration or architecture, but it is interesting from its antiquity, and from a few old relics within, such as a font and two or three mutilated tombs; but its venerable appearance is destroyed by bad paintings and the dirty finery hung about the various altars around the sides of the building. Having procured some directions, my friend returned, and, proceeding through two or three little dirty alleys, we reached a high wall, which so completely concealed the dwelling of *La Mere*, that, had it not been for a small door, we should not have guessed that there was any habitation behind it. There was neither bell nor knocker; tapping seemed in vain: we therefore shook this door with all our force, and our ears were then assailed by the loud outcries of some curs, who would have disputed our entrance. A dirty-looking female admitted us, and, when we asked for *La Mere Ste. Camille*, ushered us in through a low apartment without furniture, inhabited by fowls and ducks, into another of better dimensions. I had, it is true, seen enough of nuns and friars to destroy the romantic notions which we English Protestants often conceive of them; but all I had heard of this extraordinary being led me to expect a fairy rather than a dwarf, and, with feelings heightened by the circumstances of my walk, I had quitted the church with impressions far beyond their natural pitch. It was well for me that the entrance had somewhat checked these, or I might have started when *La Mere* first presented herself. It was not that the idea of her unearthly appearance was destroyed, but I in vain looked for her good deeds in her exterior. A little being stood before me not more than four feet and a half high. Her

black gown was made with the wide sleeves and skirt always worn by nuns; her bib and head-cloth were white as snow; a large black veil was thrown over her head and shoulders; a rosary was attached to her girdle; and a large cross was suspended from her neck. A pair of huge feet, in thick and coarse shoes, peeped from beneath her robe; her hands were small and shriveled; but her face—I have reserved that till the last, despairing to convey an adequate notion of its expression. Her features were aquiline, and had been handsome; the loss of her teeth had brought her nose and chin, sharpened by age, too near together to preserve their original beauty, but her eyes were beyond the power of words to describe. Surrounded by wrinkles, they yet preserved all the fire of youth; they were black, and seemed to penetrate into every secret feeling. They were occasionally raised to Heaven with fervour, but, when she was speaking of her adventures, they were in incessant motion. Her voice was not harsh, but loud as that of a Stentor, and contributed more than anything else to the idea of her being supernatural.

Accustomed to see a multitude of people, all of whom she cannot recollect, it is very easy to pass for an old acquaintance with *La Mere des Soldats*, and as such my friend introduced himself. As such did she receive him, and welcome us both to her dwelling. We sat down and conversed some little time, during which I had an opportunity of surveying the apartment. A large *pot-au-feu* stood among the wood-ashes in the ample chimney; a small bed at one corner, with yellowish white curtains, was destined to receive not only its owner, but a huge cat, which evidently preferred diurnal possession. A table, a few old chairs, a chest of drawers, a sort of secretaire, and a basket for each of the dogs, completed the furniture.

After talking over the number of her patients and some minor troubles which had lately befallen her, she asked us to inspect the chamber prepared by herself, for those workmen who are wounded in the quarries close by her residence. There was no occupant at the time I speak of, but the three beds which the chamber contained were all ready to receive their patients at a moment's notice, and were models of neatness and cleanliness. The room was hung round with prints illustrating the lives of the saints, and, railed off from the rest was a small altar, dedicated to our Saviour, decorated with the usual accompaniments of tinsel, flowers, and candlesticks. *La Mere* placed chairs for us all to kneel upon, and said, "Whatever religion you may be of, you surely cannot refuse to join your voice with mine in thankfulness and supplication to the Saviour of mankind. All religions are the same which acknowledge the Almighty and his Son." Of course we complied with her request, and she commenced a prayer of her own composition. Her voice, however, frequently failed her, and Mons. D. offered to read the prayer for her. She put it into his hands, and gave herself up to the devotion of the moment. She repeated it after him with fervour, and, although the verses were not perfect, they were simple and affecting; and, on seeing her with her hands and eyes upraised, and her whole self entirely abstracted, as it were, from this earth, it was not possible either to refuse her credit for her sincerity, or in some measure to partake of her feelings. On rising, she laid her hand upon my arm, and exclaimed, "Now you are truly my sister, and I hope you will never forget the prayers of *La Mere Ste. Camille*." We offered her money, but she pointed to a little box, and said, "Put it into that, for there I keep the treasures of others. I do not want it just now for my hospital, but there are many poor in this parish."

We returned to her own room, and then begged her to relate to us the history of her life; for I told her that I had come all the way from England to hear it, and to see her. She readily complied with my wishes, but wandered occasionally from her subject. She frequently stopped to make reflections, and at times her enthusiasm rendered her almost incoherent; the following, however, is the substance of her narration.

Her real name is Maunoir, and she was born at Angers, where she lived with a wealthy mother. From the earliest age she devoted herself to charity, and, when the civil wars commenced, she visited the fields of battle to carry succour to the wounded, and comfort to the dying. With her basket of drugs and cordials, she braved the horrors of such a scene, spent hours in staunching wounds, and probably saving the lives of many, who would otherwise have perished from exhaustion. During these troubled times, sixty-four unhappy priests were shut up in the chapel of the castle at Angers, and were suffering tortures from thirst. This diminutive being scaled the walls, and by means of cords, lowered wine and water through the broken windows to the unfortunate sufferers. For this she was thrown into prison, and even there, regardless of her own fate, she contrived to help her companions in misfortune. She was at length released by some counter revolution, which changed the authorities. Her mother died, and her property having been all confiscated, Mademoiselle Maunoir went to Paris, in the hope of attaching herself to some religious community devoted to the relief of the sick, and, arriving at her aunt's, she was entreated to leave her vocations, and behave as became the heiress of a considerable property. This she positively refused to do, and she was consequently disinherited: before her aunt died, however, she made over her property to

the institution which her niece had even then endeavoured to found.

Finding that to associate herself with any established order would be to confine her pious exertions, she pursued her own course, and particularly devoted herself to the care of sick or disgraced soldiers, and of those who were not sufficiently poor to go into an hospital, and yet not rich enough to pay for medical attendance. But the former have always been the chief objects of her care, from which she derives the title of "*La Mere des Soldats*." She not only visits them in their hospitals, but in their prisons, whither she carries them bodily refreshment and the consolations of religion. For this, she is so well known to every body, that she is admitted where no one else would be allowed to go; and whenever an unhappy soldier is tried for any offence, she takes her station in the court, with her little bottle of *eau de melisse* in her hand, with which she revives the spirits of those who are condemned. The instant that the prisoner is taken out of court, away she trots at an incredible rate, with her wooden shoes, and great feet, to the palace. The sentinels, who know her, permit her to pass; the people in waiting admit her still further; and she glides into the royal presence almost unperceived. She does not always plead in vain, for, the military laws of France being extremely severe, every opportunity which affords an excuse for their mitigation is readily seized. Among the successful instances which she related to us, I shall select only two.

The first was that of a young man who had been forced into the army, and torn away from a young wife, to whom he had been married only a few months, and from a number of beloved friends and relations. The news of his mother's dangerous illness, and the immediate prospect of the birth of his child, reached him, and he sought and obtained leave of absence, in order to return to his family. His home was far in the south of France, and he had the happiness of finding his mother better; but, as he was about to depart, after a very few days' rest his wife was taken ill, and, to leave her in safety, and embrace his now born child, he delayed the moment of starting, in the hope of still reaching his regiment by the expiration of his furlough. To do this he was obliged to use extra-exertion; but, overcome by fatigue and anxiety, he was a week beyond the appointed time. He was seized as a deserter, tried, and condemned to be shot. When his sentence was pronounced, the poor fellow fainted, but *La Mere* was close at hand, to pour her cordial down his throat, and to whisper a few words of hope in his ear. She proceeded, with her usual celerity, to the Thuilleries, and told her story to the kind-hearted Louis XVIII., who not only pardoned the culprit, but ordered his discharge. I saw the letter from the family to his benefactress, which expressed their unbounded gratitude; and she told me that they every year proved, by some trifling present, that her services were not forgotten.

The second instance was of more recent occurrence, and was that of a fine young man, who, after a series of irritating and insulting conduct from his superior officer, was at length struck by him. The soldier returned the blow, and felled his officer to the ground. He was arrested, and the court-martial sentenced him to be shot, in a few hours after condemnation. *La Mere* darted off to the Thuilleries with inconceivable rapidity, but unhappily the king, Charles X., was at St. Cloud. She instantly quitted the palace, and met the Duc de R——t in his cabriolet. He heard her story, and, telling her to get into his carriage, he drove her at full speed to St. Cloud, at the same time informing her that there was no hope for her *protege*, for the youthful and benevolent Duc de Ch——s had already solicited his majesty twice, without success. Arrived at St. Cloud, *La Mere* met on the stairs the Duc de Ch——s, who told her that his majesty still continued inexorable, for it was an offence which was never pardoned. *La Mere*, however, persisted, and so effectually worked upon the king's feelings, that he wavered. At that moment, the rolling of wheels and the trampling of horses were heard. They were leading the poor victim to the place of execution. Dropping on her knees, *La Mere* called religion to her aid, in so powerful a manner, that she obtained the royal grace. The Duc de Ch——s awaited the result of her visit, and when she shouted, "Pardon!" from the door of his majesty's apartment, he immediately despatched a horse-soldier to stop the execution. He arrived just as the poor fellow had had the handkerchief bound round his head, and dropped on his knees to meet his fate. The joyous cries of his companions informed him that he was saved, and when they tore the bandage from his eyes, he was senseless. They carried him from the ground to the hospital, where he had a fever; "but," said his protectress, "we shall soon get him well again."

The good deeds of *La Mere Ste. Camille*, however, have not been confined to individual instances. When the Empress Josephine was on the throne of France, she sent for this enthusiastic being, and asked her what she should give her by way of present. *La Mere* only asked for a male and female lamb of the real Merinos breed. The empress complied, and interested herself very much about their well-doing. From these, and from a more numerous donation of the same kind from another quarter, *La Mere* has reared a large flock of the purest race. This has been her great resource at all times, and, when the plague raged