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ISABELLE DE VERNEUIL; OR, THE CONVENT OF ST. MARY'S.

BY MRS. CHARLES SNELL, Author of "Helen and Florence, or a Month's Holiday at Rockcliff Castle."

CHAPTER VII.

Towards the evening of the next day, the Sister Therese entered the tower room to relieve the Sister Rosalie, who had spent the afternoon with the children. She was the bearer of rather a large parcel, and she had no sooner closed the door behind her than the three girls flocked round their good friend and made her sit down by the fire.

"Has Sister Frances returned already?" they asked.

"Yes, my dear children, and here is the stuff for the petticoats, and also the tape and thread. Then here are the knitting needles, and this parcel contains the wool."

"What a pleasant evening we shall have," exclaimed Cecile. "But let us see, here are three sets of needles, just one a piece. The grey wool is for Eugenie, the violet for Isabelle, and the scarlet for me. I think that was how we settled it."

"And all this paid for," added the nun, "there still remains seventeen francs and a half."

"Let us buy some more petticoats," cried Isabelle.

"No, no, let us buy some wood for the shipwrecked people the Mother St. Euphrasie was talking about," said Cecile. "You are both aware that they have lost everything they possessed, and that they are now in the deepest poverty."

"What would a cartload of wood cost, I wonder?" asked Isabelle.

"Eighteen or twenty francs, I believe," replied the Sister Therese.

"But we have only seventeen and a half."

"Never mind," said Eugenie, "this is the twenty-eighth, and as mamma will send me six francs for my pocket money on the first, I will take what more is required from my collection purse."

"No, no, we will both give something," continued Isabelle, "and Cecile has given the most."

"And you, you have given nothing, I presume," answered Eugenie. "It is the very least I can do to give the three francs required, since I had only fourteen francs in my every-day purse. Is it not true, dear Sister?"

Meanwhile the good Sister had been busily employed with the petticoats, and had cut the different lengths. The material was durable, without being as thick as cloth, neither was it as thin as flannel, but something between the two. Isabelle was proud and happy, and as she received her work from the hands of the Sister, she smilingly exclaimed: "If my dear mamma could see me now, how happy she would be. She was so very anxious about my learning to work neatly, for she is very fond of it, and before she went to England made a great many things for the poor. Papa promised faithfully to come back in time for my first communion, and she will then be able to see all the things I shall have finished for Pelagie Legrand."

Our limits will not permit of our giving

very minute details of the life of our young friends. We find, nevertheless, an inexpressible pleasure in thus dwelling on this period of their bright and tranquil existence; for a few more years of happiness, and the stern and rude realities of life will have strewn their path with thorns. The thoughtlessness of childhood and the bright visions of youth will have vanished, to be succeeded by the cares and troubles of life, mingled, alas! but too often with the bitterness of unmerited and unlooked-for misfortune.

Those young children looked forward with the smiling hopes and full confidence of early girlhood, and never for an instant reflecting that at any moment all earthly hopes and ties may be rent asunder and destroyed for ever. The future of each child seemed rich with promises and brilliant expectations. Each had parents who loved them dearly, brothers, sisters, and friends, and do we not know that youthful friendships have that peculiar charm that their links, though sometimes separated, are seldom or never entirely broken?

The petticoats were finished and the mittens in a fair way of completion. The purchase of the load of wood had only been delayed until the complete re-establishment of the health of the invalids would not only permit of their leaving their tower home to resume their usual studies in the class, but also allow of their being present at its distribution, which was to take place in the courtyard of the convent. Previous to the commencement of her illness, Isabelle had only assisted twice at the catechism lesson, but as she had expressed an earnest wish to devote a portion of her time during her enforced seclusion to religious exercises, she had listened with eagerness and good will to the repeated explanations of the Sister Therese, and their daily lessons of piety, self-denial, and patience were inculcated in her youthful heart by the hourly example of the kind nuns who watched so tenderly over her sick bed and those of her companions. In such a haven of peace, is it to be wondered that the simple prayers of that so long spoiled and neglected child ascended pure and fervent to the throne of the God of power and might, who is also the Lord of all mercy, through the intercession of the Immaculate and Most Blessed Mother?

The three pairs of mittens were finished about a fortnight before the festival of Christmas, and as it was feared that the draughts and chilliness of the long corridors, through which they must necessarily pass to reach the orphan school, would be prejudicial to our invalids, the Mother St. Euphrasie sent for the three girls to whom the gifts were destined into her own parlor, and had also summoned thither Cecile, Eugenie, and Isabelle. Jeanne Picard, Louise Varin, and Jacqueline Perrin, the newly-arrived inmates of the orphan asylum, were already there, and were casting frightened glances around, being totally ignorant of the cause of their presence in that room, which no one ever presumed to enter without a special invitation. But their fear was soon changed into joy; these poor children had suffered terribly from the cold, and the good Superior having resolved that the pleasure of her pupils should be complete, had not allowed the Sisters superintending the poor class to make, as was customary, the clothes usually given to the young girls on their entrance into school, and which on this occasion were so greatly needed. Deeply impressed by the kindness of their young benefactresses, Jeanne, Louise, and Jacqueline scarcely knew how to thank them; large tears rolled down their cheeks; and it was then, for the first time in her life, that our Isabelle felt the supreme happiness of having been of use to one of her fellow-creatures, and the sweet, the inexpressible joy of having performed a good action.

The petticoats and mittens were carried off in triumph by their owners, and as soon as the door had closed on them the Mother St. Euphrasie told the young girls that the convent gardener, who had come up to the house to receive some orders, had related to her the sad and sorrowful history of a little family found by the police in the town, who were plunged in the deepest distress and suffering, not only from the direst poverty, but also from hunger and cold. This family, consisting of a young man, his wife near her confinement, and a little girl of two years of age, had concealed their misery in a cellar situated in the outskirts of the town, and in this wretched abode they had borne the weary, fruitless struggle of a resolute braving of poverty and difficulties innumerable. The poor young woman having at last given birth to a dead child, the husband had for her sake conquered the repugnance he felt to ask the charity of his fellow-beings, and had gone to the Cure of the parish to implore assistance for his wife. The good old man had no sooner heard this tale of woe than he took measures to have the almost dying woman carried to the hospital, where the Sisters of St. Vincent, those heavenly-minded women, at-

tended on her with the most patient care and untiring zeal, as well as with deep and devoted kindness; while a charitable lady, on hearing the sad details from the lips of the venerable priest, had hired a small but comfortable room in the house to which the cellar belonged, and after sending thither a few necessaries, had installed therein the poor man and his little girl.

"That is the place, my dear children," she continued, "where I recommend you to send your cartload of wood. These unfortunate people, after having seen better days, have suddenly found themselves bereft of everything, and have taken as many pains to conceal their poverty and trials as others take to make a parade of theirs. It is therefore our bounden duty to come to their assistance, and let us hope that, with the blessing of the Lord, the poor young woman will be soon quite well and able to rejoin her husband and little girl."

Although at that time pale and worn and bearing a touching expression of past sorrow, yet the features of the Mother St. Euphrasie beamed with that unalterable beauty which is generally the evidence of a calm and pure conscience. Very early in life she had dedicated herself to the Lord. It was said that she had deeply suffered before bringing herself to seek for that peace which the world cannot give behind the convent grating and beneath the black veil of a cloistered nun. But she had found in a religious life both strength and courage, and when cast down by the remembrance of the past that would sometimes intrude upon her peaceful moments, she would contemplate the divine image of Him who suffered for our sakes a cruel and ignominious death, and bowed with resignation beneath the immutable decrees and sovereign will of God. With a kind word and a sweet smile for all, she devoted herself to the care and education of the young girls who gradually filled the large schoolrooms of the convent, and in their artless and unaffected love found not only happiness, but some of the purest enjoyment she had ever experienced at St. Mary's.

The cartload of wood was duly sent to Jacques Claudin's, for such was the poor man's name, on a dark, cold, and rainy day of December. The little girl was sleeping in a basket which served as a cradle, but her father was seated, sad and careworn, and was writing at a little table in a fireless room. His surprise may easily be imagined when the old gardener from the convent, knocking at his door, asked him where he would like to have the wood placed; and we can fancy with what intense feelings of gratitude towards his young and unknown benefactresses he helped to carry it upstairs and arrange it in a dark cupboard in his room, and afterwards to throw a faggot on the cold hearth, which soon after burst into a clear sparkling fire. But after Jacques shed tears of happiness as he sat by it and warmed the little, half-frozen feet of his child, we can affirm that an unspeakable joy filled the hearts of those gentle girls when they remembered that the unfortunate family no longer inhabited the unwholesome cellar which had sheltered them on their first arrival in the town, and that the wood sent by them to their present abode would preserve them, for some time at least, from the intensity of the cold which had then prevailed for some weeks.

On the second of January, Cecile, Eugenie, and Isabelle resumed their places in the class and recommenced their studies. From that date Isabelle attended regularly at the catechism class, and the Abbe Beauregard never failed to give her much good advice and many sage counsels to guide her in her daily conduct. The solemn ceremony in which she was to take part in a few months had given a tinge to her thoughts and feelings more in accordance with her actual position, and it was remarked that the child watched over her slightest actions with a careful and fixed attention, and sought by every means in her power to remedy the evils of her early education and the extreme negligence concerning her religious instruction of those who, until her father's second marriage, had been appointed to take care of her.

"I was quite right, said the Mother St. Euphrasie one morning to the Sister Josephine, "when I told Madame de Verneuil that a sojourn of a few months with us would be of so much use to our dear Isabelle. I am very glad to witness the affection existing between Cecile, Eugenie, and our spoiled child; the three girls seem united by a strong and sincere friendship, and their conduct is irreproachable."

"Yes, indeed, Reverend Mother," answered the Sister Josephine, "and Isabelle is very happy with us. She has, however, one great subject of grief, for she cannot forget the day the Sister Marie took the veil, and is always pitying her for being unable to kiss her mother except through the convent bars."

CHAPTER VIII.

The three first months of the new year passed away without bringing any change in

the position of Isabelle de Verneuil, who daily more and more appreciated the quiet peacefulness of the life she led at the convent. Towards the end of March she received a letter from her father, in which he announced the birth of a little sister, and the joy of the young girl was great on hearing this delightful piece of news. This baby, born in England, had received the names of Gertrude Eulalie, and Madame de Verneuil, at twenty-one years of age, was already the mother of two children, considered herself the happiest of women.—Neither the young mother nor the Baron, however, had forgotten their eldest daughter, as was fully proved by a large packing-case which had been brought to the convent from the Diligence office on the eve of the new year. This case contained some very pretty things and each article was chosen with reference to the actual position of the happy Isabelle; for, with an exquisite tact, the donors had selected books for the use of their daughter which could not fail to meet the approbation of the Mother St. Euphrasie. There was also a handsome rosewood workbox, containing a collection of knitting and crochet needles of all sorts and sizes, tapes, Jarning cotton, strips of cambric and muslin for frilling, and a variety of other useful articles, as well as scissors, penknives, and the usual implements for a lady's use. A second box in Tonbridge ware, and lined with blue satin, contained twenty-four packets of the best sewing needles, thirty-six reels of white cotton and one dozen of black, of different sizes. A third box contained a beautiful carved ivory crucifix and rosary to match. These things had been brought from the East Indies and were very valuable, but they were M. de Verneuil's presents to his child, and the whole were contained in a purple velvet case lined with white satin. Our Isabelle was delighted with these presents, and she took an early opportunity of telling the Sister Therese that nothing could have given her more pleasure than the needles and thread.

"Just look, Cecile," cried she, on opening a largish parcel carefully packed in brown paper, "what a quantity of lovely wool of all sorts of colors, and what beautiful reels of cotton! I must try to get on with my needlework if only to please my dear mamma, who, away in England, still thinks of her little daughter at G. But how I should like to see my baby-sister!"

"In ten years, perhaps, or even before, she may come to the convent," said Eugenie.

"Perhaps; but in ten years I shall, please God, be twenty-two, and, in all probability, no longer here," answered Isabelle.

"That is very likely," Eugenie laughingly replied. "Young ladies do not usually stay at the convent till twenty-two. But you might, notwithstanding, see her very often."

"How sad you were, Isabelle, when you first came here," said Cecile. "Do you recollect the three or four first days?"

"O, the weariness and wretchedness I then felt!" answered Isabelle. "I really do not know what I should have done if our dear Mother had not put me in the Sister Josephine's class. I am never dull nor weary now, and if she were to take away my books and my knitting and needlework, I should, I think, die of grief."

"Then you would not like to return home and take up your old life again?" asked the nun.

"I would not mind going home for a day or two, to see papa, mamma, and my little brother and sister, but not by any means to take up my former life there, for I am far too happy here for that. Before coming to the convent I used to be dreadfully dull; in fact, my life at home, until papa married again, was much worse than it was here during those first three days, and I am very glad that it has not all to come over again."

Spring was now opening, a tint of blue sky shone through the tops of the tall trees, and beam after beam appeared, until the sun poured forth in warm light. The season was unusually advanced, and the trees in the convent garden were already clothed in that tender green that cheers the eye and gladdens the heart, after the dreary interval of leafless winter. The lilac trees, covered with blossom, only required a few warm days to bring them out into full flower, and to wait their delicious perfume on the soft breeze through the windows of the school-room, as if to woo the presence of the three charming and graceful girls, blooming beneath the shade of the old cloisters, who were then standing,

"With reluctant feet, Where the brook and river meet, Womanhood and childhood meet."

As the fine weather advanced, luxuriant masses of foliage entirely concealed the prison-like walls which surrounded, on three sides, the venerable building, and, as one wandered beneath the shade of the lofty trees through which one could scarcely perceive the glorious blue sky, one might have imagined oneself two

or three hundred miles away from any other house, instead of being almost at the entrance of a large and populous town. In the distance the bright blue waters of the Channel were visible, whose rippling waves broke with a gentle murmur against the cliffs bounding the convent lawn; but neither the nuns nor the pupils were ever allowed to walk alone on that side, nor could they even extend their rambles beyond a palisade, fixed at about fifty feet distant from the extreme edge, for the cliff in that place was nearly perpendicular, and the danger would have been frightful had any one tried to descend to the beach down its rugged side.— Besides which, at high water, and more particularly in stormy weather, the great waves, lashed into fury, dashed up the beach and broke upon the granite wall with a vegeful force, and with a noise like thunder, as if angry with the opposition they encountered, and strike terror into the hearts of the timid inmates of St. Mary's. Within the memory of man no accident had been known to happen on that spot, and the commands of the good superior were strict and formal, and not to be infringed; and, as the vigilance of the nuns appointed to the charge of this young and happy band of children was incessant, there was apparently nothing to fear.

Time, however, was rapidly passing, and the month of April was drawing to a close. The Feast of the Ascension of the Blessed Lord fell that year on the tenth of May, and the nearer the happy moment approached, the more Isabelle tried to merit the approbation of her kind instructresses, as well as that of the good old priest, who, with many pains, had taught her to love and serve God prayerfully and faithfully. But when we reflect that scarcely a year had passed since her entrance into the convent, we cannot fail to perceive the astonishing improvement she had made, and, spoiled child though she had been, it was wonderful to see the affection with which she had inspired her companions, as well as the kind and friendly nuns in the house.

We have omitted to state that a new boarder had arrived at St. Mary's during the first week of the new year. Euphemie Leriche, for such was the young girl's name, was twelve years old, and was to prepare herself to receive her first Communion at the same time as Isabelle de Verneuil; but, to speak candidly, her conduct was such that not only the nuns, but M. Beauregard, the venerable cure, had more than once seriously reprimanded with her on the subject. She was exceedingly vain, and could talk of nothing but the white dress she was to wear at the coming ceremony, and which her mother was then having prepared for her, of her wretch, her veil, her handkerchief, &c. The Sister Josephine, fearing for her children the effects of this bad example, told her one day, that if the Mother St. Euphrasie were talking in that strain she would, most assuredly, be severely punished.

"As if I cared for her punishment," said Euphemie, when later in the day she found herself alone, for a moment, with her companions; "mamma decidedly promised me that my dress should be handsomer than those of the other young ladies. She is having it embroidered at Nancy, and the lace to trim it, and also my veil and handkerchief, is being made at Malines, in Belgium. But you, Isabelle, what are you going to wear?"

But Isabelle, after exchanging looks with the Sister, made no reply to this question.

We may as well here remark, that the mother of this rebellious pupil was the daughter of a persevering and honest Savoyard, who, from circumstances it is useless here to dwell upon, had become the possessor of an enormous fortune. M. Leriche, a young and already a wealthy man, the owner of splendid estates in one of the pleasantest departments of France, having been summoned to Savoy on business of importance relative to the will of a deceased friend, had here met and been introduced to the father and daughter. As he had been appointed guardian to the children of the testator, he had necessarily been detained some weeks at P—, and during the intervals of his business the thought more than once struck him that the large fortune of Mlle. Rasdon joined to his own, would enable him to increase his financial and agricultural speculations in a manner more in accordance with his own peculiar views. The numerous affairs relating to the inheritance of the sons of his late friend being at length terminated, he resolved to ask the hand of the young lady in marriage; his proposals were accepted, and, immediately after the celebration of the nuptials he left Savoy with his bride and returned to Touraine, in which beautiful province his estates were situated. Euphemie was born during the following year, and she had scarcely numbered twelve summers, when, tired alike of the folly, and extreme vanity of both mother and daughter, he resolved to follow the advice of his friends, and place his daughter in St. Mary's Convent, there to be properly prepared for the worthy