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ROSE LEBLANC; OR, THE TRIUMPH OF SINCERITY.

CHAPTER VIII.

For several days running it rained in torrents. The roads into the mountains became almost impassable, and the excursion to Betharam had in consequence to be put off.

'Oh dear, how beautiful those mountains are; and those great tall fir-trees, that look as if they were lifting their heads up to the skies.'

'I suppose you were counting them just now as you went along with your eyes half shut, and your bridle hanging on Fanchette's neck,' answered Henri.

'Thinking! dreaming you mean. That's always the way women dream and donkeys stumble.'

'Why does that vex you?' 'Why, because it must have been my own fault that you left off caring for me.'

'And now that you are grown so kind and so obliging, it is a proof, I suppose, that you have left off caring for me, which is very lucky, as I am engaged to M. Andre.'

'And you call that love?' Henri exclaimed, with a bitter sneer. 'Would that man give up friends, fortune, life for you? and bless God that he was allowed to do so?'

'Well, I dare say he would,' answered Rose; 'for he wrote some verses which ended in this way,—'

'I saw thee, lovely Rose, the fairest in the glade; I loved thee, sweetest Rose, in sunshine and in shade; I loved thee, brightest Rose, ere I could read or spell; I've loved thee, dearest Rose, far more than words can tell; I'll love thee, precious Rose, up to my dying hour, And loving thee, I'll die, O my beloved flower!'

Henri bit his lip and muttered something very like an anathema against poetry and poets.

often stepped aside to gather branches of sweet-briar, or of honeysuckle, or of the beautiful alpine rose; anemones also, and as they advanced into the mountains the bright blossoms of the red and blue gentian, and large handfuls of thyme.

At nine o'clock they stopped at the pretty church of the village of Chorozze to hear Mass, and afterwards breakfasted under the trees of the little inn, where they had put up the mule.

'We are arrived,' said Henri; 'jump off, Rose, and take care of your nosegays. Go into the church and pray, as that is what you have come here for.'

Rose accordingly hastened to the church, where a great many pilgrims were kneeling before the altar of our Lady of Sorrows, and praying with more or less fervor.

Rose looked round and suddenly missed from her side the gentle Alice. 'I declare I think it is a vision,' she inwardly exclaimed, glancing at the same time round the church in the hopes of seeing her again.

These reflections occasioned her some distractions, and not being used to very long prayers, after having repeated the few she knew by heart, and added to them a short but fervent petition, for Andre's welfare and his speedy return, she left the church.

A mountain rises on the left side of the sanctuary, and on the road that leads to its summit the stations of the cross are erected. A Calvary with an immense crucifix stands in the centre of the platform of this hill, and the most different traveller can hardly help bending the knee as he arrives at the foot of that solitary rock.

An hour later she was dining with her cousin at a little table before the inn, under the shade of the acacia-trees, when a caleche went by. It was Alice and her grandfather who were driving away.

'I don't know anything about them,' he answered in a contemptuous manner; 'they put up at the Lion d'Or. A sorry idea they will have of the hotels of Betharam.'

'The Baron de Vidal!' exclaimed Rose with astonishment. 'Is it possible?' and she fell into a deep brown study.

'Come, it is time to be off,' said Henri, and he went to the stable to saddle the mule.

raindrops which fell on the scorched ground after the lightning had scathed it. The strong struggles of years found a vent in those tears.

And that fair girl whose angel face was haunting Rose as a celestial vision, what was she doing on the Way of Sorrows, on the road to Calvary; she whose eyes beamed with the azure light of a summer sky, and on whose lips hovered a smile bright as the opening dawn?

'We made acquaintance,' Alice said, 'in a market-place, amidst the noise and the confusion of a busy town, and to-day we meet again at the foot of a solitary cross in a desert.'

'It is very true,' Rose answered. 'Nothing can be more unlike than Pau and this mountain. But shall we see you again in Pau, Mademoiselle?'

'We are birds of passage, Madlle. Rose. You see I learnt and have remembered your name;—and to-morrow, alas! the odious railway train will carry me away from your beautiful Preennees.'

'Oh, how sorry I should be to think that I should never see you again! But you are very lucky, Mademoiselle; to be allowed to travel. I should like so much to see a large town; like Bordeaux, for instance.'

'Oh, don't wish any such thing,' exclaimed Alice. 'For those who are born and have lived amidst the hills and rocks, a city is a prison. It is like shutting up a bird in a cage.'

'Do you really think so?' Rose asked somewhat incredulously.

'Oh, yes; are not these great trees which God has made, these flowers with their delicious perfume, and Alice stooped to gather a handful of the fragrant mountain thyme, a thousand times pleasanter than streets and houses?'

'Well, you may be right,' Mademoiselle. Your home is in the country. Jules Bertrand told us that you lived in a fine chateau, a great way off from Pau.'

'And who may Jules Bertrand be?' 'He is the nephew of Madame Bertrand, the milliner in the High street; the youth who showed you the way that day to the Convent of the Ursulines.'

'True; I remember him very well. He would not take the money which my grandfather offered him. Do you think you could prevail upon him to accept one of these rosaries, Madlle. Rose?—We have just had them blessed at the altar of the Blessed Virgin.'

'And you, Madlle. Rose, might I venture to ask you to wear this medal in remembrance of the pilgrimage we have made to-day to our dear Lady's shrine?'

'Ah,' said Rose, coloring with pleasure, 'if I only knew your name, I would always mention it in my prayers.'

'Alice,' said the young stranger, as she smiled and walked away.

'I am not quite sure yet that she is not an angel,' ejaculated Rose, as she followed her with her eyes along the road to the village.

'How very much obliged I am to you, Henri, for having brought me to Betharam,' said Rose,

as once more seated on the mule she rode off from the inn door.

'Nonsense,' answered Henri. 'Take care of the loose stones,' and he whistled as he went along, as if to drown his own thoughts.

For an hour they proceeded on their way home without speaking. The high rocks on each side of the road sheltered them from the ardent noon sun. The tinkling of the donkey's bells kept time with the rushing sound of the torrents, which in many places were so increased by the recent rains that the road was covered with water.

As they were descending the hill from Iron to Chorozze, Henri made a sudden exclamation, and turned as pale as death. 'For heaven's sake, jump off this moment!' he cried, and Rose felt herself lifted off the saddle, and placed on a bank on the side of the road.

The laden with his precious burden, like a father who in sport carries his child on his back, he sprang forward and scaled the nearly perpendicular side of the mountain amidst rolling stones, uprooted trees, and showers of earth, which impeded his steps and often obscured his sight.

How he made his way up that steep acclivity, how he broke through the manifold obstacles in his path, God only knows, or what silent and intense prayers rose from his throbbing heart during that perilous ascent.

'My God!' cried Henri, while tears fell from his eyes on the young girl's forehead, 'my God let her come back to life again. I promise not to torment her any more, and to make her happy whatever it may cost me. Yes, Lord, I will do whatever is Thy, holy will, and whatever she wishes, if Thou wilt only grant her life, and not let her die on the mountain without help and without sacraments.'

Rose heard him, but had not strength to answer, nor even to make a sign.

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'Ab, God has heard me,' cried Henri, in a voice that was half joyful and half sad. 'He has taken me at my word; there can be no drawing back now.'

'Rose however, understood not a word that he was saying, and again lost all consciousness.—Meanwhile their present position was a very perilous one, and Henri began debating in his mind how they were to get out of it.

'Towards morning the fever increased and the doctor was summoned. For several days Rose was seriously ill. Babet hovered round her. M. Dumont went up to her room every five minutes, Henri spoke to no one; worked harder than ever, and towards evening would go into the church and kneel down in a dark corner.

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by means of a winding path, reached the platform, where Rose was shivering as she leant against a tree for support. They placed her on a litter which they constructed hastily, and one of the peasants helped Henri to carry it while the other acted as guide.

'You must not make yourself so miserable, child,' said the peasant woman, 'for you have had a narrow escape you two, and if I were you I should consider that I had come off cheap with only the loss of a mule; it is very lucky that the poor beast did not take you with him when he fell. The Blessed Virgin must have come to your assistance.'

'It must have been because I begged of her so hard to help me this morning,' replied Rose, thoughtfully. 'It was about something else though.'

'Ah, but you see Almighty God can make the Blessed Virgin understand all our wishes and our needs; we ask for one thing, and she gives us another; and whatever happens it always for the best.'

'But Henri was so fond of his mule.' 'It is all very well to be fond of animals; but we should not weep for them as if they were Christians,' said the good woman, seeing that Rose was beginning to sob again.

'My God,' exclaimed Rose, turning very pale; 'then we were indeed near death; it makes one shudder to think of it!' She closed her eyes, and did not open them again till Henri returned from Chorozze with a car and a boy to drive. Having taken an affectionate leave of their kind hostess, they started on their homeward journey.

'We are almost there,' he said, and Rose tried to smile.

'Here you are at last,' cried aunt Babet, coming out on the doorstep with a lantern in her hand.

'Thank God!' answered Henri; 'we have been very near losing her,' added he, lowering his voice as he helped Rose to alight. He thought no more of his own danger than of the loss of his mule.

'Holy Virgin!' cried Babet; 'and where is Fanchette?'

'At the bottom of the Gave, poor beast! We had enough to do to save ourselves, and we two escaped almost by a miracle. Why, Rose, how flushed you are, just now you were shaking with cold.'

'Her hands are burning,' said Babet; 'the child is feverish.'

'Yes, Rose was feverish; Rose was ill; Rose was delirious. All night long she muttered things which had no common sense in them, as Babet, who watched beside her, pronounced.

'She takes me for Andre,' he said to himself in a low voice, and drawing away his hand he went and leant against the wall on the other side of the bed.

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