

CHOICE LITERATURE

THE LOT FELL ON JOHANNA.

A STORY OF MORAVIAN LIFE IN 17—.

PART I.

Clear and sweet rose the voices of the women above the deep, strong voices of the men on that Easter morn. Early, so early, at the very dawning of the glad new day, did those pious brothers and sisters of the little Moravian settlement gather in the gray stone chapel for their Easter service.

As their voices take up the words of the Litany—

"Glory be to Him who is the resurrection and the life"—men, women, and children rise, and forming the procession, move through the quiet streets to the quieter graveyard. They enter the gate, the little children first, then the singers and the trombone-players. Next in the procession come the clergymen—the old bishop and the young minister, Bartholomew Richter, just arrived in America. These are followed by the women; then come the men. All are glad and every face is full of peace, though some of the women-faces beneath the white caps are very pensive, if not absolutely sad.

As the procession enters the graveyard, the song of holy melody rises to an ecstatic strain. The blue-bird and the robin, in the tree-top above the quiet sleepers, cease their matins, and, flying to a loftier perch, look down with wide eyes of astonishment and listen breathlessly to the praise. The graveyard is not a gloomy place to the Moravian. His pure and simple faith looks beyond the coffin-lid, and views death as the easy entrance into a world of bliss. The grave is to him "the covered bridge from earth to heaven."

The air was full of pleasant odours, and the soul of the young minister, Bartholomew, to beat with quicker and stronger pulsations. The voices of men and women, the distant music of the trombones, and the silver strain from the children at the head of the procession, thrilled the heart of the young man and lifted his thoughts to heaven. It was all such a new experience to him. His parents having died when he was a young child, Bartholomew had been shut off from all home life and tender associations. Yet this life, barren as it had been of social ties and home influences, had not dulled his quick sensibilities nor quenched the fires of a fertile imagination. In fact, the long years of patient, unflinching brain-labour spent in the college hall had served to sharpen his appetite for all that was full of life and beauty. He drank in the pleasure which he now found in his life of freedom in the New World as a thirsty man drinks rich, red wine. Yet this keen enjoyment was not wholly sensuous; but, rather, sense-delight, under the control and illumination of the spirit. With an eye of flesh he saw the perfect beauty of the springing flower, and with an eye of faith the hand that fashioned its delicate loveliness. He heard the song of the birds in the branches, and listened for the whispering of the spirit, which he felt and heard within the depths of his own being.

As the strong chorus of happy voices floated out upon the air, there sounded—not above the others, nor yet below them, but clear and distinct from them—one voice, sweet and strong as a seraph's. It was a woman's voice, and perhaps the reason why Bartholomew heard it so plainly was that the women walked, in the procession, next behind the clergymen. Possibly this accounts; but the sisters walked behind the brethren, remember, so that the young divine knew not whether the singer wore blue, pink, or red ribbons for the strings of her white cap. If she wore the blue, she was the wife of some one of the good brethren at the end of the procession; if pink, she was his "single sister;" if red, his girl sister, in the first flush of her fair young womanhood—the beautiful Moravian maiden, with her modest, quiet ways, her shy, sweet glances, and her ever-changing colour.

The procession moved on, and still the sweet voice rang out on the still air, floated upward with the soaring lark, and lost itself in the blue immensity. Lost itself? Who knows? Nothing is lost entirely.

There is a break in the procession. Men, women, and children are scattered through the graveyard, by the rows of graves, some standing here, some there; for the good Moravians are buried side by side, in the order of their death. A husband and a wife may lie far apart in their last slumber, and many graves may intervene between the mother and her child. Still the service of song continues; but the voice of magic sweetness is no longer heard by young Brother Bartholomew.

However, when the holy anthem rises to its greatest height of rich melody, the sweet voice is again heard, and, glancing in the direction of the sound, Brother Bartholomew sees a group of women and children standing by the graves opposite. For an instant he is only conscious of the white caps and the different coloured ribbons; but a second glance is sufficient to tell him that the young girl standing a little to the left of the others is the possessor of the wonderful voice.

She is still singing, and her face, of marvellous beauty, is turned half towards him. Her wide blue eyes are raised to the clear blue of the heavens, and seem to equal it in their purity and intensity. Her complexion is pale, with just a touch of colour on the oval cheek. She is not at all of the "dead perfection" order of girls, nor

"The rose of the rose-bush garden of girls,
Queen lily and rose in one;"

but a beautiful, natural face, with beautiful eyes and regular features, framed by golden brown hair, pushing out ambitiously from the close bands of the unsightly cap. Her beauty is that of the bud rather than the flower. Yet there is a certain firmness indicated in the only limited lines about the mouth, and, instinctively, one feels that this girl is not made of such stuff as dreams are made of, but of that sterner clay of which martyrs and heroes are moulded, and you wonder

what lies beyond the red ribbons of her girlhood. She is capable of being very happy, and also of being very wretched; but you cannot imagine for one moment that Johanna Rothe could ever be capable of a wrong, unwomanly act. You feel that she is capable of great and good things, and only capable of such.

I think it not improbable that some such thoughts as these passed through the mind of the young minister as he listened to the wonderful voice and looked upon the beautiful face; and in the days and weeks that followed the Easter service I know not how the young divine became acquainted with Johanna; but, nevertheless, an acquaintance did spring up and prosper with more rapidity than was usual in a Moravian village at the early date of which our story is a faithful chronicle. Perhaps it was because Bartholomew, having as his special charge the younger men of the Church, found it necessary to look after Johanna's brother, who, indeed, was not a model of Christian virtues, and who occasionally made trips to New York, where he imbibed much of the world's sinful tastes.

However, Johanna and young Brother Bartholomew met at "Love Feasts" and religious services; and sometimes of a rainy afternoon, when mothers and daughters sat in their favourite places in the graveyard (for such was ever the favourite resort of the good people of Bethlehem), the young pastor would pass that way; and, as he came to one little group after another, he would stop for a few moments and ask after the health of each and express some word of kindness and courtesy ere he passed on; and red-letter days were those when, among the others, he chanced to meet Johanna.

PART II.

As the summer changed to autumn, and the September haze hung over the far blue hills, and the katy-dids and crickets made vocal the silent night, the ever-watchful eye of Mrs. Rothe saw a change in her daughter. Her eyes were brighter and larger than of yore, and her colour came and went as she conversed or was silent; and, sometimes, when her mother saw the far-away look in the pensive face of her fair-cheeked daughter, she would sigh softly, and, wiping the dimness from her glasses, murmur:

"Johanna, child, the Lord grant that, when the lot falls on you, it may not be for the wrong one."

They were sitting in the graveyard one afternoon, when these words fell from the mother's lips, and this time they did not fall unnoticed by the daughter.

"Mother," she said, turning her face from the glory of the western sky, while her cheek took on the flush of the dying day, "the disposal of the lot is with the Lord. Why should I be concerned about it?"

The good woman felt rebuked; yet her heart had many misgivings in regard to Johanna's future.

"Yes, dear," she replied, "perfect love casteth out fear." Yet she sighed again as she spoke, for she thought of the long past, when the lot had fallen on another Johanna, and that Johanna had tried to think that it was the Lord's will, and had married the man she did not love, while the one she did love married the girl who had given her heart's best affection to Johanna's own husband; and she had known it all, for Anna Weiser was her intimate girl-friend, and they had met and prayed together about it, while the young men went to the "Council of the Elders," and the lots were cast. But neither Anna nor that other Johanna had questioned the will of the Lord. They had married the men to whom the lot assigned them, and every one said that they were both very happily married; nor did they themselves ever hint that it was otherwise. Yet, nevertheless, Johanna Rothe knew that, in marrying David Rothe, she had missed out of her life a certain happiness which she felt was possible and intended for every good woman to possess; and now her whole heart, bound up, as it was, in her daughter, dreaded lest she, too, should miss what the mother-heart felt was possible and right that she should possess. So, very gently and very sadly, she added:

"Thy ways, O Lord, are mysterious, and no man knoweth them."

Johanna the younger made no reply, and again turned her face to the sunset glory, and for a time both were silent, while above them, in the branches among the yellow leaves, a robin piped his farewell song, and a cricket chirped in the grass at their feet.

"Mother," at length exclaimed Johanna, without turning her face from the crimson and gold low down in the west, "would God ever let the lot fall so as to make people unhappy; so that, in obeying it, one would have to do what, under any other circumstances, he would not do?"

"Sometimes He does," replied the mother.

Johanna looked puzzled.

"In marriage, mother?" she asked, with a deep blush, still keeping her face turned away.

"Yes, my darling."

"Then I would not obey what men called His will," the young girl answered, firmly, almost defiantly, turning upon her mother a flushed face and brilliant, flashing eyes.

Mrs. Rothe had never seen her child so excited, and the good woman was terrified.

"Hush, child!" she exclaimed, in alarm. "He sometimes takes us at our word."

"Let Him take me," she replied, with a prophetic gesture toward the fading splendor of the west. "It would be a greater sin to marry when—"

She left the sentence unfinished and covered her crimson face with her hands.

"Oh! Johanna, Johanna! What is the matter? This is not like my gentle girl. What has happened to my child? Has one of the young brethren been speaking to you on this subject? or can any one without the Church have gained access to your pure mind and tempted you with the world's false views?"

"Mother," replied Johanna, in a reproachful tone, "do I not know the rules of our Church? Can you not trust me?"

"My darling!" replied the fond mother. "Distrust you? No, no, but you frighten me with your fierce words. Child, you almost defied your Maker."

"Oh! no, mother," said the girl, crossing to her mother's

side and throwing her arms around her. "You did not understand me. I would rather do something that seemed wrong to everybody and right to myself than to do what seemed right to everybody and wrong to my own soul."

"And, in so doing, you would be pleasing God," said a voice near them. And, looking up, Johanna beheld Bartholomew Richter standing before her, with the sunset light shining full upon his fine, manly features.

He hastened to apologise for his sudden interruption, and said that, overhearing Johanna's last sentence as he passed, he felt constrained to voice his approval.

"Johanna is getting strange thoughts into her head," said Mrs. Rothe. (A nineteenth century mother would have said: "Johanna is a girl of opinions.") "I sometimes feel apprehension for her future," she added, with a sigh.

"Trust the future with Him who orders it," said Brother Bartholomew, in a low, earnest voice.

"But herein lies the trouble," replied the anxious mother. "Johanna does not seem willing to abide by the Lord's will."

"Mother does not understand me," exclaimed Johanna, in self-defence. "I say that I can never do what other people may say to be the will of God, when down deep in my heart I feel that it would not be right for me to do so."

"You know that in such a case we would try the lot," said the young man.

"Even then I would not go against this conviction of my own soul, if all the lots that ever were cast should decide that I should," she answered, with decision.

"You are decided?"

"Yes, fully. What would you do?"

Bartholomew Richter was a man of strong and vigorous thought and action, and, consequently, had always been able, by prayer and meditation, to see his way out of a difficulty, and so had never reached that critical, wavering uncertainty when he felt that he must trust to the lot for the necessary decision; and now, when this young girl put the question to him so suddenly, he felt such doubt and uncertainty as he had never experienced before, and he answered, honestly:

"I do not know. God has always made plain to me the course He would have me take without seeking His will in casting the lot, and I trust He always will."

The glow was gone from the west; only a touch of gold low down on the horizon was left from all the wealth of splendour which a few moments before had been piled up mountains high above the purple hills. Mrs. Rothe rose, and with a glance towards the darkening sky, held out her hand to her young pastor. His eyes followed the direction of her glance, and Johanna murmured:

"Beyond the sunset are the hills of God."

Then they turned from the sunset and from each other; the mother and daughter going down through the valley to the pretty cottage home, and Brother Bartholomew away to his hillside retreat, where he might spend the twilight hour alone in communion with his God. And the night came down about the arcs of men, and hushed that toil and tumult, and the busy hum of life ceased in the valley 'neath the hills, and

"Evening stood between them like a maid.

the smooth-rolled clouds
Her braided hair; the studded stars the pearls
And diamonds of her coronal; the morn
Her forehead jewel, and the deepening dark
Her woven garments."

An hour later, and the sound of bell and trombones summoned the mountain worshipper from his retreat to the village church, where the evening service was just beginning.

"I have sad news for you, brother," said the old clergyman to Bartholomew, at the close of the service. "Brother Weiser has departed this life."

"Brother Weiser in St. Thomas?"

"Yes. He has left a most interesting work. A labourer is needed."

It was enough. It is said of the Moravians that they never wait to be called into the service of their Master. They are always ready with the words: "Here am I! Send me!"

"I will go," said Bartholomew, in a low, steady voice.

"God bless you, brother," said the old man, placing his hand on Bartholomew's shoulder. "But he who goes should be married."

"I will marry. When ought I to go?" was answered, without a moment's hesitation.

"As soon as possible."

"Must my marriage be decided by lot?"

The old gentleman drew back in astonishment.

"Brother," he exclaimed, after a moment's silent wonder, "is it possible that you are so ignorant of the Church regulations?"

"Yes; truly I am ignorant as to the facts of this custom. I thought possibly there were exceptions to the general rule in regard to this matter."

"None!" thundered the elder man.

"You see I have never thought of marriage as a personal matter."

"There is a council of the elders to-morrow. Shall I present your case?"

"Yes," was the reply.

For Bartholomew Richter the mists of the future had suddenly disappeared. He now faced himself face to face with the question which a few hours before he had been unable to answer other than by saying he did not know. He must know now, for he must act.

Bartholomew Richter was not a man to shrink from facing a difficulty, and resolutely he turned to the question he had so recently put from him as puzzling and unprofitable. The time for decision had come. He did not for one moment stop to consider that the lot would decide for him. He felt at once that he must decide now whether it would be his duty to abide by the decision of the lot, or to do as Johanna said—choose what he knew in his own soul to be right, though the whole world said it was wrong.

That night, in the solitude of his own chamber, he met the question and answered it; and on the morrow, when the lot did not fall on Johanna, he did not change his decision, but went to St. Thomas alone. And the elders were