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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 V.—(Continued.)

For some weeks past Isabelle had fixed her eyes on a pretty little girl, named Pelagie Le-grand, lately admitted into the orphanage school, and who had lost both her father and mother. As soon as she had discovered, on questioning the Sister Josephine, that this child was also to participate in the sacred rite the following spring, she had asked and obtained permission to clothe her for the important occasion. This permission was liable at any time to be revoked, for it depended entirely on the good or bad conduct of the superior pupil; and if, by any chance (but such an event was extremely rare at St. Mary's), the candidate was refused by the good priest, on account of inattention, frivolous conduct, or any other cause, the orphan child was then dressed at the expense of the community.

Isabelle knew all this, but was not in the least disheartened. That same day she took her first lesson in knitting, and commenced hemming a pocket-handkerchief for her protegee. She did not work very fast, poor child, for too short a time had elapsed since she had begun to learn the truly feminine accomplishment of needlework, but the Sister Therese, who was much pleased with her willing endeavors, took particular pains with her, and was better satisfied with a few inches of plain hemming well done than with two yards rapidly, though carelessly, executed, soiled, and crumpled by an inattentive child. Seated between Cecile and Eugenie, Isabelle worked courageously, and a fortnight after her first lesson in knitting, the good nun set her up a stocking, and from that time it became the favorite occupation of the young girl during her hours of recreation, or of any other leisure moments she could find.

On the re-opening of school after the holidays, Cecile Blanchard had joined the drawing class, and Eugenie de Grandville, in addition to her former studies, those of the English and Italian languages. Towards the new year singing had also been added to their other accomplishments, and needlework had to give way, in some measure, to allow the necessary time for these new pursuits; but twice a week the pupils met in the blue room, as it was called, and worked as usual from two until five o'clock. Isabelle had been extremely anxious to join her companions in their new labors, but the Mother St. Euphrasie had easily made her understand that, until she had finished the clothes destined for her orphan protegee, and received her first communion, it would be quite impossible for her to commence any fresh study.

"You will have to work very hard all the winter, my dear child," added the Superior, "if you expect to join those classes after the next holidays. Do you not intend to try for a prize next year?"

"Although I am in it, I do not belong to the class, 'Reverend Mother,'" answered Isabelle; "and the young ladies are already so far advanced."

"That matters not, my child; the more you study and the harder you work the sooner you will be able to join them, and I am quite certain that you do not wish your father and mother to come home and find the same spoiled child they left behind them. Surely you would wish to surprise them by your improvement."

Two or three new pupils had arrived at the convent since the holidays; but although they had been very kindly received by the older residents, their coming did not in the least influence the intimacy already existing between Cecile, Eugenie, and Isabelle. Marguerite de Serdan, the elder sister of one of the newcomers, and also of one who had recently left the convent on account of ill-health, had lately returned to St. Mary's, where she had been educated, after having spent three years in the bosom of her family, and now her dearest hopes were about to be realized. Even before leaving the calm and happy retreat of her childhood, where so many happy years had been passed, and the good nuns, who had lavished on her all the tenderness of their true desire to take the vows, but being at that time only eighteen, her parents had been extremely opposed to her design, and she had been obliged to succumb to their wishes and return home with them. At the end of the first year she had renewed her request for permission to enter upon her novitiate, but it was again refused, and for three successive years no persuasions of her's had been able to bend her father's will or obtain the long-wished-for boon. But Marguerite never wavered in her determination to become the bride of Heaven; she prayed and waited, hoping almost against hope, and her father, who had a thorough knowledge of the waywardness of the human heart, was more than ever determined to withhold his consent until such time as he should be convinced that her vocation was true and unchangeable.

Several years before the period of which we write, the Marquis de Serdan, having been appointed Ambassador to the Court of St. Petersburg, had quitted France with the marchioness, leaving their little daughter, then only five years of age, to the tender care of the Mother St. Euphrasie. She had remained at the convent, as we have already said, until she had attained her eighteenth year, when she was removed by her parents, and was succeeded by her sister Blanche, a frolicsome child, who had scarcely numbered nine summers, and who, with a younger sister, had been born during the residence of her father and mother in Russia. It was almost with a shudder of terror that Marguerite had quitted the peaceful home of her childhood to enter into the world she so much dreaded; but her parents demanded her submission to their will, and she was forced, however contrary to her own wishes, to obey. Nevertheless, she had fully resolved to consecrate herself to the Lord's service; not that the world had lost its charms for her, for her world lay within the convent walls, and the bitter sorrows, trials, and temptations that assail us frail mortals were to her things completely unknown. She obeyed her earthly parents, but turned her thoughts more than ever towards the bright region where dwelt her Heavenly Father, that best of friends, and resigned herself to patient endurance. At length, however, her fervent piety, her faith and innocent purity of heart and mind, convinced the Marquis that his child's vocation was firm and unalterable. The tardy consent was given at last, and on passing for the last time through the iron-barred portal of the convent of St. Mary's, which only opened to receive into the sanctuary of peace those who desired to shroud themselves for ever beneath the black veil of the Order, or to give egress to the funeral procession of a departed nun, not a sigh for the bright world she had left behind, nor a tear of regret, was heard or seen to dim the bright blue eye of the pious Marguerite de Serdan.

The young Blanche, having been attacked by severe illness, had left St. Mary's the previous year, and Marie, the third daughter of M. and Madame de Serdan, had accompanied her sister Marguerite on her return to the convent, and had lately taken her place among the pupils of the second class. After the profession of Marguerite, the Marquis and Marchioness were to return to Russia, and as the little Marie was a very delicate child, they had resolved to leave her with the Superior, and Blanche, who was to spend the winter in the south of France, under the care of a sister of her mother's, would also in the spring return to G—, and once more become an inmate of St. Mary's.

The ceremony of taking the veil is always a momentous event, as may be surmised, in a religious establishment, and for the celebration of Marguerite de Serdan's final vows, a grand festival was preparing at the convent. The principal portion of the wealth of a religious community is generally lavished in good deeds; any superfluity is bestowed on the chapel, and

this homage to the Lord is not grudgingly awarded, but is offered with that heartfelt pleasure and unselfishness which denote the cheerful giver. But the convent of St. Mary was not rich, and it was customary to make flowers atone for the absence of gold and silver, and the beautiful work of the more favored houses. On the day above mentioned, however, the chapel presented an admirable appearance. Hundreds of wax lights burned on the altar and in other parts of the sacred building; flowers innumerable surrounded the statue of the Blessed Mother of our great Redeemer and filled the air with their sweet perfume. The private choir of the nuns was separated from the larger one by an iron grating, before which fell a thick black curtain, which was, however, drawn aside at the commencement of the service; but Marguerite de Serdan, dressed in a rich white satin robe, which was partially concealed by the folds of a magnificent Bruxelles lace veil, and wearing the usual crown of orange blossoms, was kneeling at the foot of the altar, praying and invoking the blessing of heaven on her dedication to the service of God. Her lovely face beamed with a calm and holy joy, and no thoughts disturbed the tranquility of her mind save that of the immense, the ineffable happiness which she was called upon to enjoy. Permission having arrived that morning from Rome, dispensing with the usual year of novitiate, all was now ready. The young girl pronounced the vows which were to separate her for ever from the world in a firm and steady voice, and not a tear, not even a sigh of regret, dimmed in the least degree the expression of joyous serenity spread over her beautiful features. Marguerite, or rather the Sister Marie, for on entering on a religious life she had adopted the name of the Queen of Heaven, was happy, aye, very happy. Her most cherished wishes had been unexpectedly realized after three long years of almost despairing watching, waiting, hoping, and praying; for had she not vowed herself unto the Lord, and she blessed His most holy name for having inspired her with the vocation, and rendered fervent and heartfelt thanks to the Blessed Mary, whose name she had been allowed to assume, for the assistance she had afforded her in the hour of need.

Isabelle de Verneuil had been present at the ceremony with her friends and companions; but the former, who dearly loved the young nun, had burst into tears on seeing the long silken curls of the young girl fall beneath the scissors of the Mother St. Euphrasie. It had required all the eloquence of Cecile and Eugenie, as well as that of the nuns, to console her even in the slightest degree. But it was the newly-made nun herself who ably dispersed the singular ideas the child had formed concerning her.

About a week after the happy day on which she had devoted herself for ever to the God of mercy and goodness, who had thus led her to the foot of the cross, in order to snatch her from the deceptive influences and pleasures of the world, she had met Isabelle alone in the garden, her companions, on hearing the bell, having left her to pick up some books and work which had fallen on the grass. The poor child, still absorbed by the grief she had felt on that memorable day, timidly asked the nun if she did not regret the tender and loving caresses of her parents, and whether she were not sorry to find that she could never again pass through the great iron gates that shut out all social ties and family affection.

Sister Marie listened and smiled as the sweet voice of Isabelle pronounced these words. A few seconds later she answered, with unchanging cheek and serene composure: "I am the happiest of women, Isabelle; all my fondest and most cherished wishes are realized, and I ask no other happiness but that of spending my life at the foot of the cross of our great and glorious Redeemer."

With these words she turned away; but Isabelle remained for some time standing on the spot where she had left, following with her eyes the black veil of the nun as it stood out clear and distinct against the masses of green foliage of the shrubberies. At length, however, she also retraced her steps to the convent, murmuring to herself as she went: "Marguerite has no little brother like I have; and I love my dear little Gaston far too well ever to think of becoming a nun."

CHAPTER VI.

The ceremony we described in our last chapter had taken place in October, and towards the middle of November the weather changed very suddenly, and winter with its frost and snow, wind and rain, had set in for good, and few if any, except the inhabitants of that part of the coast, knew how severely it occasionally ushers itself in at G—. For some days a chill north wind had blown without intermission, while clouds of snow darkened the atmosphere, being scarcely able, from the violence of the blast, to find a resting place upon the earth; while the windows and doors of the old con-

vent shook beneath the fury of the gusts of wind that howled fiercely round the venerable building. Notwithstanding the numerous precautions adopted to prevent the cold from taking effect upon the inhabitants of St. Mary's, the nuns, as well as the pupils, suffered acutely from the severity of the weather. The infirmary was crowded with invalids, and colds, coughs, and sore throats, accompanied by fever, gave constant occupation to the patient Sisters appointed to the care of the sick.

Isabelle de Verneuil had caught, in some inexplicable manner, the scarlet fever, and before the doctor, who had been in constant attendance for some time at the convent, could pronounce an opinion on her state, or give a name to her illness, Cecile and Eugenie began to complain of sore throats and pains all over them. The medical attendant no sooner saw them than he declared that scarlet fever had broken out in the house, and recommended the bewildered nuns to send home all the pupils who had parents or relatives in the neighborhood. But the Mother St. Euphrasie, alike patient and enduring beneath this unexpected misfortune, was equal to any emergency; strong in thought as in resolve, and in humble forgetfulness of self, with a serene reliance on heavenly aid, she set herself to work. She caused the three sick girls to be well wrapped up and carried at once into a large and airy room situated in one of the towers that capped the sacred edifice, and which consequently was entirely separated from the rest of the building. Then followed days and weeks of continual nursing, anxiety, and suspense; the malady ran its course, but although the fever abated, the sore throats got well, and all fear on their account had ceased, the patients regained their strength but very slowly, and convalescence was often interrupted by a return of feverish symptoms, which hung about them for a long time. Happily, however, and thanks to the Mother St. Euphrasie's wise precautions and extreme care, the fever did not spread. The pupils generally, with the exception of a few confined with colds and coughs, were in good health, and the doctor was able at length to reassure the Superior as to the state of the three young girls; but as the weather was so snowy and cold, he advised their remaining a few weeks longer in their present warm and comfortable quarters in the tower.

One very cold evening the three girls, tired of their long and compulsory holidays, seated themselves at a table lighted by a large lamp, the brightness of which was veiled by a green shade. A blazing wood fire burned on the hearth, for the cold was intense, and one of those wintry winds that drive heavy clouds of snow before it and chill one to the very bones was whistling round and about the house. The snow, untrampled, except by the blasts that ploughed and packed it into drifts, covered roofs, walls, and pavements; icicles depended from the naked branches of the trees; yet, notwithstanding that all was tempest outside the antique lattice, the room and its inhabitants presented a picture of peaceful tranquillity and happiness.

"Oh, Sister Therese, what a cold night!" said Isabelle, shivering and drawing a little shawl closer round her throat as a gust of wind shook the windows and interrupted the train of thought in which she had been indulging for some minutes.

"Indeed it is," answered the nun.

"Do not let us think of what is passing outside," said Eugenie, "we are so comfortable indoors by this nice fire."

"O, yes, we are so very comfortable," added Cecile. "I was so cold just now, but am nice and warm at present. I should like to know what we are all going to do to-night."

"Sister Therese has one of her pretty stories to read to us, I think," said Isabelle, in a coaxing voice, "and I am going to try and finish the hem of my petticoat."

"I have my knitting," said Cecile, "as I wish much to get on with it."

"And I my embroidery," rejoined Eugenie. "Very well," said the nun, smiling; "then I suppose I may begin my story."

As soon as the invalids had sufficiently recovered to sit up they had managed to give their temporary habitation an air of cheerfulness, and by degrees almost all their little possessions had found their way to the tower. The monotony of their present life did not, however, fatigue them, and although they shared the same daily occupations, yet the good nuns managed so well, that each book, each piece of work became an inexhaustible source of pleasure. The Mother St. Euphrasie always came in to see them the last thing at night, and generally contrived to manage her visit in time for the evening prayer, of which the Litany of the Blessed Virgin always formed a portion; and although the young girls were barely convalescent from a long and dangerous illness, they read and worked as much as their strength

would allow, and spent in this manner pleasant and happy days.

The Sister Therese had scarcely closed the book from whence she had been reading a portion of the life of St. Monica to her youthful auditors, to examine Cecile's work, when the latter suddenly exclaimed:

"I have such a bright idea! How much money have you got, Eugenie?"

"I really cannot tell exactly," answered Eugenie. "I know I had twelve or fourteen francs in my purse the other day, and as I never spend anything, I suppose they are still there."

"Then do you never give anything to the collections in the chapel?"

"Yes, indeed, but I have always some money in reserve for that in another purse."

"Indeed!" cried Cecile, laughing. "How grand we are with our two purses!"

"It is not out of pride that I mention it," replied Eugenie, blushing, "it is because I always like to keep a private purse in case of accidents."

"I know that," answered Cecile, kissing her; "I only said it for fun. And you, Isabelle, how much have you got?"

"Ten francs in gold, and seven and a half in silver."

"You seem very inquisitive to-night," remarked Eugenie. "Might we be permitted to ask why the contents of our purses interest you so much this evening? We have confessed our poverty, but you have not informed us of the state of your finances."

"I have twenty-one francs."

"Then what is your idea?" asked Isabelle.

"We are anxiously awaiting an explanation, if you please."

"Well, then, listen. Did you not hear our Reverend Mother say the day before yesterday, that the poor children belonging to the sailors of the large ship that was lost with all hands, had received the three last warm petticoats remaining in her cupboard, and how much she regretted not having any more ready for the three new girls just admitted into the orphan school?"

"Yes, yes!" cried Isabelle and Eugenie together.

"Then this is what I wish to propose. Suppose we put all our money together, and buy ten yards of some good, warm, thick material to make them each one. I have counted the cost, and I find that it will take ten yards at two francs and a half a yard. We should also require some strong thread and some linen tape."

"What a charming idea!" cried the two young girls. "But, altogether we have fifty-two francs and a half, and the material, according to your calculation, will only cost twenty-five."

"I have thought of that," answered Cecile, "and we might, if you liked, buy some coarse knitting needles, and a quantity of nice thick wool, and knit them each a pair of mittens like those of the other girls."

"I should like it very much," said Eugenie.

"So should I," cried Isabelle. "We should have ample time to make them up here, as the doctor says he will not allow us to go down stairs as yet. But who will buy us all these things?"

"Our dear Mother St. Euphrasie will send into town for everything, and we will speak to her about it to-night. What do you think of our plan, dear Sister?"

"Follow the kind dictates of your hearts, my dear children," answered the nun, whose mild eyes were suffused in tears. "The orphans will bless you and Heaven will reward you."

"And you will cut them out a get them ready, so that we can get to work at once."

During the enforced imprisonment of the invalids, the warmest sympathy had sprung up between the Sister Therese and her three companions. She perfectly well remembered the conversation to which Cecile had alluded, but had not remarked the fixed attention paid to it by the young girl; however, the words she had then spoken recalled to the mind of the nun the numerous marks of interest manifested by her towards the new inmates of the orphan school. She now understood the motive of them, and mentioned the children's wishes to the Superior when she paid her evening visit. The good Mother St. Euphrasie, charmed with the pious sentiments and good intentions of her pupils, readily consented to the scheme, and promised to send the lay Sister Frances the next day to G—, on purpose to make the necessary purchases, so that they could set to work as soon as possible.

We cannot affirm that the young girls sleep was sound or dreamless that night. On the contrary, Isabelle was very restless and uneasy, and, for a time, the watchful sister feared a return of fever; but shortly after, a few murmured words caught her ear, spoken, doubtless, by her patient under the influence of a dream.