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THE BENEDICTINE NUN: A TALE OF OUR LADY OF FOLGOET.

A TALE FROM BRITANNY.

The moon was at its full, and had risen on the Monastery of St. Iva, the sombre masses of white buildings, dating from the twelfth century, seemed to slumber in a flood of light relieving the dark and lofty forest that surrounded it; a silver-fretted fall of water gushed over a craggy eminence, and ran down its rocky bed, into the gorge of a ravine, thence flowing into and nourishing a lake which lay calm and unruffled, bright as a mirror, at the foot of the mountain on the side of which stood the venerable pile.

A severe conventual taste, and the usual foresight had been exercised in the choice of a site for this monastery, as in most religious houses of ancient date; placed in the midst of wild and elevated scenery; removed from the realities of the other world. In silence and solitude, it was well fitted for the contemplation of God, in the grandeur of His works; whilst the lake and the surrounding woods furnished the few material wants of the community.

At a short distance from the entrance to the monastery on a green sward, encircled by a cluster of holly trees, whose polished leaves glittered in the breeze, stood a group of men and horses in military trappings, evidently prepared for an escort.

A profound silence prevailed, disturbed only by an occasional clink of arms, or by the fitful splashing of the water as it fell into the neighboring lake, a silence rendered more impressive by the vast structure into whose deepening shadows the eye sought in vain to penetrate.

At length the gruff voice of the officer commanding this little band broke the stillness.—'My lady, methinks, is hard to shiver: six hours have already elapsed since she entered the convent, yet six minutes were all too long to disburthen so gentle a conscience.'

'Speak with reverence when you speak of the sacraments of the Church, and with reserve and respect when you speak of my cousin, the heiress of Rohan, or be silent,' replied a cavalier, in a tone of authority. A tender anxiety was depicted in his countenance, as he advanced from beneath the shady branches of a tree against which he had been leaning, wrapt in his cloak, and lost in profound thought. His quicker ear had caught the sounds of movement within the court of the building, and the tinkling of a bell announced the approach of the lady abbess. All became bustle, and the escort mounted their ready horses. The pale face of a lay sister presented itself at the grille, and all being prepared without, the iron-studded gates were thrown open.

The lady abbess did not advance beyond the cloister of the inner court; she was attended by two members of the community, bearing tapers, and led by the hand a young maiden veiled and equipped for travelling on horseback; and as she knelt humbly at the feet of the lady abbess, the latter pronounced the following blessing over her:—'Bless thee, my daughter, and my niece; whatever trials may befall thee, be equal to them, do all things for the glory of God, and suffer all things for His name, and in thy moments of difficulty, above all, of doubt, after our Lady of Folgoet, invoke Salaun the blessed;—rise, and may our Lady guide the movements of thy heart.' But the fragile and gentle form rose not, for at the mention of Salaun the Blessed, she became all absorbed in an ardent gaze of wonder and veneration, though before her nought appeared but empty space. The sentiment of affection and respect for the religious character of the lady abbess, natural to the moment, were lost in a preoccupation over which she had no control. At length she rose, as it were, mechanically, and was conducted by her two attendants to the outer gate, where the young cavalier received her, and carefully enveloping her in a mantle, he assisted her to mount the palfrey prepared for her. The lady abbess watched the group with an affectionate solicitude till the gates were closed, when she returned, murmuring in a low but just audible voice.—'There goes a fresh heart into the turmoils and temptations of the world; truly, if it were for the glory of God, I would that she were ours.'

'Then there is no decidedly pronounced vocation,' observed one of the religious ladies in attendance, the interest she took in the young person carrying her somewhat beyond the bounds of etiquette, as she had not been directly appealed to.

'The elements are there,' replied the lady abbess; 'the encouragement and drawing on of the Holy Spirit, which we call *attrait*, is clearly defined, but extraordinary grace alone can overcome the difficulties and dangers from without, increased, as I fear they are, by some hidden obstacle within; alas! the heart is already tainted with human passion. But let the community be summoned to the chapel.'

Slowly and silently the nuns advanced along the different angles of the cloister as they quitted the solitude of their cells in obedience to the summons. The same grave pace served them all; enveloped in their veils nothing distinguished the eldest from the youngest as they moved along absorbed in contemplation and prayer.—At the chapel door the community awaited the arrival of a mattress, borne carefully by four lay sisters; it was carried into the chapel and placed on the right hand side, at a little distance from the altar. The place of distinction had cost much to the humble religious who reclined upon the mattress; obedience alone had obliged her to do violence to her humility in renouncing the most obscure corner of the chapel for her present position.

The history of Sister Cyril, as this nun was called, is briefly this: she had been the heiress to almost boundless wealth, an orphan favored with great natural charms, and she was consequently sought in marriage by the most distinguished noblemen of her time. One of those was preferred amongst the number; on a certain day she was to declare her election, and the marriage ceremony was to follow immediately after: but on the night preceding the appointed day, as she was occupied in prayer, her eyes fell on the following text:—'Lord what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' To which our Lord answers, 'Sell all that thou hast, give it to the poor, take up thy cross, and follow me.' A revulsion of feeling immediately came over her;—for the first time she was struck with the difference between time and eternity—the soul and the body. A life of luxury and indulgence of the will, such as awaited her, and its abnegation in the spirit of poverty and the cross. The more she reflected on it the more immeasurably vast eternity appeared—it was about her, it was the element that surrounded the Deity. There was not a moment to be lost in securing her future at any cost, at any sacrifice. The morning found her absorbed in this contemplation; she postponed the day of her decision, and after consulting the authorities of the Church in fasting and in prayer, she renounced the world altogether, distributed her wealth amongst the poor and for good works, entered the cloister at the early age of eighteen, and in due time took the vows of the Benedictine order.

This same person had now reached the advanced age of ninety-seven years; she was extended on a mattress stuffed with heather, as being less luxurious than straw, for, like the saints, she had become a connoisseur in the degrees of suffering and mortification, and like them, had learned to love it for Christ's sake.—'Though many and long, she was not weary of her years of suffering and temptation. They had passed in ceaseless war against the flesh, and they had seen a series of victories in the spirit bringing with them a foretaste of eternal joy.'

Twice had persecutions dispersed her community, leaving her free from its restraint, but finding her faithful to her vows. She had passed, as it were with closed eyes, once to a convent of her order in Spain, and a second time to another on the borders of Africa. In strange lands and in other communities she carried edification wherever Providence led her, drawing all who surrounded her nearer and nearer to perfection.—At length, her long years of mortification, with innumerable spiritual blessings, brought in their train great physical infirmities, yet to the last hour she followed the duties of her order, and, though unable to walk, she watched and prayed and fasted with unabated zeal. She had obtained permission to be carried early and late to be present at all the duties of the community.—Extended on the mattress, covered with her veil, she appeared aged and decrepit, but when her features were discovered no one could look upon her without veneration and delight. The spirit of peace beamed in her countenance; it was a saintly calm allied to the supernatural; the fading and furrows of age were replaced by a complexion purified even to transparency. It seemed as if the accumulated merits and virtues of three-quarters of a century passed in humble communion with the divine spirit, had there built up an altar at once mystical and simple and dwelt upon it.

Such was the Sister Cyril, whose heart was a sanctuary of holy love, and whose words were as an oracle in the ears of those who surrounded her, waiting in humble patience and submission the hour of her release and of her reward. The same holy silence reigned in the chapel now that it was tenanted by some sixty souls, and blazed with light, as when one star-like lamp burnt before the altar in the presence of the solitary nun whose turn it was to pass her hour of watch before the sacred tenant of the tabernacle. Thrice the bell sounded, announcing that the community had been called together at this unusual hour to be addressed by the lady abbess on some important subject, and they knelt in prayer asking the divine blessing.

After a short pause she began: 'You know,

my children, that the union of prayer is its strength; abnegation in the sacrifice of our own will for the honor and glory of God is one of the privileges of a religious life; by prayer we must arrive at this, for prayer is the medium of grace between the Divine Spirit and the human soul. It is in this spirit I now require your prayers, and ask that all the disposable merits of this community, together with the prayers you may in your charity offer up during the next forty-eight hours, may be presented at the throne of grace on behalf of one exposed to great dangers and difficulties—that she may triumph over all obstacles, and become the spouse of Christ; if such be His divine will.'

After the nuns had withdrawn, the lady abbess paid a visit to Sister Cyril, for she always took counsel of her on important occasions, and in the present instance she was encouraged to redoubled perseverance, in the anticipation of success.

Meanwhile the group we have seen set out from the convent, advanced on their way, and soon reached the entrance of a forest over whose sombre and dense shades the moon had no influence, but the number of torches carried by the attendants rendered it perfectly light, whilst two runners, as the messengers who carried despatches over mountains and across rivers from castle to castle, were called, kept a few paces in advance of the lady's palfrey, carrying their torches close to the ground, so that every impediment might be visible in the uneven and unfrequented paths they were traversing.

After half-an-hour's ride the cavalcade emerged into the open plain, and it was not till then that Ernest de Coëtivan addressed his youthful cousin, though the extreme care with which he directed the progress of her palfrey gave sufficient proof of his most tender solicitude. Her silent preoccupation and insensibility to surrounding objects, but more especially her apparent unconsciousness of his presence caused him no slight degree of pain and some secret anxiety, which discovered itself in the tone of his voice as he inquired whether she preferred to follow the mountain route or to cross the plain. 'We will pass by our Lady of Folgoet,' she replied, suddenly turning her horse's head and riding swiftly in the direction of the church of that name, and to which an abrupt turn round a cluster of elms soon brought them. Here the lady suddenly stopped, and throwing up her veil, made the sign of the cross, and was presently lost in silent prayer, whilst her suite remained at a little distance. Ernest gazed with admiration on the extreme beauty of her face, heightened as it was by the expression of deep devotion, and which the pale light of the moon made almost angelic. But his admiration was mingled with anguish as he perceived the impossibility of human passion existing in so pure and spiritual a state; it was with a sigh, hopeless and forlorn that he said: 'The lateness of the hour alone, fair cousin, induces me to break in upon a preoccupation that seems to exclude all external objects; I fear we must descend to earth, and move forward. Do you see nothing,' she said, gazing fixedly in the direction of the high altar, which, with the nave of the church, was visible through the window near which they stood. 'Nothing,' he replied, 'save this vast and lonely structure, bathed in a flood of light, the pointed windows staining the altars and shrines with a thousand dyes as mystical as deep; nothing but its spires, which seem to pierce the fleecy clouds about the moon; the massive and mystic outlines of its gables, which mingle with the blue sky, crowned with stars as in a dream; nothing do I see of life or motion.'

'And do you hear nothing?' she said, her whole soul seeming to beam in her face under the influence of some angelic sound. 'Nothing,' he said, 'breaks the profound silence of the night, save the murmuring of the miraculous fountain, which takes its rise in the church, and gushes fonder through the wall into the sculptured fount at the foot of our Lady's chapel.' 'Silence,' said the lady, 'it is gone to heaven, from whence it came; let us move onward.'

The position of the Lady Blanche was one of more than ordinary interest. Her father, the Baron de Rohan, one of the most powerful and wealthy nobles of Brittany, possessed two children, the Lady Blanche and a son who was some years her senior. At a seasonable age the former had been sent to a convent in Normandy for her education, with an understanding that if she showed any tendency towards a religious life every encouragement should be given to develop it, as such a result entered perfectly into the views of the baron.

It might be thought an act of heroic generosity that a person so independent of the circumstances of the world, should offer as a voluntary sacrifice one of two children for the service of God; but, unhappily, it does not always follow that the motive is so pure and disinterested as it appears to be. The baron possessed sound faith, neither would he have desired a religious life for his daughter against her inclination. But here terminated his religious views.

In a temporal point of view, pride of power, family name and honors—in one word, personal ambition, was the end and motive of all his actions; hence it was that a life that renounced all these advantages on the part of his daughter was doubly acceptable to him, as leaving them whole and undivided for his son. It is true that this latter was the very mirror of chivalry in a chivalrous age, and qualified in every way, both in character and person, to exalt still higher a family name already so distinguished.

The satisfaction of the parent was at its height when he heard of the extraordinary piety of his daughter, together with her spiritual advancement, which left no doubt as to her future destiny. In the midst of this proud satisfaction, a very probable casualty, though one he had not at all calculated upon, occurred. A courier arrived to announce that his son had fallen on the frontiers of Spain, after having accomplished prodigies of valor; even his body had been abandoned to the enemy, though not till every effort had been made by his comrades in arms to secure it. It is easier to imagine than to describe the effect of this fatal news on a heart built up of pride and worldly greatness, thus suddenly struck down to the dust and ashes of its own desolation. When, however, the baron had somewhat recovered from the shock and could bear to look upon the truth, his former ambition returned to him, and he saw but one way open by which to realize it. He demanded the immediate return of his daughter, without considering her state of feeling or the extent to which her nature had been compromised by his former intentions; and as though he were fearful this chance might also escape him, he proceeded with a precipitation that can only be explained by the times in which he lived and his arbitrary will, which was almost sovereign.

He surveyed the beauty and graceful form of his daughter for the first time since her childhood with pride and satisfaction; but his heart unaccustomed to the tender emotions of parental sympathy, was prepared to exact with rigour whatever might favor his designs; thus he announced his determination in a manner that admitted of no reply from her, and proceeded with due form to make it public. His design was to marry his daughter to one of three families which he named; but provided she did not approve of either, he left her the privilege of naming a fourth, of equal rank and wealth, on condition that the favored knight should make good his pretensions in the lists, if called upon to do so by either of the rejected knights, who might feel their honor wounded—a suggestion of barbarism too often followed in a more recent age; thus she was to become the victim of conqueror. It was under these circumstances the young maiden had made a journey to the convent of St. Iva, from which she was now returning, having received the counsel and direction she desired, with the spiritual advice of her aunt, the Lady Abbess. If at her age it required an almost superhuman effort to contend against her father's decrees, it was still more difficult to sacrifice all the tender emotions of her heart. Up to the time of quitting her father's chateau she had been daily, nay hourly, in the company of Ernest who was some three years older than herself, and devoted to her service. Thus the youthful dawn of sentiment and sympathy had been shared with him, and it cost her more pain to part with him than with all the rest of her family, not excepting her mother, whom she loved tenderly. For some time after her arrival in Normandy she was sad and desolate: but as time went on and she increased in age, in the silence of the cloister and sanctity of prayer her natural character, which was full of generous virtues, became essentially religious; but an extreme simplicity of heart and its consequences, a yearning desire for some sympathy to repose upon, as nature developed year by year, contested in a subtle form a religious vocation which demanded an entire and generous sacrifice.

The young Ernest was constantly present to her thoughts in innocence and simplicity, full of tenderness in the past, mingled with pain, thus forming a link up to the moment when they met again; but her surprise was great even to timidity, to see him whom she had always thought upon as the youth she had left him, now grown to man's estate, handsome, accomplished in feats of arms, and of that high and enthusiastic character which was precisely the most likely to conquer the little that was left of independence in her heart. It only required that these two beings, so rich in the perfections of nature, should meet again, that a natural and exalted affection should be confirmed between them.—They were now brought in contact once more, though the feelings that resulted from this meeting were very different in each; with him all was abandon and unlimited surrender of a heart full of enthusiasm, to the beauty and virtues of his cousin, for though no word of explanation had ever passed between them, yet the heart of each was quick to comprehend. In her the se-

cret, timid, and innocent delight which attends the rosy dawn of a virtuous passion, was checked and sobered by the spirit of devotion, long and fervently pursued, which dwelt like a precious essence about the heart. The virtues and the merits of the Holy Virgin, had formed the constant subject of her contemplation during her years of absence, and of all these virtues maiden purity was that she dwelt on most; this, and the innocence of St. Joseph, formed the most favored and favoring of her meditations made in the little chapel of our Blessed Lady attached to the convent.

On the first approach, the chateau of Rohan had more the appearance of a besieged place than of a reunion on a festive occasion; considerable bodies of armed men, the retainers of the Lords de Blois, de Crozon, and du Maine, the three competitors for the hand of Blanche, together with the followers of all the relations of the baron, and the numerous warlike guests who were invited; horses picketed for the night, in a mild July air, the blaze of torches reflected by the steel armour, the noise and confusion of fresh arrivals, augmenting the multitude faster than accommodation within the walls could be assigned them.

Through all this confusion Ernest conducted his charge, and the *cortège*, with no little difficulty, threaded its way to the drawbridge, and thence into the courtyard. Thinking her cousin hastily but kindly, Blanche leaped from her palfrey, and hurrying to a postern-door, that opened on to a corridor, leading to her apartment, she entered her little oratory, and cast herself before the crucifix, exhausted in body, and dismayed in spirit. The scene through which she had passed on arriving at the chateau, had renewed her anxiety, and presented the terrible reality of her position vividly before her eyes. The immediate approach of the moment when she must make her final and irrevocable determination, by which her future both temporal and eternal, was to be influenced, perhaps compromised, entirely overwhelmed her; bathed in tears, she clasped her hands in mute supplication before the little altar of the Blessed Virgin, and as she inwardly implored her protection, she murmured, 'Salaun the Blessed, intercede for me.' At the invocation of this name so propitious to her, a gentle peace stole over her, exhaustion no longer weighed her down, and with a refreshed spirit she yielded herself into the hands of her women, who awaited in her chamber to prepare her for rest.

Her sleep was that of calm, unruffled innocence; her first act, her first thought on the return of consciousness in the morning, was to place herself in the hands of Providence by a fervent aspiration, offering herself as an unconditional sacrifice to the Divine will, desiring, if it should be His pleasure, to be taken into His service in the humblest capacity of a religious life, if such an honor conferred on her would add to His glory. It seemed to her, that with this act of renunciation and self-devotion, a supernatural fortitude had descended upon her, and she felt a tacit conviction that she had nothing further to do but pursue the tenor of events as they presented themselves, with courage, and in the simplicity of truth, to arrive at the accomplishment of the Divine will. Peace was confirmed within her; the vast responsibility had been raised from her, and the genial glow of hope had taken entire possession of her heart. In this state of mind, she gave herself up to her attendants, who, profiting by the instructions they had received, decked her in all that art could furnish.

At the hour of noon, Blanche descended into the hall, and advancing to the dais erected at one extremity, took the place appointed for her, somewhat below the elevated seat occupied by her parents. The vast hall was filled to overflowing with the beauty and nobility of Brittany, glittering with all that the wealth and the luxury of the age could devise. But Blanche was the admired of all; her grace, her beauty, her noble yet modest air, seemed to excite the admiration of others in proportion as she was insensible to them herself. One there was, and one only, who penetrated the exterior, and trembled as he contemplated the unnatural calm of her features, her eyes beamed graciously on all alike, whilst her spirit was absent, and held solitary and internal converse with the heart.

We pass by the baron's address to his guests his summons to his daughter to make her election, her calm but firm objections; the shame of the father in what he considered the dishonoring of his guests, his bitter passion at this unexpected contradiction to his will, which vented itself in this final declaration.—'To-morrow, heiress of Rohan, you will at the same hour meet me; and this august assembly, and if you still persist in rendering yourself unworthy of the race from which you spring, by the bones of my ancestors, I swear justice shall be done upon you; forth from my gates shall you go a wanderer and disinherited, and another and a stranger shall take