

Choice Literature.

JOSEPHINE FOUGÈRE.

AN ALPINE STORY.

CHAPTER IV. ALONE.

When Josephine went back to the cottage a bitter feeling mingled with her sorrow. A word spoken during the funeral services had deeply irritated her. "If Genevieve has died so soon," said some one in a low tone, "it is because Rene made her life too hard. It isn't sickness, it isn't old age, but suffering of body and mind, which has taken her from this world." These words were spoken very low, but not so low that Josephine could not hear them; and she went to find herself alone, face to face, with Rene—she, his servant and his daughter, alone for life in the desolate house. Irritation and anger dried the tears under her eye lids while she looked at the poacher.

He staggered from one side of the room to the other, wandering with unsteady step, his head hanging down, his eyes bloodshot. He had the savage air and heavy tread of a wounded animal, but it was his heart that was wounded. He walked without seeing anything, and still Josephine's glance arrested and irritated him.

"Go out," he said with a harsh voice.

Josephine rose and obeyed. She went down into the bottom of the valley, where the spring widens into a quiet sheet of water and reflects the skies. It was a wild, retired place, where during the summer nights the animals of the forest came to drink. Josephine had been here many times to wash her clothes among the bright pebbles; she had often followed her mother here; this time she came alone. She knelt down at the water's edge, where formerly Genevieve had stooped, and, free from all restraint, she cried.

"Oh, mother, was it he who killed you? Must I serve him? Must I live for him? My sorrow is greater than I can bear."

Her hot tears flowed until evening. The stars shone out; Josephine raised her head and saw them sparkling in the blue sky.

"Mother," she said, "you are up there; for you night and misery are passed. But you love me yet; you love me! I shall always believe that. You are worshipping God with the saints and angels, and I have just been praying to Him at the fountain. I shall do as you wish when I work for him. With good will I would toil, I would serve him. Yes, I would love even him who has made you suffer."

As she spoke Josephine saw once more, in spirit, the shining face of her mother, and her sad thoughts were chased away like clouds before the rising sun. Then she went back to the old tower and to her father. She lit the tiny lamp and made the fire. Fougère was sitting motionless on the stump of a tree in front of the empty fireplace. His head was hanging down; his sad, dull eyes were turned toward the ground. He was breathing so heavily that it seemed as if he were carrying a burden on his broad shoulders. His hands trembled; he did not say a word.

Josephine knelt down before him, and in the shadow she saw a tear glistening on his beard. "Father," said the young girl very softly—"father, are you hungry?"

With a rough motion he put her away from him. "You have your mother's voice, but you haven't her heart," said he; and Fougère shut himself up with his mute sorrow.

Thus he mourned for Genevieve three days and three nights, without eating or drinking, without opening his mouth, even to lament.

Josephine, full of remorse, said to herself, "How he loved her! Others have been unjust toward him, and I ungrateful."

The fourth day she asked herself, "Will he die of grief?" when suddenly Fougère rose, as a bent tree rights itself with a great effort. Thus the poacher came to himself. He passed his hand over his brow to chase away the gloomy thoughts, stretched his brawny arms and looked through the window upon the white fields. Then, opening the door, he took a deep breath of air; the life of the woods called him with irresistible voice. He put on his boots and took his gun. The mourning for Genevieve was finished.

When the funeral is once over, peasants have little time to sit down and weep for their dead. Work, hard master, drives away inactive sorrow; without it, hunger would come. "On! on!" he cries to those who would seek a little leisure to nourish their grief.

If Josephine had not gone every morning to pick up a bundle of faggots, she would have died of cold; if she had not made her bread, she would have starved. Genevieve, the prudent mother, had directed that her daughter's money should remain hidden under the stones of the hearth.

"A wet day may come, darling—a wet day when you cannot earn anything; you will find then under this stone bread ready baked. Do not touch it; keep it. Work, darling, without cherishing your grief."

Before the dawn Josephine was up; even till evening she took no rest. But when the twilight came, when the moon rose above the mountains, when the valley grew dark, then Josephine on her knees thought of rest in heaven, and in thought found again her gentle mother, and in praying gained new strength for the next day's work.

Fougère came back willingly to his home; he found in his daughter something of his dead wife, something which drew him to her, in spite of himself. He no longer wished to forget his trouble at the tavern. When, from the woods, he saw the blue smoke rising from the tower, he thought without displeasure of his fireside and of the young girl who kept it. Josephine had learned to read in his face, if not what he thought, at least what he wished. She knew the minute he entered from which direction blew the wind of his changeful humour. Speaking little, but observing much, she avoided storms and kept the poacher at home. "I am minding my mother," she said with untiring sweetness; and she felt repaid.

In the middle of winter, during a day more mild than usual, she was spinning near the hearth; her spirit flew

swifter than a bird to seek her loved one. Suddenly the door opened and Leonora came in; with wandering eyes and seeming more sad and fiercer than was her wont, she sat down in the darkest corner of the fireplace, and remained there as silent and mournful as an owl among the ruins when he watches for the night. Without saying a word, Josephine had taken up her spinning and her thoughts.

"You are not sad, then?" said the crazy woman suddenly. "Josephine Fougère, do you not curse death, which has taken your mother from you? Do you not curse your father, who made her die in poverty? And do you not say that life is hard and that your heart is failing you? Must Leonora be the only one upon earth who suffers, the only one who moans? Is there no one else but she who grieves?"

Josephine shuddered when she heard these words; the blood mounted to her cheeks, the tears to her eyes; she pressed her hands to her heart and sat motionless for a moment. Then, rising, she approached the beggar, bent toward her, and, without speaking, pressed a kiss upon her forehead.

Disturbed, even in her grief, the crazy woman stood erect; she pressed her clasped hands against her forehead to prevent the blessed imprint from vanishing, and her voice was as sweet as that of a dreaming infant as she said, slowly,

"Some one has kissed Leonora; yes, some one has kissed the poor Leonora! For a long time she has wandered weeping. She finds money along the way and bread in the vill'—is, but where did she ever receive a kiss?" Leonora took her hands from her face and looked straight at Josephine: "You, you are the only one since I have begged who has done me this kindness. Since she has laid her dead under the sod no one on earth has ever kissed Leonora. May I sit down here and look at you, to find, if I can, whence comes your tenderness of heart, this blessed compassion?—Ah, I know," said she in a low voice, "it is Genevieve, it is her gentle spirit, which abides with her daughter. She loved her so dearly! Tell me, Josephine, have you seen her since she went away? Does she come sometimes to visit you during the night, or even when you are spinning all alone here when it is dark? Tell me, do you ever see her? Speak without fear."

"No," answered Josephine; and tears clear as dew glistened on her closed eye-lashes. "No, she is with God. She cannot be in two places, Leonora. She has gone away, never to come back. Her life was sometimes hard, it is true, but her death was so peaceful that only to think of it blurs, Leonora, I cannot speak of that." Silence followed.

"Tell me, darling, did your mother leave anything?"

"A little linen, her blessing and that book. 'It is better than bread, it is better than gold; if you read it, if you keep it carefully, it will keep you.' Thus my mother spoke. I am keeping it, I read it, and when I listen to it I am comforted."

"Do you think, Josephine, if you should leave your spinning to read it a little while now—do you think it would comfort the poor Leonora too?"

"Perhaps," said the young girl; and she took the black book.

"My mother was reading just here. Do you see the mark which she made? Listen."

Leonora's eyes turned now toward the page which she could not read, and now toward the sweet thoughtful face bending over the book.

Josephine began to read: "I heard a great voice saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and God Himself shall be with them and be their God. God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; because the former things are passed away."

Leonora shook her head and sighed:

"It is all very fine, but it's not for Leonora. What would she do among the saints? If she were to wear out her knees on the church-steps, if she could cry day and night, she would still be the poor Leonora. If there were a spring which could wash away her sins, Leonora would go to the ends of the earth to find it; but there is none."

Josephine sat thinking, an elbow on one hand and her head on the other.

"I saw a word," said she at last—"where is it? I saw forgiveness written here; it was God who was to give it."

Josephine searched in the old book. "Listen; here it is: 'Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.' Leonora, my mother often read in this place. Listen again: 'The Blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin.' Leonora, might not this be the spring of which you speak? This spring is not at the end of the world."

Night fell; Leonora rose and disappeared. A few minutes later the poacher entered; he carried on his broad shoulder a fine fox with dark skin. Fougère threw the animal at her feet. "We shall have a roast this evening," he cried.

"It comes just in time; we have almost nothing left," said the young girl.

"We have powder left," answered Fougère, and he began to skin the fox. Leaning against the wall was an old rusty spit. Fougère did not often use it. A poacher lives poorly; he cooks his game only when he cannot sell it. When this game, so rarely seen there, began to turn before the bright fire, then growing little by little a golden brown, began to fill the room with its savoury odour, the hunter's eyes brightened with longing. "A roast fit for a king!" cried he when the meat was done to a turn; and with a triumphant gesture he drew the spit from the smoking body of the animal. "Come to the table, Josephine—come and let us eat. It is a roast fit for a king," he repeated once more as he cut a large slice from the side of the animal. "If the had tasted this in the cities, they would not leave it to the one who caught it. On the word of a poacher, it is good." Fougère was satisfied; he wiped his moustache and looked at Josephine with as cheerful an expression as was possible to him with his stern countenance and black beard. "Now, then, my daughter, why are you so sober and pale to-day? Have you not eaten enough?"

"Yes, father." The young girl turned away: she had been sitting opposite Fougère.

"Speak," said he; "have you no more flour?"

"A measure and a half."

"What do you want, then?"

"Alas, father," said Josephine, choking down her tears, "it is mother that I need, since you ask. Have you so soon forgotten her that you do not know what makes me so pale?"

"If it is to make you sad that that crazy woman comes here, it is the last time, I declare, that she shall put her foot in my house."

"Leonora has done me no harm," said Josephine, raising her head; "no, father, she has done me no harm at all. If she loves your bright fireside, will you not let her come again?" and Fougère did not say no.

The snow melted; game was scarce; the poacher was no longer in good humour. The flour was low in the barrel; hunger came. Josephine spun day and night, but still she could not spin enough. "How shall we live?" said she one morning at the fountain as she filled her pitcher—"how shall we live?"

Full of anxiety, she leaned on her two hands in the fine sand where the water was lost to view. She looked at the old ash and the polished pebbles: she was looking closely, when a little, round, green leaf, borne by the current, rested against her finger.

"Yes, I've seen this very herb in the market; yes, I am sure of it," said the young girl. "Yes, I've seen it; they sell it in the city. I am going to gather it; I am going to carry it down there. I shall have money, I shall have bread."

Quickly Josephine took off her shoes and crossed the brook; on the other side grew fine water-cresses in thick tufts. She gathered a great many; then, sitting down under the old tree, she arranged them in bunches. On the next market-day Josephine went down to the village and sold her cresses without any trouble.

Food lasted as long as the good weather, but when the snow came there were no more cresses, and then the spinning-wheel buzzed from morning till night.

One beautiful day three young girls from the village determined to go up and make a call at the tower—on a day when they were sure of not finding the poacher there. They went in without knocking, smiling beforehand at Josephine's surprise. They opened wide the door and cried altogether, "Ah, what are you doing, Josephine Fougère?"

"You see, I am spinning and watching the fire."

"Alone?"

"Usually my dog Faro is with me, and then my father comes home every evening."

"Really, he seems hardly to think of you."

"Who would make his soup if I were not here?"

"But after you have made it you might come down into the village and take a little pleasure in the evening."

"I always stay at home then, too."

"You work too hard."

"Before, there were two of us; if I stay at home now, is it my fault? I could not go down into the village now to chat, since my mother is no longer here."

"But you will come down during the summer holidays to dance?"

"What would I gain by that?"

"Well, you are a simpleton indeed, Josephine Fougère. Don't you know you might gain a husband? Your hair will be as white as this wool before any one will come up here to seek you."

Josephine shook her head: "No, my friends, I am well as I am, without going down into the village, without dancing, without marrying."

"When you have worn yourself out in taking care of your father, tell me, Josephine, what will you do then?"

"I shall work as before."

"You are growing thin as a bird; you are suffering, my poor girl, I tell you; I see it written on your face," said the most sensible of the girls.

"Ah, well, if I am thin I shall work all the better for that; the mice would not run so fast if they were heavy;" and Josephine forced herself to smile.

"Do you sing sometimes to divert yourself?"

"No, I read."

"Is it some new lament, or perhaps an almanac?"

"No, it is a very old book; it is the word of God."

"A prayer-book? That is only for Sundays."

"But this is for every day of one's life."

"I should die of loneliness up here," said one; "And I of fear," said another; "And I of hunger," said a third, Marie-Rose, a beautiful girl who did not know what trouble or suffering was.

"Come, Josephine—come and take supper with us," said she, pulling her by the sleeve. "We have fresh bread, cream and warm rolls, and white wine too. You are growing thin here, my dear. Come, eat your fill at our house; your father will know nothing about it."

"Thank you," said Josephine, bowing her head—"thank you, my friends, but there is no one but me to watch the house. My father may come home at any time. What would become of him if he did not find the fire lighted and his supper ready? No, I must never be the cause of his going to the tavern. I am often hungry, it is true, but my mother said, 'You must take care of your father when I am gone; keep the house neat and the soup warm; let him find you always at home when he comes in.' To mind my mother is better than to take my own pleasure; I must stay," said she, choking down a sigh.

"Listen, Josephine, listen," said Marie-Rose: "you are so good that I am sorry for you; I will bring you some of my rolls to-morrow. Those that my mother make are the best in the country; she might show them to the king's cook."

"Good-bye, Josephine, good-bye," said the girls altogether.

"Good-bye, my friends," answered the lonely girl.

As the sound of their footsteps died away in the distance, the room they had brightened seemed dark to her. Hunger, which discourages the bravest, made itself felt.

"I am alone, I must stay alone," she said, bowing her head. "What shall I gain by it?"