SERENUS, AND OTHER STORIES

("'Serenus,' a little philosophical tale which may one day stand out in the history of the thought of the nineteenth century, just as to-day 'Candide' or 'Zadig' stands out in that of the eighteenth."—*Anatole France.*)

SERENVS

& OTHER STORIES

OF THE PAST & PRESENT

BY

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I

TWO MARTYRS

ONE morning in the month of March in the year 90, an hour before sunrise, a few men were assembled at the gate of the Mamertine prison, on the steps of the stairs that led from the slope of the Asylum to the street called that of the forum of Mars. In the middle was an old man with a long, white beard, thick veins on his forehead, and piercing eyes. Two empty litters lay at the bottom of the steps.

It was cold; a drizzling rain fell; in the east the sky held a tinge of wan and miry yellow. The Eternal City, which was just emerging from darkness, displayed all round the Capitol a sort of wave of greyish houses, like a muddy sea after a storm. Huge monuments rose up here and there, and their wet summits shone feebly in the dawn.

"It is morning, Styrax," said the old man to one of his companions.

"Yes, most holy father. My poor master, Serenus, was able to send me word yesterday evening, and I have done what had to be done in order that they should give us his body. And here is Demea who will take charge of that of the illustrious ex-consul, Flavius Clemens.

The lictor and the triumvirs who preside over executions are already in the prison; but the jailer will not allow us to enter until all is over."

"Let us pray for our brethren," murmured the old man.

At that moment the three magistrates whose duty it was to preside at executions went out of the prison. Styrax presented to one of them a document on which a seal was affixed.

"It is correct; the jailer will give you the bodies," said the triumvir, pointing to a fair-haired giant, a man of Germanic race, who was standing, with a torch in his hand, on the threshold of the half-open door.

Styrax and Demea entered behind the jailer, followed by the old man and by three men carrying the stretchers.

A vestibule, a long dark corridor, some steps, and then a cell. In the middle, a body covered with a mantle, and a severed head, a long head with hollow cheeks and grey hair.

"This is the body of Flavius Clemens," said the jailer.

A small pool of blood shone on the ground. One of the men dipped into it the corner of a piece of white linen, which he carefully rolled up and hid under his tunic.

They passed into the next cell.

The body of a young man lay in the corner. The head had not been severed from the trunk. The beard and hair were black, the features delicate and proud. By a singular circumstance, the refined lips, half-open in a slight grimace, and the somewhat hard bend of the narrowed

eyebrows seemed to give that handsome and enigmatic countenance an air of irony and pride even in death.

"This," said the jailer, "is the body of Marcus Annæus Serenus. He was found dead this morning, and the triumvirs said that it was not worth while to behead a corpse. I think he poisoned himself."

The rugged face of the old priest contracted suddenly. It showed surprise, pain, and anger.

"You are mistaken," he said harshly; "Marcus had been ill a long time. Prison has finished him, and it is not surprising. Is it not so, brethren?" he added in an imperious tone, turning towards his companions.

Styrax was weeping. The others were busy placing the two bodies on the stretchers, and when this was done they kissed the feet.

On their way out they met a group of idlers —porters, slaves, and a public crier—who followed the procession curiously with their eyes.

"Would you all like to know," said the crier, "who it is that you have just seen carried feet forwards on their last journey? Two patricians, if you please! Flavius Clemens, the ex-consul, the Emperor's own cousin, and Serenus, whose father, in byegone times, helped to recruit pretty women for Nero's pleasures. Domitian has condemned them to death because they conspired against the State, and, although they were patricians, he has had them put in prison and beheaded, because that was his good pleasure. Only, as you see, he has excused their bodies from being publicly exposed, a thing he would

not do for people who were as poor as you or me. The ex-consul's wife and niece as well as Serenus's sister are now on their way to the island of Pandataria. Besides, these things were done without the least noise. It was in the same way that, two or three years ago, not a few senators and great ladies disappeared one fine morning without anybody knowing why. It teaches us the vanity of greatness. As to those people who are with the two dead men, they are Christians, that is to say, the scum of the Jews. They worship an ass's head and are the enemies of the Roman people. I am by trade a carrier of news, being the grandson and successor of the famous Vulteius Mena, who lived under the divine Augustus, and of whom the poet Horace has left an account. And now, as it is nearly daybreak and we must get on with our work, I am going to the tavern to drink a pot of Sabine wine."

Meanwhile the little band of Christians, after having passed along the Via Sacra and the Via Triumphalis, passed through the Capenan Gate and took the Appian Way. At that hour the road was almost deserted, except for a few market-gardeners who, with their carts, were making for the city.

The rain had ceased, and fine weather had come with the dawn. The tombs that bordered both sides of the ringing causeway shone with the recent rain, and sparkled in the light of the sun which was now rising through the groves that surrounded the sepulchres. Raindrops glistened on the fresh leaves of the rose-laurels;

the lilac was in flower, and on the branches of other trees the early leaves were coming out like a green froth. Birds were singing about the sepulchres, and a pleasant odour hung in the air.

The Christians, with their haggard faces bending over the bodies of their martyrs, passed sadly through this scene of nature's joy and animation. One of them, however, could not prevent himself from saying :

" What a beautiful morning ! "

The look which the old priest turned towards him made him understand that he had spoken idly. Evidently the old man cared nothing for the trees, the birds, or the sun. He was indifferent to everything except his own thoughts, and the joy of external things was at the moment an offence from which he turned away his eyes.

After walking along the Appian Way for about an hour, the Christians turned to the right, and took the Via Ardeatina. At the end of some few hundred paces they stopped in front of a long, low building of brick that stood against a little hill blooming with primroses. This was the tomb of Flavius Clemens. They opened the door, lighted a torch, and placed the two bodies in a large subterranean chamber.

The priest dismissed his companions :

" Leave me with our martyrs ; to-morrow we shall celebrate their funerals. Inform the faithful of it."

Left alone, he placed the torch in an iron sconce fixed in the wall. From time to time

flickers of light shone strongly on his rugged features, which one would have said had been carved out of some hard wood, and played upon the folds of the two shrouds, which then seemed to move, whilst red reflections danced upon the vaulted roof.

He knelt on the flagstones, between the two corpses, and prayed for a long time. Then he lifted up one of the shrouds and took in his hands the severed head of Flavius Clemens. It was as yellow as wax. The arched nose was already growing thin, and the whites of the reverted eyes and the glitter of the rather long teeth between the bloodless lips gave a terrifying appearance to this dead head. The priest kissed its brow, attempted without success to close the mouth and eyes, and gently placed it back upon the stretcher.

Afterwards he uncovered the face of Serenus. The ironical mouth had relaxed, the bend of the eyebrows had become effaced, and the immobile features had an impress of gentle sweetness. The priest gazed long and piercingly on that pleasing countenance, as if he desired to look into the mysterious soul which no longer dwelt in that graceful body. And as he gazed at it, he was possessed with anger against this Christian who seemed to have passed away without pain, like a Gentile in his warmed bath, against this doubtful martyr whose body showed no mark of expiatory sufferings, against this man, almost smiling in his last sleep, who had carried away his secret with him.

While he was scrutinizing this corpse with a

silent and furious interrogation, one of his hands rested on Serenus's breast. He felt beneath the shroud something unyielding, which had the shape of a roll of papyrus. He searched the dead man's clothing and found in the folds of the silken tunic, which he roughly tore open, a little purple case, and in the case a narrow band of parchment rolled around a little ivory stick. He recognized the handwriting of Serenus; but, as the characters were very small, he could not decipher them by the flickering light of the torch.

Then, without even thinking of covering up the pale face of his brother in Christ, he rushed from the sepulchre, hastily closed the door, and fled towards Rome with rapid steps.

The crowd was beginning to swarm in the streets. There were bands of clients going to seek doles, or slaves returning with provisions; idlers collected round a street acrobat or a juggler; vendors of charms and vendors of tripe; citizens waiting their turn under a barber's shelter; women of the people crowding, with earthenware bowls in their hands, in front of taverns where were sold fried peas, boiled lupines, beans, and sausages made of boiled sheep's heads; children almost naked and as brown as crickets, paddling in the mud of the kennel; a troop of asses carrying refuse in osier paniers; beams of wood rocking on carts; jolts, shouts, oaths, voices lost in an immense murmur; all colours, all costumes, all languages—a mingling of all the peoples of the universe.

But the old man, wrapped in a coarse mantle

of grey wool, elbowed and forced his way through the crush without seeing anything or hearing anything. He plunged into the Via Suburra and entered a cracked and dark old house, five storeys high, which stood between a tavern frequented by slaves and a cobbler's stall. It was here that he lived, because he was a very holy man who practised poverty and treated his body harshly, and also because he found in this miserable district better and more numerous opportunities for preaching the faith of Christ.

He climbed a steep and uneven staircase of wood, built in the inner courtyard. When he reached the fifth storey, he opened a door on which was written in red letters the name—*Timotheus*.

This was the old man's name, and the inscription was intended to make it easier for the faithful to find his garret. A straw mat, a stool, a table, and some earthen vessels made up his furniture. Through the window, where the wind was tossing an ill-fastened curtain, there entered the noise of Rome.

Timotheus drew Serenus's manuscript from beneath his tunic and read it eagerly.

II

THE MANUSCRIPT OF SERENUS

"I am very foolish to undertake this confession. Either it will not be read, or it will grieve those who will read it. But perhaps by

describing myself to myself for the last time, I shall justify myself in my own eyes. Excellent hearts have loved me, and none has truly known me. Now, although I have long prided myself on living within myself and allowing nobody to enter there, my secret weighs upon me to-day. A regret comes to me, almost a remorse, for having played so well the strange part that circumstances and my curiosity have ended by imposing on me. I should like, so as to persuade myself that I could not have done otherwise, to go back over the chain of my feelings and actions from my most distant past to this day on which I am going to die.

"My father, L. Annæus Serenus, was Nero's captain of the guards. He had a noble heart, a restless spirit, and a feeble will. He was ambitious and yet convinced of the vanity of all things, voluptuous and yet prompt to feel the bitterness that lies beneath carnal pleasures, loving life and despising it, full of desires and void of illusions. He consented to pass for the lover of Acte, the freedwoman, so that, under this disguise, Nero, who was then very young and closely watched over by Agrippina, might be able to see his mistress freely. There was nothing noble in this part to which my father lent himself. His excuse was that he only half lied, Acte not being very cruel. But he thus ran a greater hazard than he would have done if he had refused the prince this delicate service. But it was one of my father's characteristics to take vengeance upon his own weaknesses by dangerous caprices. Add to this that the morals

of the Eastern Courts were beginning to be introduced into that of the Roman emperors, and that obedience to the prince, in no matter what circumstances, was already regarded as honourable. Finally, my father had a sort of affection for Nero, which was in part justified. Nero was at that epoch a vain, violent, and crafty young man, but he was not without artistic tastes, and sometimes his feline and engaging manners had the appearance of tenderness. Later, that bad actor, infatuated with power, became one of the worst of men. At eighteen, he was only a handsome and capricious monster, sometimes as attractive as a woman.

"My father was only able to give me very little attention, and my mother did not bother to give me any. My early education was thus entrusted to slaves, and to witty and immoral Greek preceptors. Happily, a certain distinction of nature preserved me from a precocious degradation. I was an intelligent child, excessively impressionable, gentle, thoughtful, and without gaiety.

"I was twelve years old when the great fire destroyed half of Rome and deprived two hundred thousand wretches of their homes. For two or three years, in spite of the enormous distributions of bread and money ordered by the Emperor, there was frightful misery in Rome. The spectacle of so much unmerited suffering wounded me to the heart with an incurable wound. I realized the injustice of things and the absurdity of human destinies. I found it unjust that my father should have five hundred slaves when so

many poor people were dying of hunger. I gave them all the money of which I could dispose. But with the rigid logic of my years, I thought they owed me no thanks, and I fled from their effusions, the crudity of which, moreover, offended my childish and aristocratic taste.

"One day my preceptor led me to a great feast which Nero was giving to the people in his gardens. In order to avert the anger of the mob, who accused him of having started the fire, he caused several hundreds of Christians to be arrested. Most of these had recently been thrown to the beasts in the circus. Others, clothed in sacks that had been smeared with resin, were fastened to large stakes some distance apart from one another along the broad walks. As night fell, these were set on fire. The populace crowded with shouts around these living torches. The flame which enveloped the victims was sometimes blown aside by the wind, and disclosed horrible faces and gaping mouths whose cries could not be heard. An odour of burnt flesh filled the air. . . . I had an attack of nerves, and I was carried away half-dead.

"The shock was a severe one; and although the most painful impressions are quickly effaced at that age, some remnant of it remained with me, a lassitude that seized me at certain moments, a melancholy, a weariness of life, rare in a child.

"Meanwhile, Seneca, my father's friend, had retired from the Court, and, in his country house, was preparing to make a good death. He was a strange and engaging man; a great director

of souls, who knew how to penetrate into their recesses and communicate to others the strength and serenity which he himself lacked ; a fastidious being, fond of luxury and a life of elegance, who imposed upon himself secret privations and lived like a Pythagorean ; the best and noblest of men if he had not feared death. It was for this reason that he spoke of it so often. He spent twenty years conquering his fear ; and when he had succeeded, it was almost too late for the honour of his memory.

" My father often went to see him. He took me with him, and I was present during their interviews. I was fifteen years old ; and I listened eagerly to their words. I soon embraced Stoicism with a youthful fervour.

" An Intelligence is immanent in the world ; there it creates order in all its degrees, and the wise man is its highest expression. Virtue is conformity with the will of the universal order. Justice and reason tend to reign in the world. If evil seems to us to triumph, it is because we do not see all, and we occupy ourselves with but a moment of duration. Let us abstain, let us suffer. Let us seek our joy in ourselves. After death, we shall either live a superior life in an ethereal region, or we shall enter again into the bosom of God.—I loved this philosophy of detachment and pride, and I lived arrogantly within myself, proud of feeling myself a possessor of the secret of the sublime aims of the universe.

" On certain points I went farther than my masters. Seneca proclaimed the equality of men : I inferred the emancipation of slaves. My

father, with greater calmness, said: 'Let us wait!'

"I greatly admired Seneca's bombastic death. His wife, Paulina, a rather simple woman who was always on her knees before her husband, opened one of her own veins, desiring to follow him. Happily help came in time to save her, and she did not reject it. I have since suspected that there was a little acting, or at least arrangement, in all this.

"Shortly afterwards came the civil war, the soldiers of Otho and Vitellius butchering one another in the streets of Rome, and the ignoble populace looking on at the massacre as at the games in the circus. The sight of so much horror and shame revived the frightful impressions of my childhood and confirmed me in my proud sadness.

"My father, whom I loved tenderly, died in the first year of Vespasian's reign. Towards the end of his life he thought me too formal and austere, and rallied me on the rigidity of my youthful restraint. After having passed through Stoicism, he had reached an indulgent and amused scepticism, no longer believing in anything, but finding the world curious as it is, even though it be abominable, and valuing above all things kindness and gentleness. I struggled to bear this burden like a Stoic, but before his funeral pyre I burst into tears.

"My mother died two months later, in giving life to my beloved sister, Serena. Thus I was left almost alone in the world, master of a very large fortune, and free from all material cares.

Styrax, my father's old steward, managed my property, and my little sister was under the care of the faithful Athana, my mother's nurse, who was devoted body and soul to our house. I led a studious and austere life, reading the philosophers and poets, eating nothing but vegetables and sleeping on a mat, polite to all who approached me, but preferring my solitude and my meditations to the society of men, and honestly endeavouring to realize the ideal of the sage. But I was chaste and respected my body. Among the fair symbolical divinities whom we have borrowed from Greece, I chose the proud Artemis for patron, and I had sworn, like the Hippolytus of Euripides, never to know women.

"In spite of my theories, I still kept my slaves. At least I postponed their freedom, telling myself that they were not unhappy in my service, and also finding a pleasure in keeping them without making use of their services, and in living like a poor man in the midst of all the resources of extreme opulence.

"This fine Stoic ardour lasted three months. Then came lassitude, a doubt concerning the excellence of this rule of life, a vague desire for something else. Doubtless also the effort against Nature that I had just made left me too fatigued and thus more disarmed and weak against temptations.

"One spring day, I went, for the first time since my bereavement, to one of those places of promenade frequented by people who love pleasure. I rubbed elbows in the temple of

Pompey with painted and perfumed women, sparkling with jewels. Continuing to stroll at hazard, I found myself in the Appian Way at the fashionable hour. There was a dazzling concourse of luxurious equipages, men of fashion in their litters borne on the shoulders of eight slaves, open chairs in which matrons reclined, fanned by negresses. Two Numidian grooms went past me like a whirlwind, and behind them came a carriage hung with red silk, and driven by a woman of great beauty. I gazed at her with a rather shy and sullen air, hiding an ingenuous admiration. She stopped her horses and made me a sign to mount beside her. I obeyed, and it was only the next day that I remembered the precepts of the Porch. This woman was Lycisca, a notorious freedwoman. What was the reason of this caprice of hers ? Perhaps when she met me, she knew who I was and knew that I was rich. She pretended that she had carried me off simply to amuse herself and because my looks, which were like those of an astonished young savage, had pleased her. This is not impossible, for Lycisca was a girl of imagination and caprice. She initiated me into fashionable life, and cost me only two million sesterces.

" Thenceforward it was as if I were possessed with the fury of a revenge. At first, desiring to reconcile my life with my maxims of detachment, I told myself that in order knowingly to despise carnal joys, it is necessary to have experienced them, especially in their most refined and keenest forms. Then, after having excused myself by this admirable philosophical scruple, I abandoned

myself to my new life with the curiosity of a psychologist and an artist. I endeavoured to divide myself into two, to stand outside my own sensations in order to analyse them and enjoy them better. But it was the reverse that happened. For if enjoyment is to be as keen as possible, an absence of introspection, an abandonment of oneself, is doubtless necessary. I had the lassitude and disgust of carnal pleasures without having their intoxication. I desired to awaken this, but precisely because I tried, it did not come. My inexorable habit of introspection made me nearly always unadapted to pleasure. I could not forget myself. In the middle of the wildest or most refined orgy, my head remained cold; I felt the emptiness of all things and I was filled with dissatisfaction.

"And yet, according to all appearances, it has been given me to live in a time when the power and art of enjoyment have been brought to their highest pitch. Never, I think, has there been seen or will there again be seen so small a number of men employing for their own profit and absorbing for their own pleasure a greater number of human existences. Some of my friends had as many as three thousand slaves, and riches whose limits they did not know. And the science of pleasure equalled the resources of which it could dispose. Several generations of a privileged class had studied the means of refining upon, varying, and multiplying agreeable sensations. Assuredly the men who will come after us will be hardly able to form a notion of the life that some among us have known and practised. For

reasons which it is useless to give here, the wealth of private persons can only decrease in future. And some men foresee the time when the barbarians will break through the barriers of the Empire. Then will come the close of the banquet. . . .

"But, just as the future will find it hard to imagine the intensity of our physical pleasures, so perhaps it will fail to understand the depth of our satiety; and it will wonder, as it reads our chronicles, at the number of men of our time who have taken their own lives.

"After fifteen years of orgies, coarse and delicate in turn, with my body exhausted, my senses dulled, and my heart completely empty of every belief, even of every illusion, what was there for me to do? The world seemed to me an absurd spectacle which no longer interested me. I had retained that native gentleness which came to me from my father, but only because it was agreeable to me to be kind, and even this was becoming indifferent to me. Moreover, all action was repugnant to me; public offices, having become base and precarious, disgusted me in advance. I was plunged in an immense and incurable weariness. Having no longer any reason to live, I resolved to die.

"Death did not frighten me: for me it was the great liberator; but I wished it to be without pain.

"After freeing all those of my slaves whom I judged to be capable of making a good use of their liberty, I spent two days without taking any food, and then I placed myself in a bath

into which warm water was continually poured. I had caused the marble bath-tub to be installed in the peristyle of my house, and while the heat of the bath was gradually exhausting my strength, rare flowers with strong and heady perfumes were asphyxiating me deliciously. I had the sensation of a voluptuous and mortal swoon, in which little by little my whole being was melting and dissolving. With my head thrown backward, I gazed, without thinking of anything, at one of the corners of the purple curtain of the bathroom, and round about the curtain, some little clouds, floating on the blue sky, assumed the forms of women I had known; and it seemed to me that a fragment of my soul, detaching itself from me at each breath, was going to rejoin them in the kindling azure. . . .

* * * * *

"'Do you know me, Marcus?' said a very gentle voice.

"I opened my eyes. I was in my bed, and Serena, my sister, was standing beside me.

"Styrax, seeing that I had fainted in my bath, had taken me out of it without heeding the consequences of his disobedience. He had carried me to my room, and had unclenched my teeth and given me a little soup. Brain fever soon declared itself, and for a week I had lain between life and death.

"When I perceived Serena bending over me, I thought I was looking at some wondrous figure that had come from a better and more beautiful

world than ours. She was sixteen years old, had white skin and fair hair, and possessed an immaterial and, so to say, transparent beauty that displayed her whole soul, as well as an air of innocence and gravity that I have never seen except in her.

"My existence had hitherto been entirely separated from hers. She lived retired in her apartment under the care of old Athana. When I determined to die, I did not tell Serena of my intention, fearing a painful scene, and I had not even wished to see her. The poor child had been informed of what took place by Styrax, and had passed seven days and seven nights at my bedside. She was worn out with fatigue, and there was a look of infinite sweetness, the look of a star, in her big eyes.

"'Do you know me, dear Marcus?' she repeated.

"I drew her towards me, kissed her brow, and wept for a long time.

"I recovered, but my attempt at suicide left me extremely weak for several months. I had neither desires nor regrets, neither sadness nor joy. Yet in this death of my being, a new sentiment had awakened. I began to adore my sister Serena, to love her with an humble, timid, religious love; and although I was twenty years older than she, I obeyed her just as a little child obeys his mother. It was more than fraternal affection; it was a particular kind of love, nothing approaching which had I ever before experienced. Serena was so different from all the women I had met. It seemed to me that this

love conjured up my earliest days and brought back whatever used to be good in me, my youthful ardours and aspirations towards supreme purity. Then in proportion as my intelligence recovered its vigour, my habits of curiosity came back to me, and little by little I brought to my passionate affection for my sister the attention of a spectator attracted by the spectacle of an extraordinary soul.

" One day Serena said to me :

" ' Will you do me a great pleasure ? Come with me to-morrow morning to the place where I will take you ? '

" ' I will go where you wish, Serena.'

" ' Then be ready early.'

" At dawn the next day, Serena was waiting for me in the atrium with some twenty of our slaves.

" ' Are they coming with us ? '

" ' Of course.'

" On the way she asked me if I had ever heard of the Christians, and what I knew about them.

" ' Very little,' I answered. ' They are, I believe, a Jewish sect, or, at all events, a creed that has come to us from the East, like many another now in Rome. People say that they are half-starved creatures, mad and distracted, that they have strange ceremonies, that they worship an ass's head, and that they are enemies of the Empire.'

" ' Do you believe that it was they who set fire to Rome in the time of Nero ? '

" ' My father did not think so. It was necessary to attribute the guilt to somebody on

account of the people ; and it was put down to the Christians. And, by the way, you remind me that an idiot of a pedagogue took me to the Emperor's gardens (I was quite a child) to see some of the wretches burnt there——'

" ' You really saw them ? ' interrupted Serena, whose eyes suddenly flashed.

" Then, after a long silence, she asked me :

" ' But you, yourself. Do you believe what is said about them ? Is it your opinion that the Christians are scoundrels and madmen ? '

" ' Oh, I ; my dear Serena, I have no opinion on the subject and I don't bother myself about it. And then, you know, I am not severe towards unhappy people. I am not surprised that the wretches find their lot a bad one, and I can well understand why they should revolt. I have no anger towards them. Rather I have some sympathy, being ill myself, and disgusted with the world as it is, for all rebels whatever be the reason of their rebellion. But why do you ask me all this ? '

" ' Because I am a Christian,' said Serena calmly.

" I had long learnt to be surprised at nothing.

" ' If you are a Christian, Serena, then the Christians are better than people say, and I am curious to make their acquaintance.'

" ' You won't have long to wait, for we are there now.'

" And she showed me, on the Via Ardeatina, along which we had been walking for some time, one of the sepulchres of the Flavian family. A man was standing in the vestibule. Serena

gave him a password and we entered the vault, followed by our slaves. About fifty persons were there already, most of them kneeling, others seated on stone benches along the walls.

"The partition walls of the sepulchre were pierced with horizontal niches, some of which were closed with tombstones, others yawning and awaiting their dead. Four painted garlands, one of roses, another of thorns, the third of grapes, and the last of laurel, were twined about the arch. Above these garlands, a fresco represented harvesters, with sickles in their hands, cutting the corn. High up on the walls and in the spaces between the niches, there were other symbolical pictures whose meaning was revealed to me afterwards—a shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders, whom at first I took for Mercury bearing a lamb, anchors, ships, doves, and fishes. At the end of the hall were two pulpits hewn out of the rock. Between the two was a stone altar on which were placed pieces of bread, and wine in a large cup. The hall was lit by copper lamps engraved with the same symbols as were on the walls.

"Other Christians entered. Since the terrible blow with which Nero had struck the sect, they had formed the habit of assembling outside the city, in tombs, under the pretext of funeral ceremonies and repasts. At the period when I knew them, they were left undisturbed. But the fear of persecution, a thing which was always possible, gave to these meetings an air of mystery that to me increased their strange novelty.

"I perceived in the assembly the consul for

the year, Flavius Clemens. This explained why the meeting was held in one of the tombs of his family. I recognized the wife of Clemens, and his niece, and Pomponia Græcina, and Paulina, Seneca's widow, still pale from having followed her husband more than half-way towards death. They had veils that fell down very low and concealed their hair. Finally, in the front rank, I saw Acte, Nero's old mistress and my father's old friend, still beautiful in spite of her fifty years, and, I think, a little rouged. The remainder of those present seemed to me to consist of poor people and slaves.

"An old priest, with an emaciated though gentle face, who had taken his place in one of the stone seats, stood up, and, in rather bad Latin, made a speech, doubtless for my benefit, which summed up the beliefs of the sect—the first man's sin and its consequences, the redemption of the human race by Jesus, of whom until then I knew nothing except his name and his execution, the union of souls in Jesus signified by the fraternal banquet, and the whole Christian morality expressed in the Beatitudes.

"After this the priest slowly recited prayers in which Jesus was invoked as the Son of God and the Saviour of men. Then he stretched both his hands over the bread and the cup filled with wine, and called to mind that Jesus, at his last meal with his companions, had done this, saying: 'Eat, this is my body; drink, this is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.' I have since known that some of the priests and most of the faithful do not understand these words as but a

singular and bold image, but believe that in truth they eat and drink God ; and this was one of my greatest surprises.

" Finally, the priest distributed the bread to those present, and offered them the cup after having first drunk himself. I did not take part in this love feast, not being initiated as yet.

" All this seemed to me to be grave, majestic, touching, and new. But I felt very clearly, and at once, that for me these rites and this assembly would never be more than a spectacle, and that there was an abyss between those men and myself.

" ' My dear Marcus,' said Serena to me as we were going out, ' you have seen what the Christians are. You will like them more as you know them better. I know that you are unhappy. We must make you a convert to Christianity. For it is truth, and it is also consolation.'

" ' I will think about it, Serena.'

" I diligently attended the meetings. I found again in the teaching of Callistus (that was the priest's name) a number of the thoughts and maxims of Pythagoras, Zeno, and the ancient sages. Jesus reminded me by his life and execution of the ideal portrait of the just man which Plato has traced. What seemed to me peculiar to the new religion was, first, the rigorous obligation to believe certain dogmas or truths revealed by God. And, second, that all the virtues which philosophers had already known and preached, seemed to me to be transformed, among the disciples of Christus, by a new feeling—the love of a God-man and of a crucified God, a perceptible and ardent love, full of tears, confidence,

tenderness, and hope. Clearly, neither the personified forces of Nature nor the abstract God of the Stoics have ever inspired anything similar. And this love of God, the source and beginning of the other Christian virtues, communicated to them a purity, a sweetness, an unction, and, as it were, a perfume, that I had not hitherto experienced.

"I admired these believers with all my heart; but I did not believe. The sole remnant of my philosophical education that remained with me was the conviction that, in spite of obscurities or apparent exceptions, everything happens in this world in accordance with natural laws, and that there are no special miracles. A direct revelation of God, at a given moment in history, the appearance of a God-man on earth, and all the dogmas of the new religion, found in my reason an invincible resistance, which down to this hour has not been overcome.

"I shall confess other repugnances that I sometimes felt.

"The idea which my new brethren had of this world and this life offended some natural feeling or other within me. I recognized the want of logic in such a contradiction; but, in spite of my persistent pessimism, in some degree combated as it was by my curiosity and by my affection for Serena, it displeased me that men should have so great a contempt for the only life of which, after all, we can be certain. Then I found them far too simple, closed to artistic impressions, circumscribed, and inelegant. Moreover, a little concern for our Roman fatherland

awakening within me, I was alarmed at the harm that might be done to the Empire if such a conception of life continued to spread, such a detachment from civil duties and profane occupations. At other times, I was decidedly unjust. The mental reservation which these Christians mingled with their affections so as to purify them, seemed to me to chill those affections by taking from them their liberty, their grace, and their spontaneity. To be loved in so far as I was redeemed by Jesus and only in view of my eternal salvation, this idea chilled me. And then I was annoyed to find these saints so sure of so many things, and such marvellous things, when I myself had so much sought without finding, so much doubted in my life, and had finally prided myself on my scepticism.

"My habits of observation also prevented me, in another way, from becoming a Christian. It sometimes caused me a feeling of ill humour, sometimes a malign pleasure, to discover among the Christians those human weaknesses that at other moments I reproached them for desiring to cast off. Clemens, the consul, in this society of brethren equal before God, was treated with special honour, and took pleasure in it. The slaves remained slaves, and their place was in the last ranks. There were rivalries among the women about the preparations for the love feasts and the care of the sacerdotal vestments, and still keener struggles about the priests, in order to win their attention and captivate their favour. Acte, whom the matrons held at a distance, made herself noticeable by her

violent piety. She was a woman of disordered imagination and of feeble judgment. She had never wished to believe in Nero's crimes, attributed the punishment of the Christians to Poppæa ; and, though already a Christian when Nero died, she had, at her own expense, built a tomb for the abandoned corpse of her former lover. Repelled by the Christian community, then pardoned and readmitted, again recaptured by the wiles of the body, and again pardoned, calmed at last by age, she often embarrassed the venerable Callistus by the indiscretion of her zeal, and by something in her bearing or her toilet that still smacked of the woman of easy virtue. But the gentle old man, anxious that his poor should suffer no loss, managed to humour this extravagant woman, for she was rich and gave generously.

" In spite of these little weaknesses, they were good and beautiful souls. Vainly did I say to myself : ' These saints are making a bargain ; they expect to be given Paradise ; they practise their sublime virtues for a reward.' But is it not a virtue to believe in that distant recompense, for it is to believe in the justice of God and to conceive it such as it ought to be ? And what virtue is entirely gratuitous ? At the time I followed the maxims of the Stoics, had I not for my reward the proud consciousness of my moral superiority ?

" And what a faith animated that little band ! They no longer, as did the first Christians, believed in the approaching end of the world, or in the earthly Jerusalem. But they did not

doubt that the dominion of the universe was assured to their religion. In fact, there were already Christian communities in all the important cities of the Empire, and the 'Churches' continually exchanged news and sent messages of encouragement and hope to one another. And, feeling that in their faith there was an incalculable power, and in their dogmas something that suited the needs of most men, especially of the suffering and the humble, I thought that perhaps they were right, and that the future belonged to them, that if in a century or two the Empire should sink under the shock of the barbarians, the religion of Jesus might flourish on its ruins. If this is to happen, what will the new race of men be like? Doubtless it will have more virtue, and consequently more happiness, since happiness comes especially from the soul. On the other hand, it will have less art and elegance, less understanding of the beautiful.

"But what matters to me the changing face of mysterious humanity after my death? What I know is that I saw for the first time, in the tomb on the Via Ardeatina, the goodness of simple souls, the resignation of the wretched, love of suffering, and spotless chastity.

"It was there that I saw the admirable charity of Styrax, my freedman. When he learnt that I frequented the assemblies of the Christians, he begged me one day to take him to them, saying that he could have no other religion than that of his master. When 'the good news' was revealed to him, his whole heart melted. He

wept with joy at each meeting. There came to him a great love for the poor and the sick. Not content with the money I gave him for them, he added his own to it, and distributed it in my name. He succoured not only Christians, but all unfortunates, whoever they were. And by the unique ascendancy of his goodness, he enrolled troops of poor people in the religion of the God who loves and consoles.

" It was there, above all, that I saw the more than human grace, the sweetness and the purity of Serena. All the virtues which in the other Christians seemed to me sometimes to be united with too much harshness and with too great a degree of simplicity of mind, or sometimes to be spoilt by a too confident anticipation of reward, or by the intolerance that accompanies absolute beliefs, these virtues seemed in Serena the natural fruits of an exquisite and truly divine soul. And my great occupation was to feel the charm which emanated from her person, and to see her living her beneficent life adorned by the rarest moral beauty, the candour of a child, and the pure attraction of a woman.

" ' Would you not like to receive baptism, Marcus ? ' she would ask me sometimes.

" I would answer :

" ' Please wait until the bad memories of what has happened no longer trouble me, and my past life is entirely dead within me. When I am completely a Christian at heart, I shall ask for baptism.'

" She contented herself with this assurance, happy, moreover, at seeing me recovering some

fondness for life and accompanying her to the holy assemblies.

* * * * *

"A day came when there returned from Syria, whither he had gone to visit the Churches, one of the chiefs of the Roman community, the priest Timotheus, formerly a slave and of African origin. He was austere, disinterested, and an ardent believer, but very ignorant, speaking bad Greek and hardly understanding Latin. He was capable of sudden flights of eloquence. But his logic was narrow; he had a poor knowledge of hearts; and he had no understanding of delicate gradations of feeling or of thought; his imagination was sombre, and there was something fierce and bitter in his zeal. His example made me see clearly the irritating sides of a too absolute and too militant faith, and the unpleasant rigour, the lack of intelligence and almost of humanity, which it can engender in certain minds.

"The gentle Callistus had wisely permitted the consul Clemens to take a formal part in the ceremonies of the Roman religion. Timotheus was indignant at such tolerance, said that one cannot serve two masters, and filled the rather weak mind of Clemens with such terror that the poor man suddenly resigned the functions of consul. This was the origin of his ruin. After some warnings, Timotheus condemned the innocent Acte to public penance, because she continued to put on rouge, to wear rings, and to dress with too much care. The

good creature told me one day, with torrents of tears, how harshly he had treated her, and I saw that in reality, always hungry for emotions and drama, she took a strange pleasure in the brutality of her pitiless director.

"I had my own turn. By arguments, which I recognized were unanswerable, Timotheus placed me in such a position that I had either to receive baptism or leave the Church. It was useless to explain my case to him; he would never have comprehended its subtleties. To leave the Christian community would have been cruelly to grieve Serena, to condemn myself to see her less often, and to give up a spectacle which was interesting me more and more, and, further, to abandon a touching intercourse with many excellent hearts, with a family I had learnt to love. Although the hypocrisy was repugnant to me, I resigned myself to baptism. After all, the ceremony only joined me a little closer to men whose virtues I admired and venerated, if I did not share their faith. My baptism would be only a definite pledge of my sympathy with them. It signified that I was at heart one of the little group who, in my eyes, then represented the highest moral perfection in the world. Moreover, Domitian was becoming more suspicious every day, and the Church, rightly or wrongly, expected soon to be troubled. I was bound in honour not to desert my friends in the hour of danger. Finally, the idea that I would give joy to so many good souls silenced my last scruples. I therefore allowed myself to be baptized. And, so as to tell only half

an untruth, when reciting the Christian profession of faith, I tried to see in it but a symbolical formula, and I sought to find in it a meaning large enough for my philosophy to accept. If this was cowardice, the joy of my dear Serena saved me from remorse.

* * * * *

"But time is passing; the executioner will come in an hour, and I must end my confession.

"One morning, not far from the Capenan Gate, as we were coming back from our meeting, I nearly knocked down Parthenius, the Emperor's favourite, because, as he was returning from some orgy, he had insulted my sister by his words. I should have fled immediately, and I thought of doing so. Yet I delayed, I hardly know why, from apathy, from distaste for action, not to trouble Serena, telling myself that there was no hurry, that it would be time enough the next day. But that very evening a centurion came with soldiers. My sister was condemned to banishment and had to leave without delay. The Emperor's caprice being above the laws, I was arrested and taken to the Mamertine Prison. I was not even allowed the favour of being beheaded in my own house. Our property was confiscated; the vengeance of Parthenius was complete.

"My sister embraced me gravely, and said:

"'Let us bless God, my dear Marcus. We shall see one another again soon. Do not be uneasy about me. Good old Athana will not leave

me, and there is nothing in exile to frighten me, for God is everywhere. I pray Him to help you in your trial, and I envy you the honour He does you in allowing you to die for Him. . . .'

" She said this tranquilly, in her harmonious voice, ingenuously attributing to me a soul equal to her own. But suddenly, turning aside her head, she burst into sobs (blessed be thou, Serena, for that weakness!). My heart failed me as I said good-bye to her, and I seemed to be already dead.

" I reached the prison just as the ex-consul Clemens was brought there, and we were able to exchange some words. The Imperial decree declared both of us to be guilty ' of superstition and the Judaic life.' In reality he was condemned as a suspect and malcontent, because, since he had resigned his office, he had lived in retreat, and had taken no part in any public ceremony. In addition, his great wealth had tempted the Emperor. The ex-consul's wife and niece were, like Serena, sent to the island of Pandataria. Clemens, whom I had always regarded as a man of very small intellect, seemed to me admirable in his serenity ; his placid heroism shamed me and restored my courage. The thought that my dear sister would find friends in her exile also brought me some tranquillity.

* * * * *

" The jailer is a good man. I have had writing materials on me ; he has procured me a lamp. He has warned me that the executioner will

come at daybreak. I have written all through the night. I no longer have any attachment to life; and death, whether it be annihilation or a passage into the unknown, does not terrify me. I have almost returned to the state of mind in which I was last year, when I tried to die in my bath. . . . But at the last moment I have a fear of a death which may defile or disfigure me; I have a fear of the axe which may miss its stroke. The science of poisons has made great progress in my time, and the hollow pearl in my ring contains a drop of colourless liquid which will kill me in a few minutes, almost without pain.

* * * * *

"I have seen the honours which the Christians give to the tombs that contain the bones of Nero's victims. They will honour me also as one of their saints. But can I undeceive them now? And, besides, what is the good? I should like them to guess at my suicide; I should like them to read this confession; but I shall do nothing to bring it about. For if Serena knew how I am dying, and in what unbelief, it would be too great a grief for her. . . . Moreover, I hope that Timotheus, who did not like me, will only allow a moderate cult to be given to my bones. And if simple hearts venerate me more than they should, what does even that matter? It is their faith that will be counted, not the merits of the saint they invoke. Then, after all, it is not a bad man

whose memory they will honour. I have sincerely sought the truth. I have tried since I was a young man to attain holiness as I conceived it. And if I have been idle, voluptuous and weak, if I have done little for other men, I have always had much indulgence and pity for them.

* * * * *

"I have just broken the pearl between my teeth. Farewell, Serena, my beloved sister! Had the world no other reason for existence than to produce (even at long intervals) so gentle and perfect a soul as thine, the existence of this unintelligible world would be sufficiently justified."

III

THE SCRUPLES OF TIMOTHEUS

Timotheus spent three hours over Serenus's manuscript. The beginning was written clearly enough. But Timotheus knew only the Latin of the people; and the meaning of the learned language of the young patrician escaped him in many places. The last part was not very legible, and it even happened that the passages in which Serenus clearly affirmed his want of belief were almost undecipherable. It chanced that the words, "The priest Timotheus . . . was austere and disinterested," were easily read, and the end of the phrase was only hieroglyphics.

The old priest was thus confined to suspicions concerning the case of Serenus and his pagan end. He could have entrusted the manuscript to a more skilful reader, but, though he desired to solve the riddle, he none the less feared the scandal of its discovery. For if Serenus had not died for Christ, yet it was because of Christ that he had been condemned, and perhaps, at the moment he expired, he might have had a sudden illumination, an effulgence of faith.

Timotheus then thought of burning the mysterious writing. But a scruple, a respect for death, restrained him. He knelt down and prayed for some time, and placing the parchment again in its case, he went back to the tomb on the Via Ardeatina.

He slipped the little roll under Serenus's tunic, and said aloud :

" Let his crime or his justification remain with him ! His writing shall judge him. God, who triest the reins and the heart, I recommend my brother to Thy mercy."

IV

SAINT MARK, THE ROMAN

In the year of grace 860, Angelran, Abbot of the Benedictines of Beaugency-sur-Loire, piously jealous of the miracles wrought in the chapel of the Priory of Cléry by the relics of Saint Avigerne, resolved to go to Rome and seek out the ashes of some martyr of importance, in order with them to endow the church of his Abbey.

Nicholas I., who then occupied the chair of Peter, had a special devotion for the tombs of the holy martyrs. They were, to tell the truth, in a bad condition, having been pillaged and half destroyed by Vitiges, king of the Goths, and afterwards by Astolphus, king of the Lombards. Several popes had caused bones to be transported from the saints' tombs to the Roman churches. But the treasure was far from being exhausted. Nicholas restored some of the most celebrated catacombs, and entrusted their care to sacristans. He often went to celebrate the sacrifice of the Mass in them. One of these crypts was none other than the tomb of Flavius Clemens.

It was there that, among many obscure names engraved on mortuary stones, Angelran noticed the name of Serenus. His epitaph, composed by the faithful Styrax, was this :

MARCVM ANNAEVM SERENVM MARTVR
SPIRITA SANCTA IN MENTE HAVETE

Angelran suddenly remembered that in Nero's palace there had been a captain of the name of Serenus, and he believed that he was gazing on his tomb. This Serenus had been the friend of the philosopher Seneca, who, as the world knows, had known the apostle Saint Paul. Clearly Serenus, initiated by Seneca into the Christian faith, had secretly become a convert ; and when Nero persecuted the Christians, he had dared to defend them before the Emperor and to withstand him to the face, and he had

been condemned to death. Thus Angelran promptly reconstructed in his mind the martyr's history. He promised himself that on his return he would write it at length, and amplify this probable sketch in the most elegant Latin.

He easily obtained permission from the father of the faithful to open the tomb and to carry off the venerable remains of M. Annæus Serenus, to whom he had already given in thought the name of Saint Mark the Roman.

When the stone was raised, Angelran saw what remained of the martyr's body—a pinch of whitish dust mingled with fragments of bones, and, on this ashes, the little roll of parchment which, by a strange phenomenon, remained almost intact. He attempted to read the ancient characters, and, being unable to decipher them, he said to himself that perhaps some of his monks would be more successful.

The shrine of Saint Mark the Roman was installed in the church of the Benedictines of Beaugency on Easter Day in the year 861, in the presence of a great assembly of people.

Meanwhile Angelran had handed over the manuscript to the monk Adalberon, the most learned man in the Abbey.

Adalberon succeeded, by dint of toil and patience, in deciphering the sad confession. He thus learnt that the new saint was not, as the Abbot believed, that Annæus Serenus to whom Seneca had dedicated his treatise on *The Tranquillity of the Soul*, but the son of Seneca's friend, and that this so-called martyr had been without faith and had died a pagan.

But Saint Mark the Roman had already become popular and was continually performing miracles. Adalberon, not wishing to disturb the conscience of the faithful or to give joy to the monks of Cléry, did not confide his discovery to anybody.

The reputation of Saint Mark the Roman continued to increase until the eleventh century. About the year 1030, the learned Hariulf, who presided over the cathedral school of Orleans under Bishop Heriger, compiled, from the statements of ocular and trustworthy witnesses, an account of the twenty-four miracles wrought by the power of the saint. I transcribe some of the most remarkable.*

1. *Of a man whose eyes Saint Mark restored.*

"There lived at Closmoussu a wicked priest named Gerald. This priest had in his house a young man named Witbert, his cousin and godson. One day Witbert went to the festival of Saint Mark the Roman at Beaugency. As he was returning he met Gerald on the road, accompanied by three of his parishoners who were devoted to him. Gerald hated his godson because he suspected him of loving one of his penitents. The wicked priest told his companions to seize Witbert and hold him, and whilst the unhappy man invoked Saint Mark with loud cries, Gerald tore out his eyes and threw them on the ground. A magpie, or according to others, a dove, took

* In reality these miracles are translated from the collection of the miracles of Saint Faith, Virgin and Martyr, made by Bernardus Scholasticus.—Migne's "Patrologia Latina," Vol. CXLI.

them in its beak and carried them off towards Beaugency. When he saw this, the wicked priest was seized with remorse and began to weep; and thenceforward he no longer dared to celebrate holy mass.

"Gerald's mother, whose name was Arsinde, having learnt of her son's cruelty, brought Witbert to her house and cared for him. When his wounds were healed, the blind man began to wander through the country singing songs, and he gained an excellent livelihood and was able to be happy.

"In the following year, two days before the festival of Saint Mark the Roman, as Witbert slept, the saint appeared to him and said:

"'Sleepest thou, Witbert?'

"'Who are thou who callest me?'

"'I am Saint Mark the Roman.'

"'And what desirest thou of me?'

"'I have a concern for thee. How farest thou?'

"'Not badly.'

"'And how are thy affairs?'

"'As good as possible.'

"'Canst thou say that thou art content, thou who seest not the light of day?'

"At these words, Witbert, who in his dream believed that he saw, remembered that he was blind.

"The saint continued:

"'Go to Beaugency and buy two candles; light one before the altar of the Saviour and the other before my shrine. I have prayed to God for thee because evil has been done to thee

unjustly. Go, and thou shalt have thy sight restored.'

"And as Witbert, thinking of the cost of candles, answered nothing, Saint Mark guessed his thought:

"'Be not disquieted?' said he to him. 'First go and hear mass at Tavers. There thou wilt meet a man who will give thee six farthings.'

"Witbert rose up, went to mass at Tavers, related his vision to all who were there, and prayed them to lend him twelve farthings. The people mocked him and called him mad. But suddenly a man of good, Hugo by name, advanced towards him and gave him six crowns and a groat.

"Then Witbert, full of confidence, betook himself to the church of the Benedictines of Beaugency. He bought two candles, lit them, and passed the night in prayer before Saint Mark's shrine.

"Towards midnight it seemed to him that two luminous globes, having the form of laurel berries, but larger, descended from Heaven and came to lodge beneath his eyelids in the two holes where his eyes had been. At the same time he felt his head exceedingly heavy and he slept.

"He was awakened by the voices of the monks chaunting matins. He saw!

"At first he doubted the miracle. But, perceiving through the half-open door of the church an ass that was on the point of entering the holy place, he cried to the driver of the ass:

"'Prithee, there, take care of your ass!' And immediately the man turned aside his beast.

Whereupon Witbert was assured that he had recovered his sight.

" He spent another year in wandering through the country in order to show himself to the people who had known him blind. Then he bethought him of his salvation, and he entered a monastery."

2. *Of a mare brought back to life.*

" There was at Lestiou, two leagues from Beaugency, an old soldier named Foulque. This man went to Rome on a pilgrimage, and he returned riding on a mare lent him by his brother, a holy priest named Bernard. On the road, the mare fell ill. Foulque promised Saint Mark a candle as long as the animal's tail, if she should be cured. But the mare fell down one day on the road and died. Foulque tried to sell her skin to an innkeeper, who offered him a miserable price. Indignant at this, Foulque broke off the bargain, and then, with his knife, he made a number of gashes both lengthways and crossways on the dead animal's skin, so that it would be of no use to the innkeeper. At the same time he exclaimed :

" ' What would it have cost Saint Mark, who cured so many people, to cure my mare also ? I had promised him such a fine candle ! And this mare was not mine, and I must pay my brother for her. I am a ruined man.'

" As he said these words, the dead mare rose up on her feet and began to neigh joyously. The gashes that Foulque had given her healed up, and in a moment they were covered with hair finer than that on the rest of her body

and of a different colour; and it formed a sort of pattern, which was evidence of the miracle."

3. *Of a merchant punished for his avarice.*

"A man from Auvergne had come to Beaugency on a pilgrimage to Saint Mark the Roman. He noticed that candles were sold very cheaply there because of the great number of sellers; and he thought that if he bought a great store of them, he could sell them three times as dear in another district. He therefore bought all the candles he could find and put them in chests. But one of the candles was longer than the rest. This the man from Auvergne fastened against his breast under his clothes, so that the large end was hidden in his hose and the smaller end went out of his collar, beneath his beard. But God could not suffer the insolence of this robber. The candle lit of its own accord and the fire took hold of the beard and clothes of the man from Auvergne. The wretch, howling like one of the damned, ran to the church and threw himself before Saint Mark's shrine, promising to give him all the candles if he would succour him. At that very moment the fire which was devouring him was extinguished."

I think that these quotations will suffice.

In 1793, at the time of the dispersion of the religious Orders, the library of the Abbey was transported to the town hall of Beaugency, and it was there that I had the good fortune to find the manuscript of Serenus, as well as the account of the miracles of Saint Mark the Roman.

MYRRHA

MYRRHA

"WATCH and pray for the time is at hand. The signs multiply, and woe unto them who have eyes but see not! Burnt stones have fallen from heaven. Blood has rained on Pozzalo and on Cumae. The sky has turned red for a whole night, and thick smoke hangs over the Phlegrean Fields. Remember the flooding of the Tiber and the tempests that have ravaged the Campania, and the plague which, last autumn, carried off thirty thousand inhabitants of Rome, and the famine which followed it for the provisions from Alexandria were not enough, and the earthquake which overthrew half the houses in Pompeii, that city of effeminacy and lewdness. And lately a woman of the Suburana brought into the world a pig with a hawk's head."

And Timotheus, the priest, with his vehement gestures, loosened the red mantle which was thrown over his tunic of white wool. The Christians listened to him, gazing at him with ardent eyes, or dropping their eyelids so as the better to hear his words. They were slaves, small shopkeepers, artisans, or labourers. The meeting was held in one of those large tombs in which associations of poor people secured a sepulchre for themselves by paying an annual subscription. Mortuary tablets, on which, as well as the inscriptions, there were carved images, palms, lambs, fishes and doves, almost completely

covered the walls of the vault. Copper lamps, hanging by chains from the stone roof, feebly shone on the bare heads of the men and the veiled brows of the women.

The priest continued :

" I am going to tell you a vision which God has sent me. I saw rising out of the waters a woman sitting upon a beast. The woman was clothed in purple and covered with gold, and held in her hand a cup filled with the wine of her abominations, for she had committed fornication with all the kings of the earth. The beast was scarlet ; it had the body of a leopard, the feet of a bear, and the mouth of a lion. And this mouth vomited forth blasphemies against God, against his name, and his tabernacle, and them that dwell in heaven. And men said : ' Who is like unto the beast ? and who is able to make war with him ? ' And all worshipped him save those whose names are written in the Book of Life of the Lamb that hath been slain. . . . But the Lord will come. The wicked seducer shall be thrown into the sea, and the beast hurled into the lake of sulphur which burns for ever. And the Lord shall build on earth the new Jerusalem for his elect."

At that moment, a young girl, almost a child, seated in the last row of the faithful and listening with breathless attention, asked in a low voice of her neighbour, an old woman, whose face was yellow beneath its linen veil :

" Tell me, good Mammæa, who is the seducer that carries a cup, and what is the scarlet beast ? "

" That is very easy to understand, Myrrha.

The woman is Rome; and the beast is the Emperor Nero. But we must not say this openly."

Myrrha appeared to reflect; a wrinkle came between her eyebrows, and a great sadness darkened her eyes and her brow.

The mass began. Timotheus, his hands stretched out over the stone altar on which were the bread and wine, recited the liturgical prayers. Then the faithful came to break the bread and drink of the cup. But Timotheus repelled two men and two women who in their turn approached the holy table.

"Our brethren and sisters here," he said, pointing to them with his finger, "have publicly sinned, and their penance must be public. Corvinus has been seen in a tavern with a woman of evil life. Vulteius has been present at a sacrifice in the temple of Æsculapius. Materna has gone to see the games in the circus. And Accia has committed the sin of adultery. All four will fast for a month on bread and water, and during that period they will be excluded from communion. It causes me shame and grief to reveal such great sins and to promulgate these penances. As the time draws near, the holiness of the faithful ought to become more perfect, and their faults are less deserving of pardon. The flesh is abominable in the eyes of God; games and spectacles are the work of the demon; and the Christian who shares, even with his body only, in the worship of idols, repeats the treason of Judas. Woe to those who, having received the light, behave as the Gentiles! The world is condemned: let there be nothing in common between the world

and us! But let us wait in trembling for the Judge who is to come."

Corvinus, Vulteius, and Materna bowed their heads. Accia sobbed.

An old man, Bishop Callistus, who was seated near the altar, stood up. And, although his face was covered with deep wrinkles, and his beard was as white as snow, his blue eyes were as soft and gentle as those of a child.

He said to Timotheus:

"Let me speak to them."

And to Corvinus:

"What have you to say on the subject of the scandal you have caused to our brethren?"

Corvinus, young, very brown, and with a powerful neck, answered:

"I have sinned, I know it. But there are days when the sky is so pleasant and the sun so beautiful that I forget the mystery of the fall and of redemption, and I go back to the pleasures of life and the joys of the body. A woman who was passing made a sign to me, and I followed her, hardly knowing any longer that I had a soul. But after my fault I felt sad unto death. Then I spoke to the woman of the revelation of the Lord Jesus. As I spoke to her she loosed her arms from my neck, and she even begged me to take her some day to one of our assemblies."

"And you?" asked the old man of the next penitent.

Vulteius, a man of middle age, with a simple and good-natured air, answered:

"My brother-in-law, who is an idolater, desired to offer a sacrifice to Æsculapius in order to

obtain a cure for his wife. He invited me to go with him to the temple, and I consented, not daring to say I was a Christian, and also from the fear of being a bad relation. Certainly, I believe that Æsculapius is only a demon. But I ought to say that the sick woman grew well a few days after the sacrifice."

"And you, Materna, tell us your sin."

Materna, still young, fair, and buxom, with dancing eyes whose natural gaiety could not be entirely hidden by her contrite air, answered:

"My husband, whom I have not yet been able to convert, begged me to accompany him to the circus. I refused at first, but he grew angry. Then I did as he wished, from cowardice, in order to have peace in the house, and also, I confess it, from curiosity: for the Emperor himself was on that day to drive his chariot with six horses."

At these words, Myrrha held up her head. She had some hope that Callistus was going to ask Materna what Nero was like and what she felt when she saw him. But the old man turned towards Accia.

"And you, my daughter, how could you . . . ?"

Accia, tall and supple, with her two hands covering her face, continued to weep. She answered, shaken by sobs which agitated the long folds of her veil:

"I loved him."

Callistus reflected for a moment.

"Are you sorrowful at heart, Vulteius and Materna, for your cowardice and your vain

curiosity ; and you, Corvinus and Accia, for your impurity ? "

The four penitents said " Yes " with a movement of their heads ; but Accia, either because her tears choked her, or because she was troubled by some memory, only answered a little time after the others.

" Then," resumed Callistus, " I order you to pray, during a week, twice as much as you are accustomed to do, and to seek every opportunity for succouring the poor and the sick. Go in peace and sin no more."

Then, as if to himself :

" Yes, that is what *He* would have said. I know, for I have seen *Him*."

As Callistus spoke and showed his great charity, Myrrha had felt the mysterious pain that filled her heart diminishing within her. However, there was still in her eyes a vestige of preoccupation and unrest, when, after the ceremony, Callistus approached her.

" May the Lord keep you, Myrrha," said the old man. " But you seem to me to be a little sad. What is the matter ? "

" Father, I have something to ask you. You will not scold me ? "

" It would be the first time, little Myrrha."

" Well, I would like to know if the Emperor Nero is as wicked as Timotheus believes."

" Alas ! my child, I fear so."

" Am I then obliged to hate him ? "

" We must hate no man, Myrrha. We must only hate sin."

" Then, as the Emperor was once kind to my

father, I am not forbidden to be grateful to him ? "

" Quite the contrary," said Callistus.

" But," resumed Myrrha, after a moment's hesitation, " would it be a sin to try and see the Emperor ? "

The calm face of the old priest suddenly became severe and hard, and he answered in an angry and menacing tone :

" It would be a very great sin from this day forward, for in the name of God, and by the authority He has given me over you, I forbid you—give good heed, Myrrha—to try to see him whom you have named."

" I will obey," said Myrrha. " But never before have you spoken to me so harshly."

" I did not wish to cause you pain," said the old man, caressing the child's hair. " I spoke to you thus because I love you."

" Then," said Myrrha, " lean well on me and do not be afraid of weighing too heavily. I am strong."

And the old man and the young girl, like an Œdipus and an Antigone, went out slowly behind the crowd of the faithful.

* * * * *

Myrrha was sixteen years old. The daughter of a Gallic woman who died in bringing her into the world, and of a slave named Styrax employed in the Emperor's kitchens, she had grown up in the corner of Cæsar's gardens where the houses of the slaves were crowded together, and in the subterranean halls of the palace.

She was like a delicate and humble flower that grows under the feet of a colossus of granite.

She had never seen Nero. She only knew him from the conversation of the other slaves. She heard of his power, his talents, the banquets and feasts that he gave, never of his crimes; for the walls had ears, and the least imprudent word would have been heard and carried to the Emperor. She represented him to herself as an extraordinary being, mysterious and unique, handsome and terrible, who on high, far above her, lived a triumphant and almost divine life. And in the feelings of astonishment and terror which he inspired in her, there was also a sort of immobile curiosity which did not dare to satisfy itself.

One day, Styrax had made a dish which pleased the Emperor so much that he desired to know the name of the cook. He sent for the poor man, and immediately freed him, with the condition that he would remain in his service.

Thus this all-powerful being took the trouble to be good! Myrrha was filled with a profound and trembling gratitude.

But Styrax, who was a simple and straightforward man, remained saddened and frightened by his adventure. He had seen Nero's glory close at hand, and, in the glare of the feast, the Emperor wallowing half-naked, with the face of a madman, and in the midst of the frayed leaves of the roses, a carpet of bodies overwhelmed by the orgy. . . . And his liberty terrified him because it was Nero's intoxication that had given it to him.

A short time afterwards Styrax died, whether it was that from the heat of his furnaces he had contracted some slow malady which suddenly declared itself, or that the head cook (this was the current rumour) had poisoned him out of jealousy.

Old Mammæa gave Myrrha a refuge in her little room in the Suburana. She taught her to work embroidery for the robes of the Roman ladies, and it was by this trade that they both lived.

Callistus lived in the same house. He was eighty years old. Formerly, in Palestine, he had been a collector of tolls on a bridge over the Jordan. There he had several times seen Jesus and his first companions. As they were poor and pleased him by their simplicity and goodness, he allowed them to cross for nothing. Nevertheless, he had not at first dared to believe "the good news," and it was only after the execution of Jesus that he gave himself to Him.

Coming to Rome with the Apostle Peter, Callistus had helped him to preach the Gospel there. And, ever since Peter and Paul had returned to Asia to visit the churches, he had acquired great authority over the faithful, because he was very holy, and also because he was henceforth the only one among them who had seen the Christ.

And whilst other priests, such as Timotheus, ruled their flock somewhat sternly, and thought of fixing the dogmas of the new religion in order to render the Church stronger, Callistus was indulgent to sinners, provided there was in them neither malice nor harshness, and he preached

hardly anything except the love of God and men. And every time he had to give a decision, he used to repeat :

" Yes, that is what *He* would have done, that is what *He* would have said. I know it, for I have seen *Him*."

The first time that he met his little neighbour, Myrrha, on the staircase of the house in the Suburana, he was struck by her charm and her innocence. He spoke to her, and he had no need of saying much. Myrrha's soul went of its own accord to Christ. The old man and the young girl quickly understood and loved one another, for both of them were charitable and pure.

And it was Myrrha who led Callistus every week to the assembly of the faithful, and who led him back.

* * * * *

Callistus and Myrrha went along the Appian Way, paved with large blocks and bordered with tombs whose whiteness flashed out here and there among the green oaks, the yews, and the rose-laurels. Evening was falling, and, in front of them the city displayed the profiles of its domes, its arches, and its pediments in the violet sky. And they walked towards the enormous city, bearing in their minds, humble as they were, the new thought which was to conquer this mistress of the world.

Myrrha was thoughtful, and had again fallen into sadness.

" But," said she at last, " what is it that the Emperor Nero has done ? "

" Such things, Myrrha, as I would not dare to tell you, and you could not even imagine."

" But what ? "

" I shall not speak to you of his pleasures, nor of the frightful and public profanations to which he delivers his body. And it is not enough for him to be impure ; he would like to have the whole human race in a similar state. His joy is to pollute everything that he can reach. I cannot tell you more of this. By his means, all Rome has become a circus, a tavern, a place of evil."

" But," said Myrrha, " if the Emperor is that sort of man, is it not because he is able to do whatever he wills, and the truth has not yet been preached to him ? Who knows ? He may be all that you say and yet not have an entirely bad heart, and not be evil or cruel."

" A man is always evil whose sole thought is to surfeit his body ; and your gentleness, Myrrha, comes from your innocence. Besides, Nero has poisoned his brother ; he has put to death his wife, a good and virtuous princess. He has killed Seneca and Burrhus, his old teachers. And they were both worthy men ; even the Apostle Paul held Seneca in high esteem ; he had several conversations with him, and he hoped to lead him to the faith. Nero has killed many others, either from jealousy, or hatred of virtue, or greed. And, lastly, he tried to drown his mother, and he had her killed by a centurion. He is not only the basest of charlatans ; he is the cruellest of murderers and executioners. . . . But what is the matter, Myrrha ? And of what are you thinking ? "

With dilated eyes, the young girl seemed to look at something horrible, which she made an effort to visualize although it frightened her. At last she murmured softly :

" I am thinking that no man is more to be pitied than the Emperor Nero."

* * * * *

Myrrha had hitherto lived in great retirement with old Callistus and old Mammæa. And in the streets she had always avoided joining in the conversations of the loungers and gossips before the vendors' stalls. But now, each time she went out for her work or to make purchases, she lingered in the crowd, listening to what they were talking about, and when she met people whom she knew, she questioned them about the Emperor.

It was Scevola, the barber, who answered her most fully. His shop was at the corner of the house in which Myrrha lived. His trade permitted him to be well informed about many things, and his remarks were a fairly exact summary of the opinion of the people about what interested the young girl so much.

" Yes, it is true, people say all sorts of things about the Emperor Nero. There is, first of all, the death of Prince Britannicus. The affair has an ugly look, and it is not for me to tell you the truth about it, seeing that I don't know. But what I do know is that when two princes fall out over the government things always end badly. On that, at least, we can all agree. There is also his mother's death, but I know no more about that story than I do about the other.

What is certain is that his mother was a proud hussy, and that she made no scruple of giving her husband, the Emperor Claudius, some bad mushrooms to eat. Not to mention that she wanted to reign by her son's side, and that she mixed herself up in things that did not concern her. We must be fair, and that was not very pleasant for him. As for his first wife, the Empress Octavia, what happened to her was her own misfortune; but people hardly knew her. She was proud and never showed herself in public. So that when it was known that she was dead, the fact made no great stir. Well, it is none of my business. It is politics. Must not somebody be master? There are also several others of whom the Emperor got rid. But they were rich people and aristocrats, men who wished that nobody should ever do anything for the people. The Emperor cares about our interests. He has made laws to prevent the lawyers from charging so much. He wishes to suppress the indirect taxes, but the Senate opposed this. Then he took vengeance by striking at the nobles. He is not a bad Emperor for us."

"I owe him my freedom," Myrrha could not prevent herself from saying. "It is he who freed my father."

"You see, then," answered the barber. "And, besides, nobody ever gave so many festivals, nor such fine ones. He even takes trouble personally to amuse us himself. Only the other day, at the races on the Festival of Youth, he drove a chariot. He won. Perhaps it was arranged beforehand, but we owe him that much."

"Did you see him?"

"As plain as I see you."

"What is he like?"

"Ah! it is not because he is Emperor, but he is a handsome man. And he has an air! One feels that nobody could overlook him. Whatever they say, he is not a man like the rest of us. He does what he wishes, and those who find something to blame in that—well, let them go and talk about it somewhere else than in my shop. I do not mean you, Myrrha."

* * * * *

Myrrha grew more and more restless. She certainly did not doubt Callistus's word, and even the barber's remarks confirmed on many points what the old priest had said. When she tried to form a notion of Nero's crimes in their reality, she shuddered with fright, and she had a great pity for their victims. But at the same time it gave her almost a pleasure to know that Nero was not hated by the people.

From thinking of the Emperor, a secret desire grew up within her. If she could see him! Only for once! Then she would be more tranquil. Not that she forgot her promise. She had resolved to do nothing to meet him; and, moreover, she hardly admitted to herself her own desire, to such a degree was it mingled with terror.

Accordingly she did not think that she was doing anything wrong on the morning when she went to pay a visit to old Menalcas, one of Nero's

gardeners. He lived in a corner of the great terrace, in a little house hidden by trees, and one could enter it without passing through the Imperial garden. Myrrha brought the good man's little daughter a clay doll which she had dressed like a patrician lady, but the truth was that she came to talk about Nero.

Thus she did not hesitate to repeat to Menalcas all that Callistus had told her, and she added :

" Is all this true ? You ought to know, you who have been here so long, and to whom the slaves of the palace tell everything."

With a quick gesture Menalcas led Myrrha to the end of the room, looked all round him, and whispered very softly in her ear :

" Yes, everything they say is true, and I know things that are still more terrible."

Then, without noticing the young girl's sudden pallor :

" I never speak of them, for I want to die in peace."

And changing the subject :

" But as you are here, would you not like to take a little stroll ? This part of the garden is farthest from the palace, and the Emperor never comes to it, at least at this hour of the day."

" Yes, I should," said Myrrha.

Menalcas went out with her, and then left her to go to his work.

A broad avenue bordered by giant trees stretched from the palace to the terrace, and ended in a lofty portico whence one could see the whole city. Towards the middle of the avenue was a large pond, where bronze Tritons vomited

forth quivering jets of water. On each side, at regular intervals, gods, goddesses, satyrs, and nymphs displayed their white bodies.

Myrrha did not dare to look at them, in alarm at their immodesty, or from fear of finding beauty in these representations of idols. Moreover, though she was alone, she was intimidated by the pomp and majesty of the place.

Suddenly she heard the sound of voices, and saw entering the avenue a band of walkers, clothed in magnificent garments.

Quickly she threw herself behind a clump of foliage.

Soon the company passed in front of her. First came the Emperor, leaning on a beautiful Syrian boy; then at a distance of some paces behind, his usual companions, Otho, Senecio, Tigellinus, with their pale and sharp features, and their effeminate and balanced gait.

Myrrha saw only Nero. She recognized him by his likeness to the images on the coins and, above all, by the air and expression of his countenance. His overhanging eyebrows threw a shadow over his green and dreamily languid eyes. His jaws were heavy, his chin projecting, his lips thick. There was in him something of the god and something of the beast.

Embroideries of gold shone on the folds of his white silken toga; a collar of rubies quivered on his breast like drops of blood and fire; and the fat hand which he rested on the brown child's shoulder flashed with sparks at every step, so laden was it with jewels.

Although Myrrha was but an ignorant little

girl, she had the feeling that this man was infinitely distant from her, not merely in earthly position—he, the master of the world; she, so obscure and poor—but in the very depths of his thought and his soul. And at the same time she was struck by the immense sadness of this all-powerful man. Something strange passed in her mind. It was as if she pitied him, softly and tremblingly, and as if her pity had to traverse an infinite world which lay between them.

At the moment he passed the clump of shrubs behind which she crouched, Nero was speaking. He was speaking to himself, and did not turn to his companions. And this is what Myrrha heard:

"I am bored. . . . My power is too limited. The pleasures that I can procure satiate me; and those of which I dream are unrealizable even for me. . . . I am richer than the ancient kings of Persia; but whatever I do, I shall never hold within my hands all the treasures of the universe. . . . There is a supreme degree of the joys of the senses to which I sometimes attain by means of artifice, but I cannot hold it. . . . I have put many men to death; but I cannot kill all my enemies, for I do not know them all. . . . I am the greatest of poets: but when I write verses, I am obliged to choose the words with an effort, and to count and measure the syllables. . . . I am the most harmonious of singers: but in order to preserve my admirable voice, I am obliged to be sober in my use of wine and to deprive myself of food that I like. . . . All this is absurd and irritating. . . . I am most unhappy. . . . I would insult the gods if the gods

existed. . . . To be the greatest of men—and to be nothing more, O fury! . . . How paltry this garden is, and how monotonous! I should like to have gardens so vast that one would see in them forests, rivers, mountains, and lakes, and that all the noblest views which the face of the earth can assume would be assembled in them, and I would have them all the more beautiful because they would be the work, not of nature, but of art, and in them one would feel the power and the will of a man."

He had reached the end of the terrace, under the marble portico. He leant over the balustrade and gazed at the wave of roofs beneath his feet, spreading out to the horizon.

"How ugly this city is!" he said.

And he added:

"I will burn it."

The next day Myrrha went to seek Callistus in his poor room, and, kneeling down, said to him:

"Father, I have grievously sinned."

"Oh!" said the good Callistus, "I do not believe you."

"It is only too true. I have broken the promise I made you. I have seen Nero."

The old priest started up in astonishment and fright.

"And did he see you?"

"No, for I was well hidden."

Callistus's face became more serene.

"Thank God!" he said.

He asked the young girl where and how this meeting had taken place, and she explained it to him point by point.

"But," he resumed, "when you went to the house of Menalcas, the gardener, did you desire to see the Emperor?"

"I think I did; but I desired to meet him by chance."

"Why?"

"I cannot say."

"And when you walked in the garden did you know that you would see him?"

"How could I have known?"

"But at least you hoped that you would?"

"I don't know."

"Then why do you say that you have grievously sinned?"

"Because I have lost my peace of mind, and I am troubled as if I had committed a great fault."

"Oh, Myrrha, it is then true that we have within us thoughts and feelings of which we ourselves are ignorant, and that the most limpid and purest soul has its darkness. Let us pray to God that He grant us to know ourselves completely, and to suffer nothing in us which is displeasing to Him. But tell me, what were your feelings when you saw the greatest enemy of God?"

"Shall I confess it, oh father! At first I was dazzled by his beauty and the magnificence of his garments. Then he began to speak, and though the meaning of some of his words escaped me, I understood that he must be really guilty of the impurities and cruelties with which people charge him. But also I understood that he suffers."

"If that is true, it is but justice."

"I do not dare to tell you a thought that came to me."

"Speak, Myrrha, I wish it."

"Well, perhaps if he has committed so many crimes, it is because he is Emperor, and he sees the entire world beneath him. And then he would not be any wickeder, even when he commits those crimes, than other men are when they commit their ordinary faults."

"By this reasoning, Myrrha, if God had caused you to be born an Empress, would you not have become the worst of women?"

"Oh, father, what do you say?"

"You see, then!"

"But the Emperor does not know the good news. Perhaps he would listen if it were told to him. Do you not think so?"

"No, Myrrha, I do not think so. He has shown in all his actions so profound and black a malignity that he has in advance repelled the grace of God."

"Yet he said one thing that would not have displeased you. He said that he did not believe in idols."

"Alas! he would be less far away from the true God if only he believed in those other gods."

"But they say that, out of pity for the poor, he wished to suppress the taxes."

"Say out of pride and in order to be applauded by the populace of the circus. He feigned pity by a sacrilegious comedy; and, besides, he could only have relieved the poor of Rome by pressing more heavily on those in the provinces."

Myrrha reflected; she remembered Nero's words: "I shall burn Rome;" but she did not repeat them to Callistus. She resumed:

"I see well that he is the most criminal of men; the only one, perhaps, whose damnation is assured. But is not that a frightful thought? If he is, as you say, irremediably wicked, if he is wicked intentionally and without remorse, what is sadder than to be thus? And since God knew that he would be so wicked, why did He put him into the world?"

"That, Myrrha, is a great mystery. Doubtless God has willed in this way to try the virtue of His servants. I know nothing more."

"But," said the young girl, in a low tone, and as if hesitating before her own thought, "perhaps the Emperor Nero has no soul, and when he dies he will sink into nothingness? He would then be but a scourge, like a tempest or an earthquake. Cannot God send men the trials that strengthen them without the agent of that pain being condemned some day to eternal suffering?"

Callistus was so surprised that he found nothing to answer.

"These," said Myrrha, "are things that I do not understand. Yet . . . there are men and women who love him. . . . He himself gave freedom to my father. . . . He is handsome, and they say he is very clever. . . . If one could. . . . Is it a sin to believe that any man, whatever he may have done, can still be saved?"

"Certainly it is not," said Callistus.

" And would it be a sin to pray for the Emperor Nero, and to impose on oneself penances whose fruit one would apply to him ? "

" No, indeed ; but I believe it would be very useless."

" And if someone offered their life to God with the hope that God would be willing, in exchange, to grant the Emperor a chance of salvation, would there be anything reprehensible in that ? "

" Abandon these thoughts, Myrrha, I entreat you. Take care that there does not enter into them a little pride and much vain curiosity. Content yourself with being a modest and pious child, and attached to the duties of your state of life as you have hitherto been. And promise me again, and more seriously than the first time, never to try to see the Emperor Nero again. It is only on this condition that I can give you absolution."

" Father, I will do as you wish ; but it is not my fault that, ever since I saw him, I am always thinking about him."

One day Myrrha went to a country house in the outskirts of Rome, to fetch embroideries for a lady.

As she was returning in the evening, she saw a great red light in the sky. This light kept increasing in size as she drew nearer to the city. Soon it filled the entire sky. The trees on the road along which the young girl walked were brightly lit up, and her shadow advanced by her side, as clearly outlined as if it were broad daylight.

At a turn of the road, she saw before her Rome in a blaze.

The flame had burst out in the part of the great circus close to the Palatine and Cælian hills. It had devoured that quarter with all its tortuous and narrow lanes, the tops of whose houses almost touched one another, plunging and rushing through them as if it were in some Cyclopean chimney. Soon the Palatine hill was surrounded like an island in a sea of fire, and whilst the flames licked its sides, they were also spreading round about into the Velabrum, the Forum, and the Carinæ. Finally, they climbed the Imperial hill, and there, in a mad spring, they seemed to spout upwards to the stars. Then, in fast streams, they fell back again towards the Suburana. And Rome was like a huge furnace whose embers had the shapes of domes, pediments, porticos, and walls pierced with holes. . . .

As she passed beneath the walls of a lofty terrace on which there stood a square tower, Myrrha heard somebody singing on the summit of the tower, and accompanying himself on the lyre.

It was a sad and slow song, in a language she did not understand, an elegy of Simonides on the burning of Troy. The voice was harmonious though a little clouded, and it prolonged itself in laments. Myrrha stopped to listen. But she soon felt that the grief was feigned and that the singer was admiring the beauty of his own voice. And then the song hurt her.

When she reached the Capenan gate, she found there a despairing crowd of people, surrounded

by as much of their poor furniture and such bundles of clothes as they had been able to rescue from the fire.

Many wept and told how some of their relatives, an old mother, a wife, a little child, had been unable to escape and had perished in the flames.

A man said :

" I am sure that three hundred were left in the district of the Esquiline hill, alone."

" But," said another, " we must try and put out the fire, or at least do what we can to pull down the houses, so as to save the rest of the city."

Somebody answered him :

" We have tried. But there are men who keep off those who want to help. They say they have orders."

And Myrrha remembered what the Emperor had said. He had done it then ! Assuredly this crime surpassed all the rest. And she herself saw and touched this crime ; it displayed itself beneath her very eyes.

Then, her heart wrung with pity for the victims, she thought :

" Wilt Thou not open, O Lord, Thy holy Paradise to all these unhappy beings, and will not their suffering have passed away like an evil dream ? . . . But he ! he ! . . . If there be yet time I offer Thee my life that it may please Thee to send him a ray of Thy grace."

* * * * *

She reached the Suburana by a circuitous path, very anxious about Callistus and Mammæa.

They were both safe and sound, but the house in which they had lived was burnt down. A large number of other Christians were on the streets. Callistus was comforting and encouraging them.

"Let us bless God," he said, "for having taken from us the small amount of earthly goods we had, for we always think too much of them. As the distress is common, it gives us an opportunity for helping one another and showing that we love one another."

The Emperor allowed the victims to take refuge in those temples that were still standing and in the markets. He also opened a part of his gardens to them. He had wooden huts built for them on the Forum, and he caused food to be distributed among them.

But this did not prevent the people from saying that it was Nero who had set fire to the city, and that he had even sung as he gazed at the fire from the summit of a tower.

These remarks reminded Myrrha of the song she had heard on her way. But to those who accused the Emperor, she answered, endeavouring to deceive herself :

"If he had kindled the fire, would he have shown so much zeal in succouring the victims ?"

And she did not perceive the weakness of this reasoning.

The Christians, not wishing to go into the temples of false gods, nor to shelter in the huts, from hatred of the impious hands that would offer them succour, took refuge in their tombs.

Myrrha and Mammæa continued to work

embroideries for the Roman ladies, and this enabled them to live and even to help their indigent brethren.

Now, in spite of their great distress, many Christians rejoiced at the fire, so much did they hate Rome, the impure city.

In particular, Timotheus, the priest, exulted with a sombre joy. He said one day to the assembled brethren :

" The hand that lighted this fire may be abominable. But it has done nothing save by the will of God. For behold, the oldest temples of idols, those which malice or ignorance venerated most, have been destroyed from top to bottom. Burnt is the temple of the Moon, built by Servius Tullius ! Burnt is the temple consecrated to Hercules by King Evander ! Burnt is the temple of Jupiter Stator, elevated by Romulus ! Burnt are the palace of Numa Pompilius and the temple of Vesta ! This, more clearly than aught else, proclaims the end of the world, which is to come by fire. And that end will be the beginning of our victory and of our joy."

" My brother," said Callistus, " perhaps you may be right. But how can you rejoice at an event which has brought so much suffering to the humble, to those whom Jesus loved ? "

At that moment, some soldiers, led by a centurion, entered the place of assembly.

" We arrest you by order of the Emperor," they said.

" Why ? " asked Callistus.

" Because it was you Christians who set fire to the city."

And, pointing to Timotheus :

" Is it not proved by the words of that ruffian ? "

Myrrha had believed that Nero's last crime was the greatest that one could conceive. He had now done something still more terrible by accusing innocent persons of that crime. And for this reason she said to God :

" For him, for his salvation, not only my life, Lord, but all the tortures it will please Thee."

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The soldiers then led away the Christians, and flung them without distinction into the underground cells of the Mamertine prison.

And Myrrha felt an obscure pleasure in thinking that she was a prisoner by Nero's command : for it was the first time that the will of the almighty Cæsar was directly influencing her humble destiny. Continually she saw again, grown still more beautiful in her memory, the Emperor's sad and terrible countenance, and she hoped that she would appear before him at her trial.

Often, in the prison, the priest, Timotheus, between two prayers, burst forth into imprecations against Nero, and repeated the list of his crimes ; and never did he name him otherwise than as " the Beast."

And although she knew that Timotheus was right, Myrrha suffered cruelly.

But, on one occasion, one of the prisoners expressed the opinion that it was the Empress

Poppæa who had persuaded Nero to accuse the Christians, because she had been initiated into the Jewish religion, and therefore hated the disciples of Jesus. He said that the Emperor loved Poppæa to distraction, that it was on her account he had killed his first wife, that he never refused her anything, and that recently he had given her three hundred she-asses, so that she could take baths of milk.

And although Poppæa's intervention diminished Nero's guilt a little, on that day Myrrha suffered still more.

"Oh, that Jewess!" she said.

* * * * *

The prisoners appeared before a proconsul, and this was a great disappointment to Myrrha. He contented himself with asking them if they were Christians, and then condemned them to be exposed to the lions in the great circus.

"Will the Emperor be there?" Myrrha asked one of the jailers.

"The Emperor never misses one of those festivals," answered the man.

A great joy lit up the young girl's face, that pale and diaphanous face in which there was no longer room for anything but the large ardent eyes, with their violet eyelids, and the little mouth always half-opened by the soft panting of an angelical desire. . . . She no longer saw clearly into her own thoughts. It was pleasant to die for so great a criminal and thus to fulfil her vow. But to die through

him—was not this horrible? No, for though, doubtless, it aggravated the punishment, it would also make it more meritorious and more efficacious, and for the same reason it would no longer be painful. Indeed, she no longer knew anything. . . . Sometimes she was seized with terror. She did not understand why it was that Nero did not seem horrible to her. She no longer heard or saw anything, but lived in a fever, in a dream.

Old Callistus regarded her with uneasiness. For a long time she had not spoken to him again of the Emperor Nero. But he felt that she had no other thought. He asked himself if this strange preoccupation ought not to be regarded as something other than a miracle of charity. And he did not dare to question her, fearing his lack of skill in reading that soul, and lest he might trouble it merely by touching it.

On the eve of the execution, after the evening prayer, which the condemned made in common, Myrrha said in a loud voice:

"Let us pray for the Emperor Nero!"

The Christians hesitated an instant. But the priest Callistus thought within himself:

"I was wrong to be uneasy: Myrrha is holier than all of us."

And he began the prayer for the Emperor, and the other Christians recited it with him.

Now, when he heard this, a jailer who was standing near the door (he was a very tall and fair Gaul), began to weep, and prayed Myrrha to explain to him the religion of Christ.

* * * * *

On the next day the Christians were led into a low prison, situated beneath the amphitheatre of the great circus.

Through the bars Myrrha saw the arena dazzling with light, and a great populace seated on the benches which were spread around in circles—senators, knights, soldiers, plebeians, vestals, and courtesans, in woollen hoods, in fawn-coloured tunics, in silk maniples; a swarming and buzzing crowd, whom the curtains, hanging in the air and held up by cords, bathed in moving reflections of red light.

She perceived, in front, the end of the heavy carpet that fell from the Imperial dais, and, a little to the side, behind some other bars in the half-darkness, the lions gliding backwards and forwards.

The other condemned prayed, prostrated on the ground in groups, or embraced one another before dying. And with death so near, although their wills remained firm, several wept, sobbed, or were seized with fits of trembling. Timotheus and Callistus exhorted them. Timotheus said to them:

"It is a joy to sign one's faith in one's blood, and to brave the powerless anger of the impious. This blood will cry out against him. Yet once more, the time is at hand. . . . And what is a moment of suffering for a life of eternal happiness? He is a fool and a coward who would refuse the bargain."

And Callistus:

"O my brethren, God be merciful to you. The death that awaits you, what is it after all

but the death of a hunter surprised in a wood ? We will go on together, so strongly united in the same thought of love that we shall not feel the wild beast's claw or tooth. And God will do such great things with your blood ! By your death you will lay the foundation of happiness and peace for future humanity."

But Myrrha remained apart, standing near the bars, a stranger to all that was happening around her.

The keepers of the beasts opened the gate of the prison and that of the cage of lions at the same time, and suddenly there was a great silence.

Myrrha was the first to enter the arena. She saw the Emperor on the dais ; and, with a light and even step, she walked straight towards him. She thought :

" He will have to see me, and it will be near him that my soul shall be sent forth to save his."

Callistus followed her, as quickly as the weakness of his age allowed him.

The lions had left their cage : and, at first, blinded by the sudden light, some stood still, others turned about vaguely, with their muzzles to the ground.

Myrrha kept on walking, her eyes fixed upon Nero. The Emperor, half leaning towards one of his companions, felt this look and turned round. He believed that the young girl was coming to beg his mercy, and he had a malicious smile.

But she went to the foot of the dais without saying a word or raising her clasped hands, and

there, motionless, she continued to look at him.

Her hair was untied and hung over her back, and a rent in her robe laid bare her delicate shoulder.

The Emperor stretched forward his head, like that of a bestial god. A quick flame blazed beneath his heavy eyelids. He stood up, and calling by name the chief of the keepers of the wild beasts, made a gesture of pardon. . . .

One of the lions, having perceived Myrrha, was approaching her with long, oblique steps. . . .

Then old Callistus, who had understood the Emperor's gesture, seized Myrrha in his frail arms, and, with all his strength, pushed her towards the lion.

LILITH

LILITH

When Jesus was born in the days of Herod the king, there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem, saying:

Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the East, and are come to worship him.

When Herod the king heard these things he was troubled. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

And they said unto him: In Bethlehem.

Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said:

Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

But after that the wise men, led by the star, had found the child and worshipped him, they were warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, and they departed into their own country another way.

Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked by the wise men, was exceeding wroth. . .

* * * * *

Princess Lilith, King Herod's daughter, lay dreamily on her purple bed, while the negress,

Noun, slowly waved a feathery fan over her brow and Ashtaroth, her cat, slept at her feet.

Princess Lilith was fifteen years old. Her eyes were as deep as the water of a well, and her mouth resembled an hibiscus blossom.

She thought of her mother, Queen Mariamne, who died when Lilith was quite small. She did not know that her father had killed her out of jealousy; but she knew that he kept the body of the queen in a secret chamber, embalmed with honey and aromatic herbs, and that he still wept for her.

She thought of her father, King Herod, so gloomy and always ill. Sometimes he shut himself up in his room, and there he would be heard uttering loud cries. He kept thinking that he saw those whom he had put to death: Kostobar, his brother-in-law; Mariamne, his wife; his sons Aristobulus and Alexander, Lilith's brothers; Alexandra, his mother-in-law; Antipater, his son; Baba-ben-Bouta, the teacher of the law, and many others. And although Lilith was ignorant of these things, her father filled her with great terror.

She thought of the Messiah whom the Jews expected, and of whom her nurse, Egla, now dead, had often spoken to her. And although the Messiah was to be king in place of Herod, she said to herself that nevertheless she would like to see him; for the distant attraction of this marvellous event diverted her mind from the thought of how it could be accomplished.

She thought, lastly, of little Hozaël, the son of her foster-sister, Zebouda, who lived in

Bethlehem. Hozaël was a little boy a year old, who laughed and was beginning to speak. Lilith loved him tenderly. And almost every day she had the mules harnessed to her cedar chariot, and went with Noun, the negress, to visit little Hozaël.

Lilith thought of all this, and that she was quite alone in the world, and that, without little Hozaël, she would be terribly bored.

* * * * *

Then Lilith went into the garden to walk beneath the great sycamores.

There she met old Zabulon, who had formerly been captain of the king's guards. Herod had replaced his Jewish guard by Roman soldiers, but as he had confidence in old Zabulon, he had entrusted him with the duty of watching over the part of the palace in which Princess Lilith lived.

Old Zabulon had been ailing for some time past, and he was warming himself on a stone bench in the sun. Age had bent him so much that his long beard was folded over his knees.

Lilith said to him :

" Why are you sad, old Zabulon ? "

" I have heard from a centurion that the king has given orders that to-morrow, at dawn, all the children of Bethlehem under two years old are to be killed."

" Oh ! " said Lilith, " and why ? "

" The wise men have proclaimed that the Messiah is born. But it is not known how he is to be recognized, and the wise men have not

returned to say if they had found him. By killing all the little children in Bethlehem, the king is sure that the Messiah will not escape."

"That is true," said Lilith; "it is a very good plan."

Then, after a moment's reflection:

"Can one see him?"

"Who?"

"The Messiah."

"In order to see him it would be necessary to know where he is. And if it were known where he is, the king would have no need to kill all the little children in the village."

"That is so," said Lilith.

She added in a low voice, and as if afraid of her words:

"My father is very wicked."

Then suddenly:

"And little Hozaël?"

"Little Hozaël," said Zabulon, "will die like the rest, for the soldiers will search all the houses."

"But I am quite sure that little Hozaël is not the Messiah. How could he be the Messiah? He is my foster-sister's son."

"Ask mercy for him of your father," said Zabulon.

"I do not dare," said Lilith.

She resumed:

"I myself will go, with Noun, to look for little Hozaël, and I will hide him in my room. He will be safe there, for the king hardly ever comes into it."

* * * * *

Lilith had her mules harnessed to her cedar chariot, went to Bethlehem with Noun, entered the house of her foster-sister, Zebouda, and said to her :

" It is a long time since I have seen Hozaël. I would like to take him to my palace and keep him there for a day and a night. The child is weaned and no longer needs your care. I will give him a robe of hyacinth and a necklace of pearls."

And she did not tell Zebouda what she had learnt from Zabulon, so great was her fear of the king.

But she noticed that Zebouda's face shone with unaccustomed joy.

" Why are you so joyful ? "

Zebouda hesitated a moment, and said :

" I am joyful, Princess Lilith, because you love my son."

" And your husband, where is he ? "

Zebouda hesitated again, and answered :

" He has gone to collect the flock on the mountain."

Noun hid little Hozaël under her clothes ; and Lilith and the good negress returned to the palace at the hour when the sun was setting behind Jerusalem.

* * * * *

When Lilith was in her room, she took Hozaël on her knees ; and the child laughed and tried to grasp the little princess's long ear-rings.

But Noun, who was preparing a mess of maize

pap for the child in an adjoining room, ran in and said :

" The king ! Here is the king ! "

Lilith had only time to hide Hozaël in the bottom of a large basket and to cover him up with a heap of silks and bright-coloured wools.

King Herod entered with a heavy step, his back bowed, his bloodshot eyes sunk in his cadaverous face, while collars and plates of gold jingled upon him ; and his chin was agitated by a trembling that shook all his plaited beard.

He said to Lilith :

" Where have you been ? "

She answered :

" In Jericho."

And she raised her tranquil eyes towards the king.

" Oh ! how like her she is ! " murmured Herod.

At that moment a little cry came from the basket.

" Be quiet, won't you ? " said Lilith to Ashtaroth, the cat, who was sleeping on the carpet.

Then she said to the king :

" Father, you seem to be troubled by something. Would you like me to sing you a song ? "

And taking her zither, she sang a song about the roses.

And the king murmured :

" Oh ! that voice ! "

And he fled, as if seized with terror, because Lilith's looks and song had reminded him of the voice and eyes of Queen Mariamne.

* * * * *

A short time afterwards Lilith went into the garden and saw old Zabulon weeping.

"Why are you weeping, old Zabulon?" she asked.

"You know why; Princess Lilith, I am weeping because the king desires to kill the little child who is the Messiah."

"But," said Lilith, "if he were really the Messiah, men would not have the power to kill him."

"God desires men to help Him," answered Zabulon. "Princess, you who are good and compassionate, you ought to warn the father and mother of the little child."

"But where shall I find them?"

"Ask the people of Bethlehem."

"But ought I to save him who will drive my race out of the palace, him through whom I shall perhaps one day be a poor prisoner or a beggar in the streets?"

"That time is far off," said Zabulon, "and the Messiah is as yet only a very little child, weaker than little Hozaël. Besides, the Messiah will have enough power to be king without harming anybody. And if one day you have a daughter, Princess Lilith, the Messiah, when he is grown up, could take her in marriage."

"But is he the Messiah?" asked Lilith.

"Yes," said Zabulon, "for he was born in Bethlehem at the time declared by the prophets, and the wise men have seen his star."

"He must be beautiful, though little, must he not, Zabulon?"

" It is written that he will be the most beautiful among the children of men."

" I will go and see him," said Lilith.

* * * * *

When night came, Lilith wrapped herself in dark garments; and the bracelets and circlets of gold on her arms and ankles, and the necklaces of gold on her neck, and the precious stones with which she was covered, shone through her garments with as mild a radiance as the stars in the sky; and thus Lilith resembled the night, whose name she bore.

For " Lilith " in the Hebrew language means Night.

She went out of the palace secretly, with Noun, the negress, and she reflected on her way:

" I should not like the Messiah to take away my father's crown, for it would be hard for me to live no longer in a beautiful palace, and no more to have beautiful carpets, fine dresses, jewels and perfumes. But neither do I wish that this little newly-born child should be put to death. Therefore I shall tell my father that I have discovered his retreat, and as a reward for that service I shall beg him to spare this child and to keep him in his palace. In this way he will be unable to do us harm; but if he is the Messiah, he will associate us with his power.

* * * * *

Lilith found Zebouda in prayer with her husband, Methouel. And both seemed to be filled with great joy.

Then Lilith thought of an artifice.

" Hozaël is well," said she, " and I will bring him back to you to-morrow. But since you know where the Messiah is, lead me to him. I have come to worship him."

Methouel was a simple man, and little inclined to believe evil. He answered :

" I will lead you, Princess."

* * * * *

When they reached the place where the child was, Lilith was greatly astonished, for she had expected something extraordinary and magnificent, though she did not know what, and she saw but a hut built against the side of a rock, and beneath its thatched roof an ass, an ox, a man who had the appearance of an artisan, a woman of the people, beautiful indeed, but pale and fragile and poorly clad, and in the manger, on the straw, a little child who at first seemed like many other children.

But as she drew nearer, she saw his eyes, and in those eyes a look which was not that of a child, an infinite and more than human tenderness ; and she perceived that the only light in the stable was the light that emanated from him.

She said to the young mother :

" What is your name ? "

" Miriam."

" And your little boy's ? "

" Jesus."

" He seems to be very good."

" He sometimes weeps, but he never cries out."

" Would you allow me to embrace him ? "

" Yes, lady," said Miriam.

Lilith bent down and kissed the child on the forehead ; and Miriam was a little angry to see that she did not kneel.

" Then," said Lilith, " this little child is the Messiah ? "

" It is as you have said, lady."

" And he will be the King of the Jews ? "

" That is why God has sent him."

" But then he will make war, he will kill many men, and he will dethrone King Herod or his successor ? "

" No," said Miriam, " for his kingdom is not of this world. He will have neither guards nor soldiers ; he will have neither palaces nor treasures ; he will raise no taxes, and he will live like the poorest fishermen on the lake of Genesareth. He will be the servant of the humble and lowly. He will cure the sick, he will console the afflicted. He will teach truth and justice, and it is over hearts and not over bodies that he will reign. He will suffer in order to teach us the worth of suffering. He will be the king of tears, of charity, of pardon. He will be the king of love. For he will love men ; and to those who are tormented with the desire of loving and for whom the earth is not enough, he will tell how their poor hearts can find contentment and joy. He will have inexhaustible mercy for all those, even though guilty, who have kept this gift of loving and of feeling themselves the brothers of other men, and who do not prefer themselves to others. And, doubtless, he will have a throne——"

"Ah! You see, I was right," said Lilith, still resisting.

"But," resumed Miriam, "that throne will be a cross. It is on a cross that he will die, in order to expiate the sins of men and that God, his father, may take pity upon them."

Lilith listened with astonishment. Slowly she turned her head towards the manger; she saw that the child was looking at her, and under the caress of his deep eyes, she was conquered, and slipped on her knees, murmuring:

"I was never told these things."

And she worshipped.

Noun, the good negress, had for a long time been kneeling and weeping.

"I know," said Lilith, as she got up, "that King Herod seeks the child to put him to death. Take the ass (I will pay his master), and flee!"

* * * * *

By the narrow paths which twist about the round hills, Jesus and his mother and Joseph and Lilith and the negress and the ass reached the plain.

"I must leave you here," said the Princess. "I am Princess Lilith, King Herod's daughter. Remember me."

And while Miriam, mounted on the ass which Joseph led, and holding Jesus in her arms, went away along the road to the right, Lilith followed with her eyes in the night the aureole which surrounded the divine brow of the little child.

And just at the moment when the pale,

mysterious light disappeared behind a wood of sycamore trees, there appeared on the road at the left-hand side, with a noise of horses and clanking of steel and rapid flashes of helmets in the moonlight, the squadron of Roman soldiers marching towards Bethlehem. . . .

THE BELL

THE BELL

THE little parish of Lande-Fleurie had an old bell and an old parish priest.

The bell was so cracked that its sound was like an old woman's cough. It was unpleasant to hear, and it saddened the labourers and shepherds scattered among the fields.

The parish priest, Father Corentin, was still sturdy in spite of his seventy-five years. He had the face of a child, wrinkled but rosy, framed with white hairs like the skeins of wool which the good women of Lande-Fleurie used to weave. And he was loved by his flock for his goodness and great charity.

* * * * *

As the period approached when Father Corentin was about to complete the fiftieth year of his priesthood, his parishioners resolved to give him a present of some importance to mark this anniversary.

The three churchwardens secretly made a collection in every house, and when they had got together a hundred crowns they brought them to the priest, begging him to go to the town and himself choose the new bell.

"My children," said Father Corentin, "my dear children . . . it is evidently the good God who . . . so to speak . . . in some way . . ."

And he could not go on, so greatly was he moved. He could only murmur :

"*Nunc dimittis servum tuum, Domine, secundum verbum tuum in pace.*"

("Now, Lord, lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word.")

* * * * *

On the following day, Father Corentin set out to buy the bell. He had to go two leagues on foot, as far as the village of Rosy-les-Roses, where the diligence passed that went to the good town of Pont-l'Archevêque, the chief town of the province.

It was fine weather. The life of the trees, of the birds, of the herbs and the flowers rustled in the sun on both sides of the road.

And the old priest, his head already full of fine future peals, walked along joyously, praising God, like Saint Francis, for the gladness of creation.

As he approached Rosy-les-Roses, he saw, on the side of the road, an unharnessed cart belonging to some performing gipsies. Not far from the cart, an old horse was lying on his side, his four legs outstretched and stiff, the curves of his ribs and the pointed bones of his rump bursting through his worn skin, blood in his nostrils, and with a huge head and white eyes.

An old man and an old woman, clothed in strange rags and wearing tights of reddish cotton sprinkled with stars, were sitting on the bank of a ditch, weeping for their dead horse.

A girl of fifteen rose out of the bottom of the ditch and ran towards the priest, saying:

"Charity, Father, charity if you please!"

Her voice was husky yet gentle, and it modu-

lated her prayer like a gipsy song. The child, whose skin was the colour of freshly tanned leather, wore only a dirty little smock and a red petticoat; but she had large velvety black eyes, and lips like ripe cherries; her yellow arms were tattooed with blue flowers, and a leather band held back her black hair, which was arranged in the shape of a fan on each side of her thin face, just as is seen in Egyptian statues.

The priest, slackening his pace, had taken a couple of pence out of his purse. But, meeting the child's eyes, he stopped, and began to question her.

"My brother," she explained, "is in prison because they said he stole a fowl. It was he who earned our livelihood, and we have not eaten for two days."

The priest put the pennies back into his purse, and took out a silver coin.

"I am able to juggle," she said, "and my mother tells fortunes. But they will not let us carry on our trade in the towns and villages, because we are too poor. And now our horse is dead. What is to become of us?"

"But," asked the priest, "could you not look for work in the country?"

"The people are afraid of us and throw stones at us. Then we have not learnt how to work; we can only do our own tricks. If we had a horse and a little money to get clothes, we might be able to live by our own trade. . . . But there is nothing left for us except to die."

The priest put the silver coin back into his purse.

" Do you love the good God ? " he asked.

" I will love Him if He helps us," said the child.

The priest felt in his girdle the weight of the bag that contained his parishioners' hundred crowns.

The beggar did not take her eyes off the holy priest, her gipsy eyes that were almost all pupils. He asked :

" Are you good ? "

" Good ? " said the gipsy with astonishment, for she did not understand.

" Say : ' My God, I love you ! ' "

The child was silent, her eyes full of tears. The priest had unfastened his cassock and taken out the bag of money.

The gipsy snatched the bag with the gesture of a monkey, and said :

" Father, I love you."

And she fled towards the old couple who had not moved and were still weeping for their dead horse.

* * * * *

The priest continued his walk towards Rosy-les-Roses, thinking of the extreme poverty in which it pleases God to keep some of His creatures, and praying Him to enlighten that little wanderer, who obviously had no religion, and who, perhaps, had not even received Holy Baptism.

But suddenly he recollected that it was no longer any use going to Pont-l'Archevêque, since he no longer had the money for the bell.

And he retraced his steps.

He could hardly understand now how he could have given to an unknown beggar, to a performing gipsy, such an enormous sum—that did not belong to him.

He hurried on, hoping to see the gipsy girl. But there was no longer anything on the roadside except the dead horse and the cart.

He reflected on what he had just done. He had, without any doubt, sinned grievously: he had abused the confidence of his flock, misappropriated money in his charge, committed a sort of theft.

And he saw with terror the consequences of his fault. How could he hide it? How repair it? Where could he find another hundred crowns? And, in the meantime, what was he to answer to those who might question him? What explanation could he give of his conduct?

The sky darkened. The trees became a crude and staring green against the livid horizon. Large drops fell. Father Corentin was impressed by the sadness of creation.

He was able to return to his presbytery without being noticed.

* * * * *

"Are you back already, Father?" asked his servant, old Scholastica. "Then you did not go to Pont-l'Archevêque?"

The priest told a falsehood.

"I missed the diligence at Rosy-les-Roses. . . . I will go another day. . . . But listen, do not tell anybody that I am back."

He did not say his Mass the next day. He remained shut up in his room and did not even dare to walk in his orchard.

But, on the following day, he was sent for to give Extreme Unction to a sick man in the hamlet of Clos-Moussu.

"He has not returned," said the housekeeper.

"Scholastica is mistaken; here I am," said Father Corentin.

* * * * *

On his way back from Clos-Moussu, he met one of his most pious parishioners.

"Well, Father, have you had a pleasant journey?"

The priest lied for the second time.

"Excellent, my friend, excellent."

"And the bell!"

The priest told a further lie. Alas! he had already given up counting them.

"Superb, my friend, superb! One would say it was made of silver. And what a pretty sound! If you only give it a fillip with your thumb, it keeps on humming so long that you would think it was never going to end."

"And when shall we see it!"

"Soon, my son, soon. But its baptismal name must first be engraved on the metal, and those of its godfather and godmother, and some verses from the Holy Scriptures. . . . And, you see, that takes time."

* * * * *

"Scholastica," said the priest when he got home, "if we sold the arm-chair, the clock, and the cupboard that are in my room, do you think they would fetch a hundred crowns?"

"They would not fetch three gold pieces, Father. For, saving your reverence, your furniture is not worth twopence."

"Scholastica," resumed the priest, "I shall eat no more meat. Meat disagrees with me."

"Your reverence," said the old servant, "that is not natural, and I am certain there is something the matter with you . . . ever since the day you started for Pont-l'Archevêque. What happened to you then?"

And she bothered him so much with questions that he ended by telling her everything.

"Ah!" said she, "that does not surprise me. Your good heart will ruin you. But do not worry about it, Father. I will take it upon myself to explain the matter until you have got together another hundred crowns."

* * * * *

And then Scholastica invented stories, which she poured out to everybody: "The new bell had been cracked when it was being packed, and it had been necessary to cast it again. The bell had been cast again, but the priest had had the idea of sending it to Rome so that it might be blessed by our Holy Father the Pope, and that was a long journey. . . ."

The priest allowed her to talk, but he became more and more unhappy. For, besides reproaching himself for his own falsehoods, he felt

responsible for those of Scholastica, and this, joined to the misappropriation of his parishioners' money, formed at last a frightful heap of sins. He bent under their load, and, little by little, a terrible pallor replaced, on his thin cheeks, the red roses of his innocent and robust old age.

* * * * *

The day fixed for the parish priest's jubilee and the baptism of the bell had long passed. The inhabitants of Lande-Fleurie were astonished at such a delay. Rumours spread about. Farigoul, the smith, said that Father Corentin had been seen in company with a bad woman, in the neighbourhood of Rosy-les-Roses, and he added :

" I tell you what happened ; he has spent the money for the bell with wenches."

A party was formed against the worthy minister. When he walked in the streets there were hats that remained on heads, and as he passed he heard hostile murmurs.

The poor holy man was overwhelmed with remorse. He saw the full extent of his fault. He felt the saddest attrition ; and yet, try as he would, he could not reach perfect contrition.

For he felt that he had given this imprudent alms, this alms from the money of others, almost in spite of himself and without even having been able to think of what he was doing. He told himself also that this unreasonable charity might be, to the soul of the little gipsy, the best revelation of God, and the beginning of an inward illumination. And he kept seeing the eyes of the little wanderer, so gentle and so full of tears.

However, the anguish of his conscience became intolerable. His fault grew by mere lapse of time. One day, after having remained a long time in prayer, he resolved to unburden himself of his sin by confessing it publicly to his parishioners.

* * * * *

On the following Sunday, he mounted the pulpit after the Gospel, and paler and tenser for a more sublime effort than the martyrs in the arena, he began :

" My dear brethren, my dear friends, my dear children, I have a confession to make to you. . . ."

At that moment, a clear, silver, limpid peal rang forth from the steeple and filled the old church. . . . All heads turned, and a wondering whisper ran along the ranks of the faithful :

" The new bell ! the new bell ! "

* * * * *

Was it a miracle ? And had God sent the new bell by His angels, in order to save the honour of his faithful minister ?

Or had Scholastica gone and confided her old master's embarrassment to those two American ladies—do you know them ?—Susy and Betty Percival, who lived in a splendid country house three leagues distant from Lande-Fleurie, and had these excellent ladies arranged to give Father Corentin this pretty surprise ?

In my opinion, this second explanation would raise even more difficulties than the first.

However that may be, the inhabitants of Lande-Fleurie never knew what it was that Father Corentin had to confess.

SAINT JOHN AND THE DUCHESS ANNE

SAINT JOHN AND THE DUCHESS ANNE

THE parish of Saint John of the Finger is thus named because it possesses in its church one of the most precious of Christian relics—the actual finger of Saint John the Baptist, the sacred forefinger which on the banks of the Jordan pointed the crowds to the Divine Saviour of men.

Some scholars of the present age maintain that the word "finger" is here but an orthographical alteration of the word "figurine," that it therefore comes from the Latin word "*figura*," meaning a shape or figure, that there are, in the town, the remains of a number of potters' moulds which date from Roman times, and that thus, when one says "Saint John of the Finger," it is as if one said, "Saint John of the figures or shapes." And certainly this explanation is plausible. Nevertheless, between two etymologies, a Christian ought to prefer that from which he can derive most edification.

* * * * *

Even to-day, this Finger performs miracles from time to time. But four or five centuries ago, when faith was more living, it performed them in abundance.

The priests used to present the venerable relic to the faithful, enclosed in a case of gold and crystal; and the greater number of those sick

persons who kissed it were cured, above all if they were poor.

For the Finger of the holy Forerunner preferred to succour serfs, villeins, and people of low estate; but it was distrustful and parsimonious towards the great, as appears in this veracious story.

* * * * *

In these times the Duchess Anne of Brittany was, in spite of her power and her immense riches, in the most piteous state in the world, for she was plagued by an ulcer which made her suffer a thousand deaths, and gave her no rest either by day or night. In vain had she summoned the most famous leeches of Padua and Ravenna. Their science had to yield before the devouring evil.

Then she thought that, without doubt, the Finger of Saint John could cure her, and she commanded the priests to bring the benevolent relic to her castle. She promised that if she was cured she would give ten thousand golden crowns to the poor, and ten thousand more for the beautifying of the miraculous sanctuary.

Now, it was ten days' journey from Saint John of the Finger to the Duchess Anne's castle.

The Finger was placed in a rich reliquary borne by monks chanting canticles, and a great multitude of the faithful followed them.

On the first day the trees along the road bowed with respect as the procession passed along, but towards evening the trees ceased to bow, and those who bore the reliquary felt an invincible

fatigue which prevented them from advancing further.

They looked into the reliquary and saw that the Finger was no longer there.

For the Finger had said to itself on the way: "What are they doing with me here? After all, a saint is more than a duchess, and it is for her to put herself to some inconvenience."

And thereupon, taking with it its crystal case, the Finger had returned in the air to its church, where the priests found it again the next day.

* * * * *

The Duchess Anne understood that she must go to the saint, since the saint refused to come to her, and this is why that, in spite of the length of the journey, she went to Saint John of the Finger. She presented herself in the church in pompous apparel, clad in purple and brocade, and followed by her pages and her ladies-in-waiting. And having placed on the recalcitrant relic a kiss in which there were at once fervour and condescension, she waited for her cure with serenity.

The cure did not come.

The Duchess Anne grew obstinate.

She paid in advance the twenty thousand golden crowns she had promised.

She made a vow to consecrate to the Lord in a Bernardine convent the virginity of her eldest daughter, who was a person of great beauty.

She sent orders that a heretic, whose trial

had been unduly protracted, should be condemned and burned on the market-place of Rennes.

And she caused three hundred waxen candles to be lighted before the shrine in which the Finger was enclosed.

But her malady did not leave her.

And yet each day, all about her, artisans and peasants, beggar-women and mountebanks, mendicants and cut-throats, lepers and highway robbers, were instantly restored to health by the power of the compassionate Finger.

* * * * *

The Duchess Anne then consulted an old priest, renowned for his knowledge and his virtues.

"But," said she, "why does the Saint refuse with this obstinacy to me what he grants to all these wretches whose lives are of no account to anybody?"

"They are of some account at least to themselves," replied the old priest. "And as the saint consents to cure them, their lives are of account also to God, and it pleases Him to be served here below by these poor people."

"Yet," answered the duchess, "if the saint cared to take some interest in me, would he not find more advantages in that than in occupying himself with this herd of beggars? I am powerful, and I would not be ungrateful."

"Learn to know the character of this great prophet better," said the old man. "He was a

rather rugged saint, and he never had any respect for either riches or external pomp. He wore a garment of camel's hair and a leathern girdle about his loins. His meat was locusts and wild honey. And he gladly welcomed the poor and humble, and baptized them in the waters of Jordan. But when he saw Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptized, he drove them away with hard words, because he knew that these people were proud in their hearts and thought themselves superior to other men."

* * * * *

The Duchess Anne reflected upon these words. She told herself that it would not be easy for her to overcome the prejudice of this rugged patron of the common people, and she thought of this stratagem.

She put on a dress of fustian and a peasant's cloak, and thus dressed she slipped into the crowd in order that, without being perceived, she might kiss the merciful relic.

And this time the duchess was in fact delivered of her malady, whether it was that the saint was so busy as to be duped by her artifice, or that he cured her, without knowing it, in the jumble of the other sick persons.

And, at the same time as the body, the good saint healed the soul. The Duchess Anne suddenly gained a knowledge of charity. She did not shut up her daughter in a cloister, and she did not cause the poor heretic of Rennes to be burned, it having been revealed to her that God

did not demand either that imprisonment or that execution.

And she began to give much in alms. And not only did she relieve the indigent; she loved them, because it was when wearing their livery that she had been cured. And she did not believe herself above them. And she died in the odour of sanctity.

THE TWO FLOWERS

THE TWO FLOWERS

I

MESSIRE ORY DE HAUTCŒUR was riding through the country one day on his white horse, seeking adventures. He was clad from head to foot in steel, and a plume an ell long floated over his morion. Behind came his chaplain, a venerable man with a red, good-natured face, slowly balancing himself on the back of a mule; then four men-at-arms, clad in coarse fustian and astride of ill-conditioned nags, for the good knight was richer in virtue than in coin.

As he rose in his stirrups to explore the horizon, he perceived a cloud of dust in the distance. The cloud grew larger and approached him; from the midst of it came a noise of furious galloping. The whirlwind passed close to Ory. He distinguished at the head of the band a knight of tall stature in black armour, then men-at-arms with miscreant faces, and, in the middle of them, bound on a horse by her girdle, her feet fastened to the mane, and her head tossing on the crupper, a marvellously beautiful woman, in a white dress, whose long golden hair was blown by the wind and intwined with the long tail of the palfrey.

"Help!" she cried, "in the name of God and the Blessed Virgin Mary!"

Ory de Hautcœur clapped spurs to his horse, but the cavalcade was already some distance off,

and it was galloping so fast that the good knight's horse, though properly spurred, could not reach it. His four companions made an effort and followed him from afar. Ory shouted to the black knight :

" Stop, stop ! ravisher of women ! felon ! renegade ! "

The other did not hear, and continued to gallop away.

Then, in less time than it takes to say Amen, Ory leaped to the ground, took up a small stone, remounted his horse, and hurled the stone with such strength and skill that it struck the black knight's helmet with a loud noise.

The wicked knight swore like a pagan, and he and his band turned round. He sneered when he saw Ory on his lean horse and the poor appearance of his four varlets. He did not think of this, that God was with Ory.

It would take too long to describe the combat. Know only that Ory cleaved the knight in twain with a great stroke of his sword, and that he and his four good servants killed or put to flight the whole band, whilst the chaplain, keeping himself apart behind a hawthorn bush, prayed God to help the champions of the noble lady.

When this task was done, Ory de Hautcœur, after wiping his good sword on the grass, carefully cut the fair prisoner's bonds, and lifted her down from her horse with his gauntleted hands. She leant against a tree to breathe a little, for she had been bruised by her bonds and by the ride ; but by a singular grace from on high, she had no grievous wound.

Ory took off his helmet and laid it on the ground; and the noble lady was not a little surprised to see that the knight who had just fought for her so fiercely had a young and fresh countenance, with a few brown hairs beginning to show themselves on his lips, and eyes as gentle as those of a young girl.

He, on his side, marvelled at the beauty of the lady, her hair as silky as silk, her eyes as blue as bluebells, her mouth as rosy as roses, and the air of sweetness and modesty that covered her delicate face. He thought her more beautiful than the faces of the angels he had seen in illuminated missals or the saints he had seen on the painted windows in the churches. And, as he gazed at her, he began to love her as deeply as one of God's creatures has ever been loved.

Then he placed himself with one knee on the ground and said to her:

"Most noble matron or maiden, I thank God who has led me across your path. I place myself from this moment entirely at your service; and if it please you that I wear your colours, I will stain them by no unworthy action, but I will bear them with as much reverence as a clerk bears the Holy Sacrament. I am a knight-errant, and my name is Ory de Hautcœur."

"Rise, Sir Knight," said the lady, "for it is becoming to kneel only in churches. My name is Frileuse de Blanc-Lys, and I am not a matron but a maiden. I was still fresh from Holy Baptism when my mother died; and my father was away on the last crusade, from which he has never returned. I lived alone in the old castle of

Tour-Vermeille, which is only two leagues from here, under the care of Dame Gudule, my mother's woman, and an old man, Rigobert by name, who was squire to the late lord. But when I reached my sixteenth year, our neighbour, the Sire de Pic-Tordu, whom you have just slain, seeing me one day close to our dwelling, suddenly conceived a damnable desire and wished to lead me into sin. Now, as he was not able to overcome me by his insidious words, and as I remained shut up in my manor so as to avoid any unpleasant encounter, he came last night with an armed band, and entered the castle by some treachery. The faithful Rigobert and my other servants died defending me. I do not know what has become of Dame Gudule. As for me, I was in great danger of death and dishonour, if God had not sent you to my aid. Of that, gentle knight, I shall have an eternal remembrance. And therefore I authorize you to wear my colours, which are white and azure, seeing that I esteem purity of heart above all things, and that often, in my lonely life, the thought of heaven has comforted me. And now, to finish your good action, take me back to the castle of Tour-Vermeille, the red stone donjon and turreted roofs of which you can perceive rising behind that range of hills. Alas! I shall find the bodies of my good vassals bleeding on the flagstones, and I shall be more lonely than before. But I doubt not that God has received their souls into His blessed Paradise; and I do not think myself entirely abandoned by Him, since He has summoned to my protection so trusty and virtuous a knight."

Thus spake Frileuse de Blanc-Lys, in a voice as sweet as music, and broken with tears towards the end of her speech. Ory placed a devout kiss on the maiden's long white hand, and helped her to mount her horse, which he himself led by the bridle.

II

As they went along, they spoke of the adventures in which the knights of former times had distinguished themselves, principally those of King Arthur's companions, who are also called the Knights of the Round Table; of the beauty and chastity of their ladies, and of the deeds of prowess into which they had been led by love, which, if it is pure and reverential and free from all evil desire, makes every virtue to blossom in the hearts of men and inspires them with invincible valour.

"Gentle knight," said Frileuse, "though I am not comparable with the illustrious ladies of ancient times, I would wish with all my heart that, for love of me and zeal in my service, as great fame should come to you as formerly to Launcelot of the Lake and Perceval of Gaul."

"If not by my prowess," answered Ory, "at least by my goodwill and the constancy of my love, do I hope to equal those ancient paragons of chivalry whose miraculous feats are sung by the minstrels during the winter evenings."

And, in truth, Ory was very much like those perfect knights of distant ages. Although he lived at a time when chivalry was already in decay,

when most nobles were more often guided by interest and avarice than by the love of God and of their ladies, when the burghers, enriching themselves in the towns and making merry with their cronies, were beginning to mock those who dreamt of uncarnal and immutable loves and who went to seek fame in foreign lands, Ory de Hautcœur passed through the corruption of the age without seeing it, for his eyes and his soul were always turned upwards, and he was as candid and credulous as a well-born child whose nurse delights him with pretty stories.

"I was baptized," he continued, "with water from the stream whence Archbishop Turpin drew water for Roland. My father died, as did yours, gentle lady, warring against the Saracens. My mother, after she became a widow, built a convent for noble girls, of which she is now the abbess, and there she lives in lofty penitence, praying for the unbelievers whom I slay, and illuminating missals and antiphonaries, for she is as skilled in matters of writing as any cleric. I have a castle somewhere in the Pyrenees, but I left it when I was about twelve years old, and I have never gone back there since. I go through the world fighting for causes that seem to me just. I have left in my manor an old man who manages my estate and lets me have, when he can, a purse of money, for I never receive payment for my services or take my share of the booty. I sleep in the churches that I pass on my way, sometimes in the open air beneath the heavenly vault, which is a vaster and equally holy church, or in the castle of some friendly noble, or in the huts of the villeins, who

think me mad and yet treat me with honour, knowing that I love them as poor and weak brethren, and that I defend them upon occasion. Thus I wander at random, trusting to my sword and always endeavouring to be a good servant of God. And I am yours also, which is the same thing, for you would never command me to do anything of which God does not approve."

"Sir Knight," replied Frileuse, "it is sweet to hear you speak. In the old castle where my days flow by, one like another, I do not pray from morning until evening, for it is necessary to have some respite even from the holiest exercises. But often I used to get old Rigobert (may God have his soul!) to repeat to me the finest tales of chivalry; then I used to think of them again in my chamber, and I used to wish to be one of those ladies for whom knights do deeds of prowess. In the evenings as I watched the sunset through my window I felt within me a mingled sweetness and sadness, and I began to desire things that I could not express in words. I let my thoughts go where they wished; I dreamt of a splendid knight decked with all virtues and perfections; he loved me alone, and he took the place in my heart of my dead father and mother, and he was something more still. I expected him, I saw him coming in the glory of the setting sun, and the purple clouds formed the canopy of his triumph. Now to-day, I dream no more, Sir Knight, since you are here."

Whilst Ory and Frileuse conversed thus, the chaplain, who followed them on his mule, listened without saying a word, but a malicious smile

turned up the corners of his thick lips and of his little grey eyes; and it seemed that the holy man inwardly mocked at the sublimity of such subjects.

III

After walking for two hours, the little troop reached the castle of Tour-Vermeille. Corpses in pools of blood were scattered over the courtyards; but Ory and Frileuse scarcely saw them, because they were happy. Moreover, God, wishing this miserable world to continue, has placed in the hearts of the living a rapid forgetfulness of the dead.

As they were entering the great hall they heard groans, then cries of "Help!" and they perceived Dame Gudule firmly fastened to the biggest armchair, which was of such ample structure and so massively formed of heavy oak, that the old woman, in spite of all her efforts, had hardly been able to move it an inch. As soon as the varlets had unbound her, she burst forth in words:

"What! it is you, dear young lady, my angel, my dove, my lamb, Frileuse of my heart! Holy Virgin, what an adventure! Certain I was that I should never see you again except in Paradise, and that I should die of hunger in the late lord's chair! Is it possible, Jesus, that there exist Christians so wicked! But you, what has happened to you? And how did you escape from the talons of the renegades? They have beaten me to a jelly, my child, and my old skin must be black and blue; and while they were beating me,

they made horrible jokes among themselves, and wanted to take off my petticoat, so that I feared for my virtue; and I shall be seventy years old, or nearly that, next Candlemas. But tell me, my lamb, have they robbed you of your honour? For that Pic-Tordu is a scoundrel! His mother was an Egyptian, learned in evil spells, whom his father brought back from the Levant, where that Pagan had bewitched him with her philtres and diabolical charms. One day she disappeared, whether it was that she died or something else. Some thought her a demon and are sure that Pic-Tordu is a true son of the devil. I trembled all over, therefore, when I saw him dragging you away. Has he done you any harm, dear heart? You are a little pale, but not ill it seems, and even your blue eyes are brighter and shine more than usual. What a happiness to see you again! You were cutting your first teeth when your sainted mother grew faint and felt death coming. 'Gudule,' said the dear lady to me, 'you will watch over Frileuse and protect her from all harm whether of body or of soul.' Judge of my feeling when I saw myself bound to this chair, all alone and not able to move, and I thought to myself: 'Where is she now, the poor dear creature? And what are they doing to her, Lord Jesus?' But why do you not answer me?"

"Dame Gudule," said Frileuse, smiling, "I do not answer you because you do not stop talking. This brave knight whom you see has saved my life, and perhaps more, by killing Pic-Tordu and his soldiers. His name is Ory de Hautcœur. I

am glad, Dame Gudule, that no worse has happened to you, for I love you as my mother's nurse and faithful servant."

"Sir Ory," replied Gudule, "be blessed of God for having brought back to me our young lady. She is a pearl, I tell you, a precious jewel, a notable flower of grace and virtue. When she was still quite small——"

"Good Gudule," interrupted Frileuse, "Sir Ory and his chaplain will be good enough to receive the hospitality of the castle of Tour-Vermeille. Go and see if those bandits have left us any provisions, and get ready to treat our guests as well as you can."

"Trust to me," Gudule answered. "I talk a great deal, and often at random, as is the case with old people; but in spite of my age, I have still a good head, thanks be to God, and——"

"You will also take great care, Gudule, of those brave men who have fought with Sir Ory. As for you, reverend chaplain, you will pardon me if I do not offer you to-day succulent dishes such as quarters of venison, boars' heads, pheasants dressed in their feathers, with preserves of fruits, almond cake, jams, and other delicacies."

"Madam," said the chaplain, "we should not, in truth, despise the gifts of the Lord; but by my state and profession I ought to be detached from them; and, moreover, the grace of your welcome is a condiment that would make a peasant's food worthy of a king."

"I do not know whether that condiment is satisfying," said Frileuse; "but I promise you

better cheer as soon as I can replace my poor servitors." (And at this word large tears moistened her blue eyes.) "We will collect their bodies this evening, and we will watch with them through the night. To-morrow, reverend chaplain, you will say a Mass for them, and we will lay them in consecrated ground."

"May it rest lightly on their bones," murmured the chaplain, "for if they did not all live in a state of grace, assuredly they died in it, for they died for you, Lady Frileuse! They toiled during their lives, they were resigned and valiant; they had simple minds and upright hearts, and patient faith in God and in that future justice which they called Paradise. They were numbered among those humble souls who force God to permit the continued existence in this world of the powerful and the rich who are without charity, and they counted among those whose virtues are sufficient reasons why this earth should go on existing, though it be evil and full of horrible things. Fair visions of the future and an immortal hope consoled their narrow existences; they lived and died for others than themselves; and in this they were not deceived, even if one supposed, in abominable impiety, that there is no Paradise beyond. Let us pray for them, my brethren, *oremus*.

IV

Ory de Hautcœur remained some weeks at the castle of Tour-Vermeille. He hunted stags and wild boars in the neighbouring forests. In the

evenings he talked with Frileuse, and the ladies and knights of former times always entered into their conversations. There were discussions on their virtues and merits (Ory preferring the latter, Frileuse the former) and on the conditions necessary for loving rightly and well. But they always ended in agreement. Often also they prayed the chaplain to read them the written stories of noble deeds which were to be found in great abundance in the library of the castle. The holy man read these to them willingly, yet not as a man whose own interests were kindled by them (for he was of a sedate temperament), but like someone who amuses himself with observing curiously the ideas and behaviour of others.

This chaplain, whose name was Simon Godard, was the son of a villein, and was born in the poorest hovel in a very poor village. The prior of a neighbouring abbey had noticed his engaging ways when he was quite a child, and the little villager had, by his subtle intellect and his diligence, become a most excellent clerk versed in all sorts of studies. To tell the truth, he was not quite so accomplished in holiness. He was rather fond of the pleasures of the table, prudent to excess, a mocker, and less given to saying prayers than was the good Ory de Hautcœur. But his charity towards his brethren was great, not only in giving alms, but in excusing poor sinners provided there was no malice in them, for he was no more severe to the sins of others than he was to his own. In addition, he was surprised at nothing, tolerated everybody, and did not get angry with those who were not like himself. He had ideas of his own

on many matters, but he did not express them, either from prudence or from a fear of being misunderstood. Ordinarily his face and his whole exterior were those of a jovial and unthinking churchman; but his appearance belied him, for sometimes when he forgot himself there escaped from him reflections so wise and so bold that one would not have expected them from so monastic a countenance.

He amused himself with the loves of Ory and Frileuse as if they were a pleasant game played by simple-minded children. But he ended by thinking that the game was lasting too long. Such a quintessence of sentiments seemed to him mere dreamy nonsense. Sometimes he thought the knight a little too ingenuous; and sometimes, knowing men and the infirmity of the flesh, he had fears for the very innocence of the two lovers, and he could not prevent himself from having some distrust of the end of the adventure.

"Sir Knight," said he one day to Ory, "do you love the Lady Frileuse?"

"Verily, I do," answered Ory, "and with all the powers and faculties of my soul."

"And does the Lady Frileuse also love you?"

"I have some suspicion she does, if I may say so much."

"Are you a pure spirit, Sir Knight?"

"If I were, reverend chaplain, I would not be the miserable sinner I am."

"And do you think that the Lady Frileuse is a pure spirit and a disembodied soul?"

"I am quite ready to think so, worthy chaplain. So much grace and so much beauty do not belong

to a terrestrial creature, nor to one subject to the servitudes of the body."

"A pure spirit could not have such fine eyes, Sir Knight, for spirits have no eyes at all; and you would not love her, for spirits are invisible. Tell me also, are you both free?"

"Frileuse is an orphan, and I have no master except God."

"Why, then, do you not become the husband of the Lady de Blanc-Lys by the sacrament of marriage?"

Ory started as if he felt disagreeably surprised

"So soon?" he answered. "But that would not be the same. I must do something to deserve her, and it is from this thought that my virtue comes. To disturb that divine flower! You are not thinking of that, reverend chaplain. If I did what you propose, it would seem to me as if I were committing a sacrilege, that a force would go out of me and that a grace would leave me along with it."

"And why, then, do you love her, if it is not to possess her?"

"But I love her . . . to love her," answered Ory, simply.

"God bless you, my son," murmured Simon Godard, musingly.

V

Now, there was in preparation a new crusade against the infidels who still held the tomb of our Lord in their power. As soon as the news

of this reached Ory, he was filled with great joy, and said to Frileuse :

" It is not fitting that others should go without me to conquer the Holy Sepulchre and harass the Saviour's enemies. I beseech you humbly, lady, to grant me leave to go. I shall return, if God wills, less unworthy of your merciful love."

" Dear Knight," answered Frileuse, " I should be made of very coarse clay if I had not the courage to say to you, ' Go.' But I should be of steel or granite if I did not add : ' Return soon,' and if I did not feel my heart growing weak within me at the moment when you leave me."

Having said these words, she herself aided Ory to put on his armour, his leg-guards, spurs, greaves, armlets, gauntlets, coat of mail, cuirass, and, over all, a tunic of precious silk which she had worked with her own hands and which was partly white and partly blue ; for these, as you may remember, were the dear lady's colours. After which, she girt on his sword and put on the helmet, whose steel mask only allowed the light of day to enter through two holes pierced at the places of the eyes.

Ory and Frileuse were at that moment in the great courtyard of the castle, where the grass grew between the flagstones, with here and there some little flowers. Suddenly Frileuse, by an inspiration from God, plucked one of the flowers, a little daisy with a golden heart.

" Receive this little flower," she said, " and keep it in memory of me. If you bring it back

to me from the Holy Land as intact and fresh as it is now, I shall know that your thought has remained faithful to me, and I will give you my hand in return."

"Lady," answered Ory, "I do not ask how this flower can preserve its freshness and newness for so long a time, but I believe it since you say so, for you have never spoken falsely. If all that is needed is that I should be faithful to you, I will bring it back, were it after ten years, if I do not die, in the condition in which you see it now. Do not doubt this any more than you doubt the Holy Gospel."

Then Frileuse placed the little flower in Ory's helmet, fastening the stalk in one of the joints, and (what she would not have done on one of the fair knight's cheeks of flesh) she kissed the two polished steel cheeks of his helmet; and so great was the poor girl's love that this cold kiss warmed her to the heart. She trembled, nearly fainted, and wept for a long time.

VI

Then Sir Ory started on his way, followed by his four varlets, whose names were Hector, Ogier, Lahire, and Launcelot, and by his chaplain, Father Simon Godard. The good man was going to Palestine, not from religious fervour or from love of blows, but out of curiosity and to see new things.

As the little troop advanced, it joined other bands, and little by little they grew into an army.

But the time had already passed when all Christendom, even to old men, women, and little children, marched behind a monk to the conquest of Palestine. In the host where Sir Ory rode in the front rank, one saw hardly any villeins; not a single burgher, but only knights and men-at-arms and mercenary soldiers who made war their trade.

Ory went along, full of his dreams and of the memory of Frileuse, without even perceiving that a number of his companions were led by other thoughts than that of the service of God, and that they did not always behave themselves as perfect Christians.

Simon Godard, lolling on his ancient mule, and heaving like a full leathern bottle, usually rode at the knight's side, for he loved his candour, and they often conversed together to while away the tedium of the journey.

"Shall we soon be in Palestine?" Sir Ory asked him one day, for the knight was no great clerk in geography.

"In a month from now we shall approach it, if nothing unforeseen happens," answered the chaplain. "But we shall be half as many when we reach it as we were when we started. Many of the host are dying of famine, of fatigue, or of malignant fevers. I do not know if you notice it, but we leave behind us a large number of our companions, and, as there is no time to bury them properly, the dogs and crows give them another sort of burial."

"I do not pity those who go before us into the holy Paradise of God," said Ory. "The

body is a prison and its substance is vile; what becomes of it matters not a jot."

"There are moments, Sir Knight, when I do not distinguish clearly between the prison and the prisoner. It afflicts me that so many people are dying. Nor do I clearly see what purpose these deaths serve. We shall spend a year or more in taking two or three towns, and when we are conquerors, there will remain of us less than a handful of men. Disease will then finish us; the infidels will not even have the trouble of driving us out, and everything will have to begin again."

"Truly; but the walls of Jericho did not fall until the seventh day, and this is not yet the seventh crusade."

"But is it absolutely necessary that Christians should possess the tomb of the Lord Jesus, which, moreover, is but an empty sepulchre, where nothing of Him remains, and which He has allowed for more than a thousand years to be kept in the hands of infidels? And do you not think, Sir Knight, that this soil belongs to them as legitimately as the soil of France does to the French?"

"Do not speak thus, reverend chaplain, for such mockery does not become a churchman and a saint such as you are."

"I do not mock, Sir Knight; but the will of God does not appear to me so manifest as it does to you. It troubles me that God has given to his worst enemies greater wealth than to Christians, more skill in industry, better engines of war, and victory over his faithful servants."

"Do you not know, Father Godard, that their wealth comes to them from the demon, and that it only serves to lead them into the most abominable vices? And if God sometimes allows them to defeat us, it is because He is proving those whom He loves, seeing that trials purify us and raise us to Him."

"You would make a very good theologian, and I should make a very bad knight. If it so happened that I was ruler of the land of France, I believe that I should hardly ever leave it. For while the nobles and sovereigns go and get themselves killed in distant lands, the villeins are slack in paying their dues; the burghers in the towns accumulate gold pieces, and, as the nobles need money for their distant expeditions, these burghers gain all sorts of liberties and privileges. I do not complain of this, for I am one of the people; but I say that it is a great mistake for a noble to join a crusade."

"I know, worthy chaplain, that you are speaking contrary to your thought, and that all this is only to try me. But such words do not touch me, for I have but a small castle, little lands, and no towns. Then, I am not sorry that other Christians are endeavouring to improve their hard and base condition. For my own part, I am not a draper or a spice merchant to stay always in my own little corner, and to value nothing but money and material joys. It is something higher and of greater value that I seek. I am not, reverend chaplain, made of the same stuff as your burghers and your villeins. I could not remain long in the same place or

limit my felicity to the things that can be seen and touched. I love the Lady Blanc-Lys, and I leave her without knowing whether I shall return. I am joining in an adventure which you say is useless and foolish, and from which no profit will come to me even if it should succeed. Why am I doing this? I do not know; I cannot do otherwise, and I feel that it pleases God and that I am His workman."

Simon Godard, although of a subtle mind, found nothing to reply to this except: "Amen!"

VII

As the crusaders were passing through Germany, a knight of that country came to join them. He was of small stature, seemed to wear his steel armour with difficulty, and rode without grace. He had with him a numerous train of varlets and a quantity of baggage and wagons. He said that he came a long way, from a castle which he possessed near the mouth of the river Vistula, and that he was going to the Holy Land to expiate his sins. His name was von der Pouf. Otherwise, he spoke little and did not mix with the other crusaders either on the march or in the camps.

One day he met all alone in the country a boy who was herding swine. He asked him if they were for sale, and while he was discussing the price, his varlets from behind noiselessly slaughtered the poor swineherd.

Having thus gained possession of the swine,

as some of the crusading nobles suffered from a dearth of victuals, he sold them at as dear a price as he could.

Ory de Hautcœur bought a young pig, a fine enough one, in truth, but he had to pay fifty crowns.

"This von der Pouf," said the chaplain, "who goes to the Holy Land to expiate his sins, is doubtless afraid that he should lack cause for his penitence. I reckon this knight to be very capable of betraying Him whose sepulchre he is going to seek."

"Let us," answered Ory, "keep our own hands all the more carefully from all unjust gains, and let us detach ourselves from earthly goods, which are perdition to the soul."

VIII

Meanwhile, every evening as he took off his helmet, Ory used to look at the little white flower which Frileuse had fastened to it. He always found it as fresh as at the moment when it had been plucked, and he was in no wise astonished at this, but rejoiced at it in his heart. And he pointed out this prodigy to the chaplain as a sign of the protection of God and the high sanctity of the Lady Frileuse.

"I am not," said Simon Godard, "versed in the science of plants; but it is possible that the water which flows from your brow during the long days of marching, coming to moisten the stalk of this little flower, keeps it in its original

freshness. Still, I would not pledge myself to this. There are in the world many natural phenomena whose causes I do not know, and I leave to greater clerks the task of elucidating this."

"Happy are those who believe, worthy chaplain!" answered Ory de Hautcœur.

"Ah!" said Simon Godard, "the Turks believe in Mohammed as firmly and as simply as you do in Christ, and yet they will be damned!"

When the army, after crossing the Hellespont in boats and passing through still other countries, reached the Holy Land, the little flower was no more withered than at the start. And when Sir Ory slept beneath the stars on bright and clear nights, he found in the morning a drop of dew in the heart of the marvellous little flower.

The good knight thought of the fogs and mists of the West, and wondered at the purity of the Oriental sky, the grandeur and rigidity of the foliage, the deep azure of the lakes, the whiteness of the houses and buildings, and the ardent light that spread over everything. The landscapes seemed to him made of precious metals; he found their aspect supernatural and fantastic, and he thought that this place had been a fitting theatre for the life of the Saviour Jesus. Sometimes also, in the warm and languid evenings, there came to him a desire to live without toil and to enjoy his body. Then he took the flower in his fingers, and the sight of its immaculate corolla gave him back his courage and his virtue.

Many battles were fought in which Sir Ory performed wonderful deeds of prowess. Frileuse's

little flower, always fresh and living, never left the visor of his helmet, and though it was his custom to plunge into the thickest part of the fight, and his armour was often red and streaming with Saracen blood, never was the dear flower soiled by the least stain.

At last the host of crusaders began to besiege Jerusalem. Although no mention of this siege is made in the histories, it must have taken place, since I am here relating what happened at it to Sir Ory de Hautcœur.

The walls of the city were high, and defended by a large ditch, and well supplied with Saracen soldiers firing arrows through the loopholes of the battlements. As they slew many Christians in this way, the ditch was filled with corpses so that a heap of them soon reached half-way up to the top of the rampart. Seeing this, our good knight thought of a plan :

Twenty men-at-arms, having climbed on this pile of corpses, joined their shields above their heads and made what the old Romans used to call a *tortoise*, for the shields, joined in this way, imitated the shell of that animal. Ten other soldiers mounted on top of this, and used their shields like the others. The knight of Hautcœur's four varlets climbed on this second roof, holding their four shields joined on their arms. This formed a lofty pyramid of three stages, to the summit of which Ory de Hautcœur lifted himself, clothed in steel, and with the blossom of the little flower in his helmet. He was only a few feet from the summit of the wall and was getting ready to climb over it,

when the Saracens who were guarding the loopholes poured upon his head, one after another, more than a hundred pots full of boiling oil. The stream flowed over him, and then dripped on the three layers of shields, as one sees the water of a fountain flow in a large sheet from one basin into another. And, in truth, when the boiling liquid touched Sir Ory's head, it seemed to him that it was limpid and refreshing water, and the little flower opened its white bosom to the rain of fire as if it had been the dew of heaven.

Ory then made the sign of the Cross, and, raising himself by the strength of his wrists, climbed to the top of the wall. The Saracens had disappeared. He began to run along the rampart, looking for a suitable place to descend into the interior of the city, when a tall Saracen, who was hiding in an embrasure of the wall, rushed upon him unexpectedly, and smote him a blow with his sword strong enough to cleave a knight in two and cut into his horse's body. But when the sword of the infidel touched the little flower, it broke clean in two in the middle, although it was made of the finest Damascus steel. Nevertheless, the shock was so great that Ory stumbled, made a false step, and fell from the summit of the wall.

Just at that moment, it happened unluckily that the crusaders were pushing a heavy catapult towards the rampart. The enormous machine met the good knight in his fall, and his head was suddenly caught between the steel-pointed beam and the granite of the wall, while his

body and his legs hung in space. It seemed that his head must be crushed like a nut under a smith's hammer. But his helmet, in which blossomed the innocent little daisy, was not even cracked. Only the wall yielded to the stroke of the catapult, and crumbled with a great noise, while Sir Ory fell on his feet in the ditch without suffering any injury. He jumped on the ruins, sword in hand, and was the first to enter Jerusalem.

IX

The Christian conquerors, after massacring the army of the infidels, dispersed themselves through the city, pillaging the houses, and slaughtering here and there those who protested too strongly. Sir Ory, alone, as he had told Frileuse, did not soil his hands with any booty, wishing to serve the cause of God gratuitously. But after praying in tears at the Holy Sepulchre, he went through the city in the company of Simon Godard. And sometimes they went into the houses, not to pillage, but curious to know what these were like inside.

Ory related to the chaplain how, by the miraculous power of the little flower, he had been saved three times from certain death.

"I was not there and I saw nothing of it," said Godard, "being then occupied, I think, in reciting my breviary; but even if what you tell me were not true, I think it possible, for you are assuredly the most virtuous lord in Christendom."

"I believe so, reverend chaplain," said Ory, with simplicity. "I am not like the other knights who at this moment are drinking and feasting without a thought of God, and are wantoning with the pagan women. But I remain pure in the time of victory as in the time of trial, and since I kissed the stones of the holy Tomb I feel around my heart an invincible cuirass against evil."

These words were too much, and here the knight sinned against Christian humility. This movement of pride was not lost upon the demon, who is always on the watch.

As Ory and the chaplain talked, they entered the house of one of the principal Saracen chiefs. A peristyle of white columns supporting arches wrought in trefoils, surrounded a square court-yard paved with mosaics. In the middle, a jet of water rose up and fell into a marble basin, and at the four corners, banana trees stretched out their leaves like long parasols. An odour of incense, coming from some unknown quarter, floated in the air.

"How good it is here!" exclaimed the knight of Hautcœur. And, in order to breathe more freely, he took off his helmet (decorated with the little flower, which still remained fresh) and held it in his hand.

As they passed under the peristyle, they saw a closed door. It was painted red and furnished with ironwork artfully designed, and some Arab letters around the arch formed an intricate ornament. Ory broke in the heavy door with a blow of his gauntlet. He entered with the

chaplain; shrill cries burst forth; it was the women's room.

There they were, lying among cushions on a carpet as thick as a plot of grass, their faces painted, wrapped in bright and silky stuffs. The sunlight, dimmed by the coloured windows, lit up this place of damnation. Perfumes of deadly sweetness rose from braziers, unfolding their blue spirals.

The most beautiful of the women dragged herself to Ory's feet, weeping and lamenting in the Saracen language; and she surrounded him with her arms and mingled with her supplications diabolical caresses and glances. Ory did not comprehend her words, but he understood that this pagan wished to lead him into evil. The image of Frileuse, so fair and so white and with her blue eyes, suddenly became effaced from his memory, and he saw only this pagan, quite material and earthly in her beauty, fat, amber-coloured, smelling of honey, with her long eyes so dark beneath their heavy lids. . . .

Meanwhile another infidel had thrown herself at the chaplain's feet and was kissing his robe.

"Oh! it is hot here," said the holy man.

"Reverend chaplain! reverend chaplain!" cried Ory in anguish.

But Simon Godard had gone out to breathe the air.

Then, for a space of a quarter of a minute, Ory consented to sin in his heart.

At that same moment, a thousand leagues away from the Holy City, Frileuse de Blanc-Lys, in her oratory, was praying to God for her knight.

And this was why Sir Ory, with a violent gesture, suddenly repulsed the seducer, who rolled on the carpet, and he fled away with great strides and without looking behind him.

As he ran, he turned his eyes towards his helmet, which he had kept in his hand. The little white flower had entirely withered.

He tried to doubt his misfortune, put on his helmet again, and went to fight in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem. He received a sword-stroke from a Saracen which broke his helmet and gave him a terrible gash on the forehead. He was able to save from the confusion of the fight all that was left of the little flower—its dried stalk and its little golden heart, which had now become almost black.

" I will do such a penance," said the good knight, " that it must blossom again."

X

He made his confession to his chaplain with tears and vehement contrition.

" It is nothing, my son," said the good man, " less than nothing, in truth."

" My crime is enormous, father, for it weighs upon me like a mountain. If it were so slight a matter as you say, the Lady Frileuse's flower would not have withered."

" All flowers wither, and it had lasted long enough."

" And what will Frileuse say on my return ? "

" If she is sensible, she will say nothing."

"The daisy will blossom again, father."

"I have some doubt of that, my son."

"I shall not believe that God has forgiven me until it blossoms again."

"Just as you please; but, for my part, I will give you holy absolution without any difficulty."

"Not before I have expiated my sin, father."

"As you will, my son, but you are a very difficult penitent to satisfy."

On the next day, Ory de Hautcœur thought of climbing the hill of the Holy Sepulchre, wearing his armour and dragging himself along on his knees. And to make his penance more vigorous he had put gravel and sharp pebbles into his leggings. So great was his pain that he fainted three times on the road. Simon Godard, who followed him grumbling, restored him three times with a cordial made by the monks. The good knight fell half-dead on the tomb of Christ, and for a week he could not stand upright.

Frileuse's daisy did not blossom again.

XI

When Sir Ory's legs were almost healed, as he still tormented himself and sought in his mind for some other penance, Simon Godard said to him:

"Do not trouble yourself so much, Sir Knight. As you wish to do a work that is pious and agreeable to the Lord, I have one to propose to you. You know that I am naturally curious and that I like observing what is done about me. Now, although it is not my habit to mix myself up in

other people's business, owing to my innate prudence and my love of rest, yet I will not be silent to you touching what I have discovered about Sir von der Pouf. When he reached this place he fell ill, a thing that seldom happens to a knight on the eve of a battle. His varlets and his men-at-arms did not fight any more than he did, but, after the victory, this did not prevent them from pillaging in the city, not capriciously like the other crusaders, but with order and application, without wasting or destroying anything, not pillaging houses but rather stripping them bare. And that is not all. I believe I recognized the demeanour and bearing of von der Pouf in a certain squalid little man whom I have several times met in the city, late in the evening, trafficking with the secondhand dealers. In a word, I mightily suspect this von der Pouf of being a wretched Jew who has slipped into the host in order to betray the Christians and to practise all sorts of hidden thefts. Do you remember that on the day when he sold that herd of swine at such a dear price to the knights, he did not keep even a little ham for himself? Therefore treat him as seems good to you. I gladly deliver him to you; for though I am of clement disposition, I do not like evil persons, nor, above all, traitors."

"What do I hear?" exclaimed Ory. "A Jew, an executioner of our Lord Jesus in His holy army! I swear to God and all the blessed dwellers in Paradise that by me shall perish in certain death this son of those who crucified my Saviour."

"Sir Knight," said the chaplain, "it is not because he is a Jew that he must be slain, but because he is a knave and an impostor. Nevertheless, it would please me if I first made sure of the truth of my suspicions, and if you sent your varlet, Launcelot, to find it out. He is of subtle mind and knows some words of bad German. He will have no difficulty, with God's help, in detecting our man."

Launcelot set out immediately, and returning some hours afterwards, confirmed all the words of Simon Godard. He had loaded himself with a bale, and by the artifice of a false beard he had given himself the appearance of a Jewish porter. Von der Pouf's people, believing what he told them, to wit that he came to sell goods to their master, had brought him into their master's presence without suspicion.

Von der Pouf's true name was Manasseh. His numerous wagons were filled with merchandise from the West which he sold to the Saracens, and in proportion as he emptied these vehicles, he filled them with merchandise of the Levant which he had stolen in the sack of the town in order to sell it to Christians on his return. Then, after each battle, his men went out at night to spoil the corpses and to slay the wounded.

Von der Pouf himself had boasted to Launcelot of these abominations.

"I could have this Jew burned after a public trial," said Ory, "but it pleases me more that I alone should execute justice for our Lord."

When night came, he girt himself with his armour, and put on his helmet, without forgetting

the little dried heart of the poor daisy, and with his sword in his hand, he marched straight to the tent of von der Pouf. At his approach, the Jew's varlets fled like hares. He entered the tent and found the false knight wrapped in a wretched saddle-cloth, and busy counting gold pieces with his crooked fingers by the light of a smoky lamp. Merchandise of all sorts was piled up on the floor of the tent—Oriental carpets, woollen and silken stuffs, bracelets, necklaces, trays made of engraved copper, braziers, flagons of rose-water, and also, in a corner, a great heap of wretched clothing which had been taken from the corpses of poor Christian soldiers.

"I know who you are," said Ory to the Jew, "and I am going to slay you for the greater glory of God."

Von der Pouf trembled in all his limbs. He understood that it was his end and that all supplications would be useless. Then in a voice quivering with fear, hatred, and rage, he said:

"Sir Knight, it is true that I hate the Christians with my whole strength, and that I have slain many of your brethren, and that I rejoice at it even in this hour when I am going to die. But you shall know that my father and mother were burnt to death by Christians, and that they despoiled me three times of the goods I had accumulated by my labour. You are going to kill me, nothing is more certain; but if you were just you would spare me."

"I could excuse your hatred," said Ory gravely, "but not your iniquity and your treachery. Yet I do not wish to slay you except loyally and

in a regular combat. Come dog! take up your arms!"

And as von der Pouf still trembled and his two knees bent under him, Ory said:

"I am going to help you."

Then he himself took down the Jew's armour, which hung on a nail, and put on him his coat of mail, his armlets, his cuirass, and the rest. As the knight equipped him, the Jew trembled all the more, and bent beneath the growing weight. At the end, when Sir Ory had put on his helmet, the wretch sank down, rolled on the ground in his armour, and then did not stir.

"This Jew," said Ory, "was so great a thief that he has even robbed me of his death. I should have liked to kill him with my own hands. But though he has deprived me of that joy, may God have mercy upon him!"

At the moment when the knight of Hautcœur was leaving the Jew's tent, the moon fell like a silver cloth over the camp of the crusaders, lighting up the whitened tents and the groups of men lying about them, and gleaming upon the swords and cuirasses. Nothing moved in the serene light, and the peace of night was as deep as if the tents had been stacks of hay, and the soldiers sleeping harvest-men, and the swords sickles thrown on the grass.

Ory took off his helmet and looked at it in the moonlight. But Frileuse's little daisy had not blossomed again.

XII

A short time afterwards, as the conquest of the holy places seemed to be assured, Ory de Hautcœur thought of returning to France.

"The way is long," he said to Simon Godard; "opportunities for suffering or fighting will not be lacking on the road; the little daisy will blossom again. Whatever happens, I will not see the Lady Frileuse until it has blossomed again."

"In that case, you will never see her again," answered the chaplain.

"I shall see her again if I deserve it, for God is just," said the knight.

Ory de Hautcœur left Jerusalem, followed, as always, by Simon Godard and the four varlets. They had been some hours on the march when they heard groans coming from a ditch. Ory got down from his horse, and approaching the ditch, saw a leper lying on the grass. The pus from his wounds had dried and made his rags as stiff as wood; his feet were swollen and violet-coloured; his eyes bled, and his face and all his limbs were covered with white and red scales, like the mouldy blotches that come on the walls of cellars.

"I ask myself," said Simon Godard, "why such a thing as this came into the world."

"To display," answered Ory, "the power of Divine grace either by the miracle of his patience or that of his cure."

And he himself poured into the wretched man's

mouth some drops of a cordial which Simon Godard carried in a gourd. As soon as the leper could speak, he said to Ory :

" God bless you for the help you have given me ! I have come here on foot from the land of France, living on roots and fruits and sometimes a little bread which good Christians throw to me. I crossed the Straits by slipping into the hold of a ship without anybody seeing me. It will soon be a year since I started. I came to the Holy Land to plunge myself into the pool of Siloam, which in ancient times wrought amazing cures through the Divine goodness ; and I hope that it will cure me because I have faith. But I have still twelve leagues to go, for the pool is close to Jerusalem in the valley of the river Cedron. I was so worn out by fatigue that I was compelled to stop here, and I thought I was going to die."

" Let us return to Jerusalem," said Ory.

He took the leper in his arms, mounted on his horse without loosening his hold, and then placed him on the crupper.

" Take care that you do not fall," he said to him, " and hold me firmly by the girdle."

But after some moments, seeing that the leper was not comfortable, he again dismounted, and fixed him comfortably on the horse, which he himself led by the bridle.

He remembered that he had led the Lady Blanc-Lys in the same manner ; and he did not feel less joy in his heart in serving the beggar than he did formerly in serving the noble lady.

" Sir Ory," said the chaplain, " this unhappy

man would be better off on my mule, and a walk would stretch my legs."

"No, no, Father Godard, I do not want, to-day at least, to share with anybody the honour of serving one of Christ's poor."

When they reached the pool, Ory gently placed the leper on the grassy turf which spread around it. The poor man plucked a little red flower and handed it to the knight, saying :

"Sir Knight, I am one of the humblest and weakest of God's creatures, and can do nothing to show my gratitude for your great charity. But God inspires me to give you this flower. Keep it in memory, not of me, but of the act of mercy of which I have been the occasion, so that the memory may strengthen you in hours of distress."

"Brother," answered Ory, "I will do what you ask me, and I pray God to heal you."

The good knight placed the scarlet flower in the visor of his helmet, and he then saw that the stalk and faded heart of the little daisy were no longer there. And he understood that God had given him the leper's little flower in its stead, and that his sin had been forgiven him.

He again mounted his horse and prepared to depart.

"Sir Knight," said Simon Godard to him, "shall we not wait until this man has plunged into the pool, and see what will come of it ? "

"I have no need to see the cure with my eyes," answered Ory, "in order to believe in the power and goodness of God. Come along, for I long to see the Lady Frileuse again."

On the following day, Ory and his companions encountered a band of Saracens, for the country was not yet completely pacified. They fought them, one against ten. Ory received on his helmet, where the red flower gleamed, some terrible blows from their swords, and the helmet was not even scratched, or the flower even bruised; and he recognized that he was henceforth invulnerable.

Father Simon Godard, having seen so many and such surprising things, no longer dared to say anything, and he was not far removed from sharing the good knight's opinion touching the virtue of the two flowers.

XIII

As Ory de Hautcœur approached the castle of Tour-Vermeille, he saw Frileuse de Blanc-Lys coming to meet him.

The noble lady cast her eyes upon the little red flower.

"Is it the sun of these distant lands," she asked roguishly, "that has changed the colour of my little daisy?"

Ory was quite put out of countenance and began to stammer; nevertheless he saw that Frileuse did not seem to be vexed when she said this.

Simon Godard intervened.

"Lady," he said, "the pagans by spells and witchcraft have robbed us of your little flower; but God has sent us this one which is not less marvellous."

"I knew it," answered Frileuse; "for it has pleased God to tell me of it by means of a dream."

And she offered her white hand to the knight.

"This story," said Simon Godard, "shows us clearly that even in the eyes of God charity is as good as purity. The best is to have both, for those who can. But let him who has not the second, endeavour at least to have the first. Amen!"

THE WHITE CHAPEL

THE WHITE CHAPEL

"GO on telling me, Susan, how splendid the midnight mass is; go on telling me!"

It was Christmas Eve. Pierrot's parents had just come back from the fields; the woman was milking the cows, the man was stowing away his tools in the barn, and Pierrot was waiting for his supper, seated on a little stool by the side of the great kitchen chimney, opposite his sister Susan.

He stretched out his hands to the clear and sparkling flame; and his hands and round face were quite rosy, and his hair was the colour of gold. Susan, very grave, was knitting a blue woollen stocking. The pot was singing on the big fire made of vine twigs, and through the lid escaped a little white vapour which smelt of cabbage.

"Go on telling me, Susan, how splendid it is."

"Oh!" said Susan, "there are so many tapers that one would think one was in Paradise. . . . And they sing canticles, such pretty ones! . . . And there is the infant Jesus, dressed in beautiful clothes, oh beautiful! . . . and lying on straw; and the Holy Virgin in a blue robe, and Saint Joseph with his plane, all in red; and the shepherds with many sheep. . . . And the ox and the ass, and the kings from the East, dressed like soldiers, with long beards . . . and they bring things to the infant Jesus—oh! such things! . . . and the shepherds bring him puddings. And

then the shepherds, and the kings, and our priest, and the ox, and the ass, and the choir boys, and the sheep ask Jesus for His blessing. . . . And there are angels who bring stars to the infant Jesus."

Susan had been to the midnight mass last year, and perhaps she believed that she had seen all this. Pierrot listened to her with an air of delight, and when she had ended, he said :

" I *will* go to the midnight mass."

" You are too little," said the mother, who was just coming in. " You will go when you are as big as Susan."

" I *will* go," said Pierrot, frowning.

" But, my poor little boy, the church is a long way off, and it is snowing outside. If you are good and go to sleep, you will hear the midnight mass in the white chapel, without ever leaving your bed."

" I *will* go," repeated Pierrot, clenching his little fists.

* * * * *

" Who says ' I *will* ' ? " said a deep voice.

It was the father. Pierrot did not insist. He was a very good child and already understood that it is best to obey when one cannot do otherwise.

They sat down to the table. Pierrot ate without appetite. He said nothing, and he was thinking.

" Susan, put your little brother to bed."

Susan took Pierrot into the room that had a floor of red tiles, where there was a cupboard and

even a chest of drawers with a marble top ; in a frame on the wall there was a square of canvas on which Susan had " marked " in red and blue cotton the six and twenty letters of the alphabet, a flower vase, a steeple, and a cat ; at the foot of the parents' bed lay a rug with a pattern representing roses which looked at once like peonies and cabbages ; in front were the two little beds of the brother and sister, surrounded by curtains of white calico.

When the child was in bed and tucked up, Susan drew the curtains of the little bed.

" You will see," she said, " how pretty the midnight mass is in the white chapel."

Pierrot did not answer.

He did not go to sleep. He did not want to go to sleep and he remained with his eyes wide open.

He listened to the footsteps of his parents in the kitchen, then the shrill voice of Susan painfully reading out of an old penny book, " The Crimes of a Band of Ogres." At one moment it seemed to him that they were eating chestnuts, and his heart was full.

A little later his mother came into the room, half drew the curtains, and bent over him. But he closed his eyes and did not stir.

At last he heard them going out, and the door being closed. Then silence.

* * * * *

Then Pierrot got out of his little bed.

He searched for his clothes in the dark. It was a long job. He found his breeches and his

blouse, but not his knitted vest. He dressed himself as well as he could, and put on his blouse wrong side front; and though his little fingers took a great deal of trouble, no button was in its proper buttonhole.

He could only find one of his stockings, and, leaning against the wall, he put it on inside out, the heel making a large lump, so that the badly stockinged little foot could only half fit into one of the little ashen clogs, and the bare little foot had too much room in the other.

Groping his way, stumbling and clattering, he found the door of the room, then crossed the kitchen, which was lit, through the uncurtained window, by the cold light of the snowy night.

Pierrot was very clever, and he did not go to the door which opened on the street, for he knew that it was locked. But he easily opened the door that led from the kitchen to the stable.

A cow moved in her bedding. A goat got up, and pulling her cord, came to lick Pierrot's hands, crying "Meh!" in a gentle and plaintive tone. She seemed to say to him:

"Stay with us where it is warm. What are you going to do, so small as you are, in all that snow?"

By the feeble light of a window at the top, which was covered with spiders' webs, he was able, by standing on the tips of his toes, to draw the inner bolt of the stable.

Suddenly he found himself outside, in the deep and frozen whiteness.

* * * * *

The house of Pierrot's parents lay by itself, nearly half a mile distant from the church. You went at first along a road bordered by orchards, then you turned to the right, and you had the steeple of the village church in front of you.

Pierrot started off without hesitation.

Everything was white with snow, the road, the bushes, and the trees in the fields. And the snow whirled about in the air like a light ball tossed by a weather-vane.

Pierrot sank in the snow up to his ankles; his little clogs grew heavy with snow; the snow covered his hair and his shoulders like white dust. But he felt nothing, for he saw, at the end of his journey, in a great golden light, the infant Jesus, and the Virgin, and the kings from the East, and the angels who have stars in their hands.

He went on and on as if drawn by the vision. But already he walked less quickly. The snow was blinding him. It was filling the entire sky with a padding of cotton-wool. He did not recognize anything, he no longer knew where he was.

Now his little feet weighed like lead; his hands, his nose, his ears were hurting him terribly; the snow was coming into his neck, and his blouse and his shirt were all wet.

He stumbled and fell over a stone, and lost one of his clogs. He searched a long time for it, on his knees in the snow, his hands benumbed with cold.

And he no longer saw the infant Jesus, nor the Virgin, nor the kings from the East, nor the angels carrying stars.

* * * * *

He was afraid of the silence, afraid of the trees veiled in white which burst out here and there from the immense carpet of snow, and which no longer looked like trees, but like fantoms.

His heart contracted with anguish. He wept and cried out through his tears :

" Mamma ! Mamma ! "

The snow ceased to fall.

Pierrot looked around him and saw the pointed steeple and the windows of the church, which shone in the night.

His vision came back to him, and strength and courage. There it was, the wonder he had longed for, the splendid spectacle of Paradise !

He did not wait to reach the bend of the road, but walked straight towards the illuminated church.

He rolled into a ditch, struck against a stump of a tree, and left there his other clog.

Across the fields, limpingly and haltingly, the child dragged himself, his eyes fixed upon the light. And as he kept going more slowly, the row of little footsteps which he left behind him grew closer and closer to one another in the white immensity.

The church grew larger as he drew near. Voices reached Pierrot :

" Come, divine Messiah . . . "

His hands stretched out before him, his eyes dilated in ecstasy, sustained only by the beauty of his dream, which now drew closer to him, he went into the graveyard that surrounded the church. The large arched window gleamed

above the west door. There, quite near him, something ineffable was taking place. . . . Voices were singing :

" In the plain below I hear
Angels who from Heaven have come . . . "

Little Pierrot went stumbling on, with all the strength that was left in his tired little body, towards this glory and towards these canticles.

Suddenly he fell at the foot of a box-tree hooded with snow ; he fell with his eyes closed, suddenly asleep, and smiling at the angels' song.

The voices continued :

" Christ is born in Bethlehem."

At the same moment the soft and silent descent of the white flakes began again. The snow covered the little body with its muslin layer, which slowly grew thicker.

And this is how Pierrot heard the midnight mass in the white chapel.

CHARITY

CHARITY

TOURIRI, Prince of Baghdad, was very rich, very learned, and had the reputation of being very wise.

He had a palace in which marbles and precious stones were carved so as to imitate trees and flowers, and he had gardens in which flowers and trees were so splendid as to imitate metals and precious stones.

He entertained beautiful women without asking anything from them but that they should be beautiful and charmingly dressed—and he had no grudge against them for being capricious or foolish.

He entertained poets without asking anything from them but that they should write verses and songs whenever the fancy came to them—and he had no grudge against them when their songs were not good.

He entertained philosophers without asking anything from them but that they should reason with him on the nature of God and the origin of the world—and he had no grudge against them when by chance their reasoning was irrational.

* * * * *

One spring morning Touriri was walking in the principal street of Baghdad.

The heaps of oranges and the bundles of roses that filled the carts of the merchants, and teeming

crowds of garments and of blue, red, and green robes shone in the whiteness of the street; magnolias leant down from the walls of the courtyards, and the water sang more lightly in the basins of the fountains.

And the young women were like half-moistened flowers, burnished with a little cool dew, and very subtly perfumed.

And because of these perfumes, these colours, and this diffused joy, the sage Touriri felt his old body becoming more supple; he remembered past days with pleasure; he no longer saw any serious objection to the world as it is; and he was not far removed from believing that life is good.

He said almost aloud:

"What pleasant warmth! and what delightful sunshine!"

* * * * *

He met a little girl, five years old, fair and rosy and pretty, and clad in a little smock. Very grave, with a finger in her mouth, the child gazed at him through the meshes of her flaxen hair, and seemed to admire greatly Touriri's long beard, or perhaps the mysterious animals that were embroidered on his mantle.

And because she was pretty, Touriri leant down towards her, embraced her, and placed two pieces of gold in her little hand.

He afterwards met a little boy, ten years old. The child was ugly, clad in rags, and covered with freckles to the end of his wizened nose, and his eyes were without transparence, like dirty water. He stretched out his hand, and, in a shrill

voice and with the air of one reciting a lesson and thinking of something else, he declared that his mother was in bed, that he had seven little brothers, and that he had not eaten for three days.

Touriri frowned and gave him a piece of gold.

Twenty paces further on, he saw an old beggar, tattered, wretched, and crippled, and with the air of a beaten dog. His beard was yellow, like badly washed hemp, and his red eyes, without eyelashes, looked like the cracks of over-ripe figs. In a hoarse voice that wheezed like a burst bellows, slowly and without a pause, beginning again as soon as he ended, he kept saying :

" Have pity on a poor man who can no longer work. Our Lord Ormuz will reward you."

And the fetid breath of his prayer smelt of fermented drinks.

Touriri stretched out a piece of silver to him, but from such a distance that the piece fell to the ground, and the old beggar knelt painfully down to pick it up.

A moment afterwards Touriri met a woman of whom one could not say whether she was young or old, and who held on her shoulder a newly-born child covered with blotches and ulcers. Humble as the dust of the road, so bent that he did not see her eyes, she followed him murmuring a persistent prayer in a feeble voice.

Not from harshness but from annoyance, Touriri hurried on ; but that misery and that complaint kept trailing behind him. He searched his purse, not finding what he sought. At last, with an angry gesture, he threw to the woman some pieces of copper.

He then perceived, thirty paces in front of him, a man without arms or legs, supported against a wall. The man was singing sadly and out of tune, in a loud voice that seemed to be a voice of wood, a love song, one of Firdousi's songs, full of flowers and birds and sunshine, and it was horrible to hear.

Touriri stopped, and, as this man at any rate could not follow him, he pretended not to see him, and passed by on the other side of the street.

He walked on for some time longer, but he no longer felt the joy of life. He said aloud :

" This sunshine is unendurable ! "

And he went back to his palace.

* * * * *

Then, having reflected, he called his steward and said to him :

" Go into the Grand Street. You will meet an old beggar, and you will give him a piece of gold ; then a poor woman suckling a child, and you will give her two pieces of gold ; then a man without arms or legs, and you will give him three pieces of gold."

But from that day forward, every time Touriri went out into the city, a servant walked before him, giving money to all the beggars and ordering them to go away so that his master should not see them.

And the sage Touriri became more and more of an alms-giver and charitable. One would have said he had sworn that there should be no more poor in Baghdad. Every day food and

money were distributed among all those who presented themselves in the lower halls of his palace. He founded a hospital for children, one for old men, one for mothers, and one for the ill and infirm.

And when he was told that somebody who had pretended to be ill or had pretended to be indigent had obtained help by a trick, he used to answer :

" Leave me in quiet. I have no leisure to seek out the truth or to distinguish it from falsehood."

He spent in this way, for the benefit of others, more than nine-tenths of his immense wealth. He even reduced the pomp of his house, and kept about him only the youngest of his women, the idlest of his poets, and the most dogmatic of his philosophers.

Otherwise he continued to live delicately, amid the finest works of the art, industry, and intellect of men ; and he never visited the hospitals he had founded, nor went down to the halls where he fed the unfortunate.

One day as he was walking in the town, a crowd of poor people surrounded him ; they cried out together that they owed him life ; and several knelt and kissed the hem of his garment. But he got angry, as if this gratitude offended him and gave him pain.

And the people regarded him as the most venerable man and the most exalted in holiness who had ever lived in Persia.

When he saw that his death was approaching, he sent away all the philosophers and poets

and only kept by his bedside a beautiful girl of sixteen, praying her to say nothing to him but only to look at him with her eyes, which were as blue as cornflowers.

He died.

The poor—those who had been the poor—of Baghdad followed his funeral procession, and many wept.

* * * * *

Beyond time, beyond space, beyond shape—where ?

I do not know, nor does anybody else—the soul of Touriri appeared before Ormuz to be judged.

Ormuz asked him :

" What have you done on earth ? What are your works ? "

Touriri, quite at ease about the coming sentence, answered with modesty and sincerity :

" Doubtless I have been weak, being but a man. I have delighted in beautiful lines, in beautiful colours, sounds, and perfumes, in pleasant contacts and in the futile sports of speech. But I have founded four hospitals at my expense, I have given nine parts of my goods to the poor and I have only kept the tenth for myself."

" It is true," said Ormuz, " that you were not an evil man, and that you were often even guided by a spirit of kindliness. Nevertheless, you will not enter my Paradise this time. But your soul will descend again into another body, and you will live a fresh terrestrial life in order to expiate and learn."

Touriri was greatly astonished, and asked :

"What is it that I have to expiate, Lord?"

"Enter within yourself, and know yourself better. What was your thought when you gave your goods to the poor? And the day that you met the old beggar, the pale woman with her child, and the man without arms or legs, what did you feel in your heart?"

"An immense pity for human pain," answered Touriri.

"You lie," said Ormuz. "Their sight was, in the first place, a disagreeable surprise. It reminded you too brutally of the existence of suffering and misery. Then you disliked them for having offended your eyes by their dirt and ugliness. You disliked them also for their humiliation, the baseness with which they implored you, and the persistence of their continued prayers; and you threw them alms with disgust. You despised these unfortunates so much that you could not endure their thanks. The crudeness of popular effusions irritated you; and the delicacy of your tastes refused to these poor people the right of proving to you, by their gratitude, that they were not unworthy of your benefits. You endeavoured to suppress poverty, for you believed that it sullies the world and dishonours life. But I, who pierce into the depths of consciences, tell you that revolt and hatred were in your charity."

"But," replied Touriri, "what I hated was not the poor: it was suffering, it was evil, it was Ahriman, your eternal enemy."

"I am Ahriman," answered Ormuz.

"You, Lord?"

"I am Ahriman, for I am Ormuz. Good can come only from evil, virtue can come only from suffering."

"Is that, Lord, the best that you can accomplish?"

"Do not blaspheme. Evil will pass away. It only exists in order to produce felicity and virtue. When the earth, on which this experiment is being made, has disappeared, when all the souls of the just are with me, it will be as if evil had never existed."

"Your reasoning is specious," said Touriri, "but what conclusion is to be drawn from it in my own case? What feeling could be inspired in me by debased creatures displeasing to look at? And what did I owe them except to relieve their misery?"

"It is in order to teach you this that I am sending you back to earth."

"But, Lord . . ."

Touriri did not finish. No longer Ormuz. . . . No longer Touriri. . . . An abyss. . . .

* * * * *

Nothing could be simpler or sadder than the life of Tirirou.

He was born at Uskub, of a family of indigent artisans. In his childhood he was poorly fed and often beaten. He learnt a trade by which he lived painfully. He had some of the virtues of a poor man: he was fairly honest, fairly good, and fairly resigned, but he had neither the pride nor the refinement which are the luxuries of the soul.

He married so as not to be alone. He often

failed to get work. His wife and his two children died in misery. One day he fell from a scaffolding, and, badly cared for, he remained impotent in both his legs, with one arm paralysed and an incurable wound in the other.

He had to beg. At first he did it badly. He felt ashamed, did not dare to insist, and was given hardly anything.

Little by little he acquired the habit of stretching out his hand, as if it were an implement for fishing, of humiliating attitudes, of prayers which pursued the passer-by with the hope of importuning him. Thenceforward he was given enough to prevent him from dying of hunger.

And as he had no joy in the world, whenever he possessed a few coins he used to intoxicate himself with liquor fermented from maize.

* * * * *

A very poor girl, who lived in a room close to his garret, met him several times, and took pity on him.

She came every morning to wash Tirirou's wound, made his bed, prepared his soup, and mended his clothes, without asking for anything in return.

Her name was Krika, and she was not beautiful, but her eyes were so good that one loved to meet them.

And without knowing why, Tirirou watched every morning from his mattress for the moment when Krika would get up and appear at her window.

* * * * *

One day, as Tirirou was begging in his usual way, a rich man threw him a piece of gold, with disgust. At that moment Ormuz permitted the soul of Tirirou to remember that it had been that of Touriri. And Tirirou, seeing the hatred in the glance of the rich man who gave him alms, understood why Touriri had been condemned by Ormuz. He understood that in his former life, though he had relieved the poor, he, too, had hated them because of their humiliation and ugliness; that is to say, because of things for which they were not responsible.

Next morning, when Krika came to wash his wound, he watched her. He saw that she did it without disgust, and that her eyes remained gentle and tranquil. He perceived that the young girl who tended him and did not hold herself aloof from him—although he was horrible even among his fellows—was truly good and saintly.

When she finished bandaging him, he kissed her hand silently and wept. And Ormuz granted him the favour of dying on that very night.

* * * * *

"What have you understood?" asked Ormuz of the soul of Touriri-Tirirou.

"This, Lord: We must serve the poor in poverty. We must enter into their souls, and not despise them for a humiliation and narrowness of spirit to which we also might have been reduced if we had been overwhelmed by the same necessities; to love them at least for their

resignation, they who form the greater number, and whose united anger would sweep away the rich like wisps of straw; and, lastly, to seek whether there does not exist in them some remnant of nobility and dignity. And we must serve them humbly; just as we resign ourselves to our own sufferings, so must we resign ourselves to the misery of others, in so far as it offends our own delicacy; we must not, when we relieve them, rebel against this misery, but accept it as one accepts the mysterious designs of Him Who alone knows the reasons of things. For the aim of the Universe is not the production of beauty but of goodness."

"That is not so far wrong," said Ormuz. "Good servant, enter into my rest."

HELLE

HELLE

HELLE, the daughter of Themistocles, the *strategos*, was very pale, and, though supple as a reed, very frail for her seventeen years. But her big clear eyes spoke of the generous thought that dwelt beneath her childish brow, and of the ardent spirit that burned in her delicate bosom.

When quite a child she had lost her mother, a Greek from the islands who passed her life in the mysterious practices of religions unknown to the Athenians. Afterwards Helle had received lessons from the poet Æschylus, a friend of her father's, and had learnt from him many things concerning her native country, concerning the gods, and concerning the proper way of worshipping them, things of which the vulgar were ignorant. Helle was very pious, and very learned for her age; she admired her father and was filled with love for the land in which she was born.

Helle had a friend, Mnaïs, the daughter of a rich Athenian named Clinias, a young, laughing, and ignorant girl, who thought of nothing but amusement and dress. And the daughter of Themistocles loved Mnaïs tenderly, although she resembled her so little.

It was the custom at Athens that, every four years, two young girls of good family were appointed by the archon-king to weave and embroider the robe which was to be offered at the Pan-Athenian festival to the protecting goddess

of the city. For six months the virgins lived on the Acropolis, in the House of the Arrhephoroi. They were clad in a white robe and a mantle embroidered with gold. And they ate a sacred bread, called *nastos*, which was made of fresh wheat, seasoned with all manner of spices.

Now, this year Helle and Mnaïs were chosen to weave the *peplos* for Pallas-Athene, and to adorn it with embroideries.

It was a great day for Helle. She said to herself that, woven by her hands, the great robe would please the goddess and be a good safeguard for the city, so much zeal and love would she bring to her task.

But when Mnaïs heard the news, she began to weep.

"For," said she, "I shall no longer dance with my companions, and I shall live between four walls, like a prisoner!"

"You are a little fool," Clinias answered her. "It is incredible that you should welcome with tears a choice that does so much honour to our family!"

And, as Mnaïs would listen to nothing, Helle took her aside:

"Why this grief, little Mnaïs? The house of the virgins is not a prison. It is bright and cheerful; it is adorned with beautiful paintings and surrounded by a tennis-court, a terrace, and a garden. From our windows we shall see the Piræus, the blue sea, and the entire city at our feet. And we shall not be alone, for we shall have the companionship of the priests, and our relatives will often come to see us."

" But he, alas ! I shall not see him again."

" Who ? " said Helle.

" I am going to tell you my secret. I love a young man who loves me. And that is why this, which causes you so much joy, plunges me into the deepest despair."

" What is his name ? "

" I cannot tell you."

" Of course he is some young man of noble birth, fluent in speech, and skilful in the handling of arms ? "

" He is handsome, and I love him," answered Mnaïs.

" But," said Helle, " are you so weak-hearted that you cannot bear a separation of a few months ? Think of the joy of working for the land that has nurtured you, you and him whom you love. Think of the thousands of girls who have eagerly desired to weave the goddess's robe, and that you are one of the two who are to enjoy so envied an honour."

" What does it matter to Pallas," said Mnaïs, " whether the robe is woven by me or by somebody else ? I am not irreligious, but why does the goddess take away from me the best that I have in the world ? "

" Oh ! Mnaïs, how can you speak thus ? Rather thank the goddess, for, after you have embroidered her robe, your lover will be proud of you and will love you all the more on that account."

" Alas ! I shall walk no more with him in the woods of myrtles and rose-laurels ! "

" It is true that you will be deprived of that

joy for a season. But you will be the little priestess of the great Pallas; the citizens will honour you, and you will be so pretty in your white robe, with its little folds, and in your mantle embroidered with gold."

At this Mnaïs smiled through her tears.

"Very well, I am willing, but have not you a lover too?"

"I love Athens," answered Helle, "and I am the servant of Pallas-Athene."

* * * * *

Accordingly, Helle and Mnaïs were installed in the little convent of the Arrhephoroi, near the temple of Erechtheus.

They began to weave the robe, under the supervision of the sacristan, Theodore, a gossipy old man, who taught them the ceremonies and rites and everything they would have to do in the great Pan-Athenian procession.

He also told them incidents which he alone knew in the goddess's history, and all the miracles due to her power, such as cures, lost caskets found, and ships saved from tempests.

And while he related these things, Helle's eyes shone, and their pupils seemed to grow larger. But Mnaïs only listened with one ear, and sometimes she fell asleep.

When the cloth was woven, a young man, Phidias by name, whose trade was to make paintings and statues, came to the House of the Arrhephoroi in order to trace the figures that were to be embroidered on the robe.

He drew the battle of the Giants, and, on a heap of their huge, overturned corpses, Pallas-Athene, threatening, the corners of her lips turned down, her eyes fierce and rolling, a deep frown between her eyebrows.

" Oh," said Helle, " that is not how I see her, but rather serene, a divine peace in her eyes, victorious without effort and without anger."

Phidias next drew the birth of Athene, with the skull of Zeus completely cloven in two, and the goddess springing fully armed from the gaping orifice, like a red flower from the cleft of a rock.

" Oh," said Helle, " this Zeus is unpleasant to look at. That is not how the gods ought to be represented: they should always be beautiful. This story signifies that Pallas-Athene is the thought of Zeus. I should like her to be standing perfectly white, above the divine brow, and the brow to be already closed again."

" Child," said Phidias, " a purer spirit than ours dwells within you."

He made both his designs over again, and gave the goddess the eyes, the eyebrows, the delicate cheeks, and the mouth of Helle.

" How like you she is ! " said Mnaïs to her companion.

" You are a silly girl," answered Helle. " This young man is too pious to have wished to give the features of a mortal to a goddess."

But she blushed a little as she said this, being moved by a secret joy.

* * * * *

Both began to embroider the robe, Helle with fervent application, and Mnaïs very negligently. Often it even happened that Mnaïs entangled the threads or mistook the colours, and then she got angry at having to begin over again.

And as they worked, the two girls sang songs in a low voice. Helle sang some of the verses of Tyrtæus or Æschylus. But Mnaïs hummed nothing except love songs, short odes of Simonides or Anacreon.

And Helle saw that Mnaïs was always thinking of her lover.

During the hours when they were not working at the embroidery, they used to play at ball in the courtyard of the little convent, or they would walk in the little garden, or help Theodore to sweep the temple, or collect and arrange flowers in order to make fresh garlands for the portico.

Often they were present at the sacrifices which pious persons came to perform. The offerings were baskets of fruit, milk and wine—sometimes a kid or a sheep. On those days the sacristan, Theodore, was more cheerful than usual, for he had the right of keeping and selling the skins, as these were his perquisites.

* * * * *

There were in the temple of Erechtheus, which was very old, an olive tree and a well.

The olive tree, which had a black and twisted trunk and was crowned with thin, silvery foliage, was that which Pallas had caused to spring up from the ground with a stroke of her lance.

Poseidon had dug the well with a blow of his trident. The water of this well was sea water, and, on stormy days, this water tossed and moaned like the sea itself.

Mnaïs sometimes amused herself by throwing pebbles into the well, for the pleasure of hearing, multiplied and increased by the echoes, the noise of the pebbles falling against the walls of the pit.

"What are you doing?" said Helle, uneasily. "This well is sacred. Take care not to anger the god!"

In the temple also were laid, every month, cakes of flour and honey, which the great serpent who guarded the citadel came to eat.

Nobody had ever seen this serpent, but he certainly existed, for the cakes offered him for food always disappeared from the altar.

It happened that the sacristan, Theodore, came to place fresh cakes on the marble table.

"I have thought of something," said Mnaïs to her friend. "Suppose we come to-night—to see the serpent eating?"

Helle was curious, and agreed.

At nightfall, the two girls slipped into the temple of Erechtheus, and waited, hidden behind a curtain.

They heard a sound like the noise of approaching footsteps.

"It is the serpent," said Helle. "Come away!"

"Silly," said Mnaïs, "do serpents walk?"

They then saw Theodore come in, with a lantern in his hand. He went towards the

altar, took the cakes from it, and ate them with an air of great satisfaction.

Helle rushed from her hiding-place.

"Oh!" said she, "and I thought you so pious and so holy! Are you not afraid that, by robbing the god, you may bring misfortune on the city?"

"The serpent is ill," said the sacristan, unmoved, "and he will not eat this month. He has made it known to me by a dream."

"Perhaps," said Mnaïs, "there is no serpent."

But Helle believed Theodore's words.

"If the serpent will not accept our offerings," she thought, "it is doubtless because Mnaïs is idle and slow in embroidering the robe, or because she has thrown pebbles into the sacred well."

And she felt her friendship for Mnaïs diminishing.

* * * * *

The House of the Arrhephoroi being situated at one of the corners of the Acropolis, the two girls could see from their terrace, fifty cubits below them, the place where the youths used to exercise themselves in running, in combats, and in archery.

Mnaïs often came and rested with her elbows on the little wall. She used to remain there for hours, and Helle saw that what she regretted most was that she no longer lived amid the noise and movement of the city.

But one day Helle saw Mnaïs, who believed herself alone, draw a letter from her bosom

and read it with restless eagerness, like somebody who fears to be surprised.

"What is that?" said Helle, approaching.

All the roses of a red-rose tree suddenly bloomed on the cheeks of beautiful Mnaïs. Clumsily she tried to hide the letter.

"Give it to me," said Helle, very grave.

Mnaïs obeyed. It was a letter from her lover. The note said:

"And I, also, my well-beloved, feel dreary and languid. The goddess is cruel to take you away from me and not to allow me to see your violet eyes and your hair which is fairer than ripe corn. Why cannot I, like one of my arrows, fly to you through the air?"

"Have you written to him, then?" asked Helle. "And how, by what messenger or by what device, can you correspond thus? Tell me everything. I must know."

Mnaïs burst into tears.

"Do not scold me, good Helle. I will confess everything to you. By looking down so much I at last recognized him whom I love in the midst of the young men who play in the exercise ground. And doubtless he also recognized me. He even knows which is the window of my room. How? I don't know. Perhaps he saw me sometimes at that window when I lingered there towards sunset. . . . One night—Oh! I slept well, all the same, I assure you—I was awakened by a noise. . . . An arrow had just broken itself against the wall of my cell. . . . I picked up the

pieces. A letter was fastened to it. Is that my fault ? "

" And you answered him ? "

" He would have died if I had not," said Mnaïs, " and I don't want him to die. He was expecting an answer and he told me how to send it to him. It is very simple. I fastened my letter to a fairly big stone at the end of a long string, and I let it down slowly from the top of the terrace. . . ."

" And where did you get the string ? "

" Do not be angry ; I took it from the basket of silks of all colours that we use for embroidering the goddess's robe."

" Oh, Mnaïs ! what have you done ? In order to please a divine Virgin, it is necessary to have a pure heart in which lives only love for her and for our country. And not only do you not keep your heart intact, but, in order to serve a feeling that offends the goddess, you make use of things that belong to her ! Alas ! I greatly fear that she may turn away from us because of you."

" But," said Mnaïs, " I love the goddess and she knows it. She will not be any angrier than I was when, as I was working in summer in my father's garden, a bird came and took away one of my bits of wool or a thread from my distaff."

" You do not even understand my thought," said Helle. " Beyond doubt I ought to denounce you to the archon-king. But the evil is done ; and, besides, I love you still, and I don't want to bring shame or grief upon you. But first promise me not to write again to this young man."

"I promise you."

"That is not all; you must not touch the robe again, I shall embroider it alone."

"As you wish," said Mnaïs, very pleased in her heart to have nothing more to do.

And, on her part, Helle was secretly glad that henceforth she would be the only person who would work on the sacred robe.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, news was brought that innumerable Persian ships were advancing towards Attica, and that Themistocles had been appointed supreme head of the Greek army and fleet.

The *strategos* came to the House of the Arrhephoroi to embrace Helle.

"I am going, my daughter," he said, "and I know not whether the gods will grant me victory, nor even whether I shall return."

Helle glowed with joy and pride.

"Yes, dear father, you will be victorious and you will return to the city. It seems to me that in some way it depends on me, that my feeble hands hold, along with the sacred robe, the destiny of our country, and that the zeal I shall show in embroidering the holy figures will calm the winds on the blue sea and, by the favour of Athene, make the management of the ships easier and more fortunate."

And from that day forward, Helle worked on the robe with such an ardour of attention and desire that she grew correspondingly pale, and one would have said that a little of her own soul

and being passed into each piece of the embroidery.

And idle Mnaïs slept almost from morning to evening, and her fresh beauty blossomed more and more.

* * * * *

One night Helle heard steps and voices on the terrace. She got up, and saw, in the moonlight, Mnaïs mounted on the little wall, and, some cubits below her, a man clinging to the brushwood and protuberances of the cliff.

Helle picked up some stones, climbed on to the wall, and, appearing to be larger than she was as she stood up in the light of the night, she threw the stones at the man. He rolled down through the rocks and bushes.

Mnaïs uttered a cry.

"Do not kill him!"

"Leave me alone, deceitful girl! At the hour when the city is in danger, when our fathers and brothers are risking their blood for it, you, an Athenian, and the daughter of an Athenian . . . But, now that I think of it, why has not your lover gone with the others? Is he then a coward? Has he deserted from the army? Or did he hide himself when the rest went away?"

"He had no need to go away," said Mnaïs, "for he is the son of a foreigner who has established himself in the city."

"Oh!" said Helle, terrified, as she hid her face in her hands.

Then, lifting up her head, she placed both her

hands on the shoulders of Mnaïs and looked into her eyes.

"Listen," she said, "if misfortune comes to Athens, beware!"

* * * * *

Helle went back to her room and offered this prayer:

"Oh, goddess, although my father is comparable in courage with the ancient heroes; although all those who are at Salamis are men of good will and are ready to die; although I myself have never had a thought except for thee and the city that is dear to thee, I tremble lest the crime of Mnaïs has aroused thy resentment against us. For the gods have often made all the citizens of a city expiate the fault of one, in order to teach us that we depend upon one another, and that the virtue of each is the concern of all. But, for that very reason, thou dost permit the crime of a bad and feeble heart to be effaced by the sacrifice of a better and stronger one. And that is why, goddess, I offer thee my life in expiation. Take me! take me! I am already so frail and so ill that it is not much for me to die, and I shall go towards thee as a leaf falls at the lightest wind when it has lost its sap and has been burnt by the sun. Thus the sun of a great love has devoured me, when still a mere child. It was not the love of a man, as thou knowest, nor of any creature condemned to death. I love only what can endure for ever. I love thee, oh goddess, because thou art intelligence, virtue, harmony; and I love Athens

because it is the city in which thou hast chosen to fashion little by little an example of life and human society in conformity with thy divine thought. Grant, by my death, by the ardour of a desire of which that death will be the sign, and by the emulation which its memory will awaken after me, that I may aid thy designs, oh, Virgin! I am thine, and I shall die satisfied; for if I die, Athens will then triumph, and it is thou who wilt call me. Take me, grant us victory, and bring it about that I may spare Mnaïs!"

* * * * *

On the following day, Helle worked at the robe, and Mnaïs wept in a corner because of what had happened. The sacristan, Theodore, entered suddenly and said:

"Bad news! The first line of our ships has been broken at the beginning of the battle and our defeat is certain."

Helle stood up, even paler than usual, and remained motionless for an instant, then she seized Mnaïs by the arm.

"Come!" she said.

Mnaïs was quite stunned and did as she was asked. Helle dragged her violently into the temple of Athene-Polias, before the wooden statue that was venerated above all others; and her strength being doubled by anger, she forced the beautiful girl down on her knees.

She seized her by the hair and drew a poignard from her bosom. All this was done so quickly that Mnaïs had not time to defend herself.

" And now, die ! " she said.

She was already lifting her arm when a noise of trumpets and shouts of joy mounted towards the temple.

Theodore entered and said :

" I was mistaken. The Persians are in flight. Victory ! victory ! "

Helle dropped the poignard and fell fainting on the floor, so great was her joy.

* * * * *

A month afterwards the great Pan-Athenian festival was celebrated.

In the middle of the procession, stretched on a little galley borne by twelve of the most illustrious citizens, gleamed the robe, covered with ingeniously embroidered figures.

Behind the robe came the two girls ; Mnaïs, blooming, careless, and laughing (for her lover had not been killed by his fall, and had escaped with a few scratches) ; Helle, scarcely able to walk, and pale, deadly pale, from having embroidered the divine garment.

When the temple of Athene-Polias was reached, Helle took the robe in her little hands, and with an outburst of love in which there gushed forth all her soul and all of life that was left her, she placed the brilliant garment at the feet of the goddess. . . .

Then her strength failed her. She slipped on her knees, and slowly sank backwards into the folds of the robe, Pallas having heard her prayer.

NAUSICAA

NAUSICAA

AFTER he had slain the suitors with his arrows, the ingenious Ulysses, full of wisdom and memories, passed tranquil days in his palace at Ithaca. Every evening, seated between his wife, Penelope, and his son, Telemachus, he told them of his travels, and when he had finished, he began again.

One of the adventures which he related most frequently was his meeting with Nausicaa, the daughter of Alcinous, king of the Phæacians.

"Never," he would say, "shall I forget how beautiful, courteous, and helpful she appeared to me. For three days and three nights I had been floating on the vast sea, clinging to a beam of my broken raft. At last a wave lifted me up and drove me towards the mouth of a river. I climbed on to the bank; a wood was near; I gathered leaves, and as I was naked, I covered myself with them. I fell asleep. . . . Suddenly a noise of pouring water wakened me, then exclamations. I opened my eyes and I saw some girls who were playing at ball on the shore. The ball had just fallen into the rapid current. I got up, taking care to hide my nakedness with a leafy bough. I advanced towards the most beautiful of the girls. . . ."

* * * * *

"You have already told us that, my dear," interrupted Penelope.

"It is very likely," said Ulysses.

"What difference does it make?" said Telemachus.

Ulysses resumed:

"I can still see her in my mind's eye on her car, driving her mules with their sounding bells. The car was full of fine white linen and dresses of coloured wool which the little princess and her companions had just washed in the stream. And, as she stood, leaning forward a little and pulling the reins, the evening wind blew her golden hair —ill held by her head-band—about her brow, and pressed her pliant robe against her well-formed limbs."

"And then?" asked Telemachus.

"She was perfectly brought up," continued Ulysses. "When we approached the town, she prayed me to leave her so that nobody could make any ill remark about her from seeing her with a man! But from the way in which I was welcomed in the palace of Alcinous, I saw that she had spoken of me to her noble parents. I did not see her again except at the moment of my departure. She said to me: 'I salute you, oh guest, in order that you may not forget me in your own land, for it is to me that you owe your life.' And I answered her: 'Nausicaa, daughter of the magnanimous Alcinous, if the mighty spouse of Hera wills me to enjoy the moment of return and that I should re-enter my dwelling, I will daily within its walls offer my prayers to you as to a goddess; for it is you who have saved me.' A more beautiful or better girl I have never met, and as my

travels are over, I am very sure I never shall meet one."

"Do you think that she is married now?" asked Telemachus.

"She was only fifteen years of age and not yet betrothed."

"Did you tell her that you had a son?"

"Yes, and that I was consumed with the desire of seeing him again."

"And did you speak well of me to her?"

"I did, although I scarcely knew you, for I had left Ithaca when you were quite a little child in your mother's arms."

* * * * *

Meanwhile, Penelope, desiring to see her son married, presented to him in succession the fairest virgins of the land, the daughters of the princes of Dulichios, of Samos, and of Zacynthos. Each time Telemachus said:

"I will not have her, for I know another who is better and more beautiful."

"Who?"

"Nausicaa, the daughter of the king of the Phæacians."

"How can you say that you know her when you have never seen her?"

"Well, I shall see her," replied Telemachus.

One day he said to his father:

"My heart wishes, oh illustrious father, that, cleaving the fish-frequented sea in a ship, I sail towards the island of the Phæacians, and that I go and ask the hand of the fair Nausicaa from

King Alcinous. For I am consumed with love for that virgin whom my eyes have never beheld; and, if you oppose my design, unwedded will I grow old in your palace and you shall have no grandson."

The ingenious Ulysses answered:

"It is doubtless a god who has put this desire into your heart. Since I spoke to you of the princess who was washing her linen in the stream, you disdain the succulent meats served at our table, and black circles grow around your eyes. Take then with you thirty sailors in a swift vessel and seek her whom you do not know and without whom you cannot live. But I must warn you of the dangers of the journey. If the wind drives you towards the island of Polyphemus, take care not to approach it; or, if the tempest casts you on the shore, hide yourself, and, as soon as your ship can get to sea, fly and do not attempt to see the Cyclops. I put out his eye formerly; but though he is blind he is still formidable. Fly also from the island of the Lotos-eaters, or, if you land among them, do not eat the flower which they will offer you, for it makes one lose his memory. Fear also the island of Ææa, the kingdom of fair-haired Circe whose charming-rod changes men into swine. Yet if ill fortune wills that you meet her on your way, here is a plant whose root is black and whose flower is white as milk. The gods call it *moly*, and it was given to me by Mercury. By its means you will render powerless the evil spells of that famous witch."

Ulysses added other advice concerning the

dangers of the island of the Sirens, of the island of the Sun, and of the island of the Læstrygonians. He said in conclusion :

" Remember my words, my son, for I would not have you repeat my fatal adventures."

" I will remember," said Telemachus. " Moreover, every obstacle and even every pleasure will be my enemy if it could delay my arrival in the island of the wise Alcinous."

* * * * *

Thus Telemachus set out, his heart full of Nausicaa.

A gale took him out of his course, and, as he was passing beside the island of Polyphemus, he was curious to see the giant whom his father had formerly conquered. He said to himself :

" The danger is not great, for Polyphemus is blind."

He disembarked alone, leaving his ship at anchor at the end of a bay, and he was visible and unprotected in the rich, undulating plain, sprinkled with flocks and tufts of trees. On the horizon, behind a dip in the hill, an enormous head arose, then shoulders like those polished rocks that stretch out into the sea, then a chest as bushy as a ravine. . . .

An instant afterwards, a huge hand seized Telemachus, and he saw, bending over him, an eye as large as a shield.

" You are not blind, then ? " asked Telemachus.

" My father, Neptune, has cured me," answered Polyphemus. " It was a little man of

your species who deprived me of the light of day, and that is why I am going to eat you."

"You would make a mistake," said Telemachus; "for if you let me live, I would amuse you by telling you beautiful stories."

"I am listening," said Polyphemus.

Telemachus began the story of the Trojan war. When night came the Cyclops said:

"It is time to sleep. But I will not eat you this evening, for I want to know the rest."

Each evening the Cyclops said the same thing, and this lasted for three years.

The first year Telemachus told of the siege of Priam's city; the second year of the return of Menelaus and Agamemnon; the third year of the return of Ulysses, his adventures, and his marvellous wiles.

"You are very bold;" said Polyphemus, "thus to praise before me the little man who did me so great an injury."

"But," answered Telemachus, "the more I show the cleverness of that man, the less disgraceful will it be for you to have been conquered by him."

"That is plausible," said the giant, "and I pardon you. Doubtless I would talk in a different way if a god had not given me back my sight. But past evils are but a dream."

* * * * *

Towards the end of the third year, Telemachus searched his memory in vain. He no longer found anything to tell the giant. Then he began the same stories over again. Polyphemus took

the same pleasure in them, and this lasted for three more years.

But Telemachus did not feel that he had the courage to repeat a third time the story of the siege of Ilium and of the return of the heroes. He confessed it to Polyphemus, and added :

" I would rather you ate me. I shall only regret one thing as I die : it is that I have not seen the fair Nausicaa."

He spoke at length of his love and his grief, and suddenly he saw in the eye of the Cyclops a tear as large as a pumpkin.

" Go," said the Cyclops, " go and seek her whom you love. Why did you not speak to me sooner ? . . ."

" I see," thought Telemachus, " that I would have done better to have begun with that. I have lost six years through my error. It is true that shame prevented me from telling my secret before. If I disclosed it, it was because I believed I was going to die."

He constructed a canoe (for the ship he had left in the bay had long since disappeared), and set off afresh on the deep sea.

* * * * *

Another tempest threw him on Circe's island.

He saw, at the entrance to a large forest, in a swinging hammock made of creepers interwoven with garlands of flowers, a woman who was gently rocking herself.

She wore on her head a mitre encrusted with rubies ; her long eyebrows joined together over her eyes ; her mouth was redder than a

fresh wound; her bosom and her arms were yellow as saffron; flowers formed of precious stones were strewn over her transparent robe which was the colour of a hyacinth, and she smiled through the tawny hair which completely enveloped her.

Her magician's wand was passed through her girdle, like a sword.

Circe looked at Telemachus.

The young hero searched beneath his tunic for the flower, *moly*, the black and white flower his father had given him before his departure. He perceived that he no longer had it.

"I am lost," he thought. "She is going to touch me with her wand, and I shall be like the swine who eat acorns."

But Circe said to him in a gentle voice:

"Follow me, young stranger, and come and rest with me."

He followed her. Soon they arrived at her palace, which was a hundred times more beautiful than that of Ulysses.

Along the way, in the depths of the woods and ravines, swine and wolves that had once been men, shipwrecked on the island, ran after the witch's steps; and although she had taken a long rod pointed with iron with which she pricked them cruelly, they tried to lick her bare feet.

* * * * *

For three years Telemachus made his couch with the magician.

Then, one day he grew ashamed. He felt extremely wearied, and he discovered that he had not ceased to love the daughter of Alcinous,

the innocent virgin with the blue eyes, her whom he had never seen.

But he thought :

" If I want to go away, the witch will be angry and transform me into an animal, and thus I shall never see Nausicaa."

Now, Circe, on her part, was weary of her companion. She began to hate him, because she had loved him. She rose one night from her purple couch and went out, taking her wand, and struck him with it over his heart.

But Telemachus kept his form and his countenance. It was because at that moment he was thinking of Nausicaa, and his heart was full of his love.

" Go away ! go away ! " shrieked the witch.

* * * * *

Telemachus found his canoe, set forth again on the sea, and a third tempest threw him on the island of the Lotus-eaters.

They were polished men, full of intelligence, and of equable and gentle temper.

Their king offered Telemachus a flower of the lotus.

" I shall not eat it," said the young hero, " for this is the flower of forgetfulness, and I wish to remember."

" Yet forgetfulness is a great good," replied the king. " Thanks to this flower, which is our only food, we know nothing of pain, regret, desire, and all the passions that trouble unhappy mortals. But we force nobody to eat the divine flower."

Telemachus lived for some weeks on the provisions he had saved from his shipwreck. Then, as there were not in the island either fruits or animals fit to eat, he nourished himself as well as he could on shell-fish and other fishes.

* * * * *

"Is it true," he asked the king, "that the lotus-flower makes men forget even what they most desire or what causes them to suffer most?"

"Assuredly, it does," said the king.

"Oh!" said Telemachus, "it would never make me forget the fair Nausicaa."

"Try it, and see."

"If I try it, it is because I am very sure that the lotus could not do what the artifices of a magician have been unable to accomplish."

He ate the flower and fell asleep.

I mean that he began to live in the same way as the gentle Lotus-eaters, enjoying the present hour and caring for nothing else. Only, he sometimes felt in the depths of his heart, as it were, the memory of an old wound, without being able to know exactly what it was.

When he awoke, he had not forgotten the daughter of Alcinous. But twenty years had slipped by without his noticing their passage. His love had needed all that time to conquer the influence of the flower of forgetfulness.

"They are the best twenty years of your life," the king told him.

But Telemachus did not believe it.

* * * * *

He politely took leave of his hosts.

I shall not tell you of the other adventures in which he was engaged, sometimes by necessity, sometimes by the curiosity of seeing new things, either in the island of the Sirens, or in the island of the Sun, or in the island of the Læstrygonians, nor how his love was strong enough to extricate him from all these dangers and to tear him away from these various stopping-places.

* * * * *

A last tempest drove him towards the mouth of a river in the desired island, the land of the Phæacians. He reached the bank; a wood was near. He gathered leaves, and, as he was naked, he covered himself with them. He fell asleep. . . . Suddenly a noise of pouring water wakened him.

Telemachus opened his eyes and saw servants who were washing linen under the orders of an aged woman who was richly clad.

He got up, and, taking care to hide his nakedness with a leafy bough, he approached the woman. Her figure was stout and clumsy, and grey hairs escaped from her head-band. It was clear that she had once been beautiful, but she was so no longer.

Telemachus asked her for hospitality. She answered him with kindness and made her women give him some clothes.

"And now, my guest, I am going to lead you to the King's house."

"Are you the Queen?" asked Telemachus.

" It is as you have spoken, oh stranger."

Then Telemachus, rejoicing in his heart, exclaimed :

" May the gods grant long life to the mother of the fair Nausicaa ! "

" I am Nausicaa," answered the Queen. . . . " But what ails you, venerable old man ? . . . "

* * * * *

In his canoe, which he hastily repaired, old Telemachus gained the open sea without once glancing behind him.

PRINCESS MIMI'S LOVERS

PRINCESS MIMI'S LOVERS

. . . THEN Cinderella married the king's son.

Some months afterwards, the king's son, having lost his father, became king in his turn.

Then Queen Cinderella brought into the world a little girl, whose name was Princess Mimi.

Princess Mimi was as beautiful as the day. Her rosy face and her light golden hair through which the sun gleamed, made her look like a moss-rose; and she was very intelligent.

When she was fifteen years old, it was necessary for her to marry: for such was the law of the kingdom.

But, as she was a princess, she could only marry a prince.

Now, there were at that time, in all the surrounding countries, only two princes: Prince Polyphemus, who was seven times bigger than Princess Mimi, and Prince Tom Thumb, who was seven times smaller than she was.

And both were in love with Princess Mimi; but Mimi was not in love with either of them, for one was too big and the other was too small.

Nevertheless, the king ordered her to choose one of the two princes before the month was over; and he allowed the two princes to pay their court to the princess.

And it was agreed that he who should be rejected would forgive the other and do him no injury.

Polyphemus came with presents. They were oxen, sheep, and baskets filled with cheeses and fruits. And he was attended by giant warriors, clothed in the skins of animals sewn together.

Tom Thumb brought birds in a gilded cage, flowers, and jewels, and he was attended by jesters and dancers clothed in silk and wearing caps with bells.

Polyphemus related his history to the princess.

"Do not believe," he said to her, "what a poet called Homer has told about me. In the first place, he said I had but one eye, and you see I have two. It is true, indeed, that I ate the men who landed in my island; but, if I did this, it was because they were very small, and I had no more scruple about eating them than you would have in picking the bone of a plover or a young rabbit at the table of the king, your father. But one day a Greek, named Ulysses, made me understand that these little men were yet men like myself, that they often had families, and that I did them a great injury by eating them. From that day forward, I have lived only on the flesh and milk of my flocks. For I am not of a bad disposition; and even, you see, Princess Mimi, that strong and big as I am, with you I am as gentle as a new-born lamb."

And, out of vanity, Polyphemus did not say that Ulysses had conquered him in spite of his strength, and had put out his eyes while he slept, and that he had only recovered his sight by the remedies of a learned magician.

And Mimi thought:

"All the same, he would be capable of eating me if he were hungry. On the other hand, Prince Tom Thumb is so small that I could gobble him up if I wanted."

Tom Thumb related his history in his turn.

"Perfidious enchanters," said he, "tried to lead me astray in the forest with my six brothers. But I scattered white pebbles behind me so that we found our way. Unluckily I met the Ogre. He brought us into his palace and placed us in his big bed. I discovered that he intended to kill us the next morning. Then I put the Ogre's seven daughters into the big bed in our place, and it was they whom the Ogre slaughtered. And I took his seven-league boots, which were of great use to me in a war I had to wage against a neighbouring king: for they allowed me to discover all the enemy's movements. And thus I became a very powerful prince. But I gave up wearing the boots, and I put them in the museum of my palace, because they are uncomfortable for my feet, and also because, as they compel those who wear them to go over seven leagues at every stride, they are not suitable for ordinary walking. But I will show them to you, Princess Mimi."

And, out of vanity, Tom Thumb did not say that he was the son of a poor wood-cutter. And, as Polyphemus had done, he mixed the true with the false: for love, interest, and sometimes imagination, make us always lie a little.

And Princess Mimi was amazed at the cleverness of Prince Tom Thumb.

* * * * *

One day Polyphemus, who was lying with his legs stretched out in the princess's boudoir, which he completely filled, said to her in a voice like thunder, whose reverberations shook the stained glass of the windows and jolted the fragile little tables :

" I am simple-minded, but I have an honest heart, and I am strong. I can tear off fragments of rocks and hurl them into the sea ; I can knock down oxen with a slight blow of my fist, and the lions are afraid of me. Come to my country. There you will see mountains, blue in the morning and rose-coloured in the evening, with great lakes like mirrors, and forests as old as the world. I will carry you wherever you wish. For you I will gather, on the highest peaks, flowers with which no woman has ever yet adorned herself. My companions and myself will be your slaves. Is it not a rare destiny to be like a little goddess waited upon by giants, to be the sole queen—little darling that you are—of forests and mountains, of torrents and great lakes, of eagles and lions ? "

The princess was a little moved as she heard these words. She shuddered, and yet was joyous, like a wren that, held in the hollow of a big hand, yet felt that that hand adored her, and that it was she who had made a captive of the huge bird-catcher.

But Tom Thumb, snuggling in a fold of Mimi's robe, said to her in his shrill and crystal voice :

" Take me : I occupy such a little space ! Small as I am, you will have the pleasure of

thinking that you can do with me whatever you please. I will love you intelligently. I will tell you so in a hundred different ways, and according as you will be sad or gay, lively or quiet, according to the hour and the season of the year, I will suit my words and my caresses to the secret of your heart. And I will have a thousand artifices to amuse you. I will surround you with all that the industry of men has invented to give pleasure to life. You will have beneath your eyes only elegant objects; you will enjoy beautiful fabrics, well carved statues, jewels and perfumes. I will tell you stories and I will have comedies performed for you by ingenious actors. I can sing, play the mandolin, and compose verses. It is finer to express harmoniously things that have been seen and felt than it is to cross torrents, more difficult to conquer words than to conquer lions, rarer to beautify life by the grace of the mind than to exercise the muscles of the body."

And Princess Mimi smiled and dreamed, as if this speech had lulled her deliciously.

* * * * *

One morning she said to her two suitors:

"Make me some verses, I beg you."

Prince Tom Thumb thought for a moment, then repeated these verses, small like himself:

"A prince I am
(You know the same),
Yet I am small,
Tom Thumb my name.

"A tiny body
Far from stout.
No strength have I
To brag about.

"A drop of dew
Upon a briar
Humbly reflects
The heavens entire.

"A perfume drop
The breath encloses
Of many thousand
Living roses.

"Though I am small,
My claim I state.
It simply is
My love is great."*

* Tom Thumb's verses were in French, and the above lines are a very inadequate translation. His exact words were these:

"Bien qu'étant prince
(Chacun le sait),
Je suis fort mince,
J'ai nom Poucet.

"Corps minuscule,
Gros comme rien,
Ne suis Hercule:
M'en moque bien!

"La goutelette
Sur l'églantier
Humble, reflète
Le ciel entier.

"Et mille roses
(Une moisson!)
Vivent encloses
Dans un flacon.

"J'ai (mais qu'importe?)
Corps frêle et court.
En moi je porte
Si grand amour!"

"Charming! exquisite!" said the Princess.

And she felt proud to be loved by a little man who strung words together with so much ease.

"Bah!" said Polyphemus, "it ought not to be very difficult to make such little verses."

"Try," said Tom Thumb.

The giant tried all day long. He could do nothing. Sometimes he struck his forehead angrily with his clenched fist, but this brought nothing forth. He was astonished and enraged at being so powerless to express what he felt so keenly. That seemed to him unjust. He remained motionless, his mouth half-open, and with a vague look in his eye. At last, towards evening, he remembered that *love* rhymes with *dove*. Some hours afterwards he went to Mimi, and said:

"You are as beautiful as a dove,
And I assure you, Princess, I have given you all my love."

The Princess burst into laughter.

"Are not these verses good?" asked Polyphemus.

Tom Thumb was triumphant.

"Still it was not so difficult!" he said. "You had only to say:

"Oh, Princess fair, although you're small,
For me you fill the world and all.*

Or:

"A giant I, madly in love,
And dying for a little dove.†

* "Vous êtes bien petite, ô ma Princesse blonde:
Mais votre petitesse emplit pour moi le monde!"

† "Je suis un bon géant très fou
Qui meurs d'amour pour un joujou."

Or this :

" Tiny, tiny girl,
You have pierced my heart,
You are only as tall as my ankle,
But you struck me with love's dart.*

Or if you prefer it :

" In two words, this is how it goes,
Once a tall oak fell in love with a rose."†

" Adorable ! " said the Princess.

But she saw in the giant's eye a tear as large as an egg ; and he had such an unhappy air that she had pity on him. At the same time it seemed to her that Tom Thumb showed too much satisfaction with his own cleverness, and that this was in bad taste. She was thus the more touched by the gentleness and simplicity of Polyphemus.

" After all," she said to herself, " he could crush his rival with a fillip of his thumb, or simply put him in his pocket. Although I myself am bigger than Tom Thumb, he could carry me off under his arm and do what he wished with me. He must be very good, for he does none of these things."

And she said to Polyphemus :

" Do not grieve, my friend. Your verses are not very good ; but your heart is in them, and, after all, they say the essential."

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* " O petite, petite fille
Qui m'as percé d'un trait vainqueur,
Toi qui me viens à la cheville,
Comment donc as-tu fait pour atteindre mon cœur ? "

† " Je m'en vais en deux mots vous raconter la chose :
Il était un grand chêne amoureux d'une rose."

"But," said Tom Thumb, "they are not verses: for the first has nine syllables, and the second has fourteen, and no cæsura."

"Then," said the Princess, "they are the verses of a Futurist poet. Be silent, Prince Tom Thumb!"

* * * * *

The palace of Princess Mimi was surrounded by a large park, through which flowed a blue river. In the middle of the river, on a little island, like a nosegay, was a summer-house made of fine coloured china, with windows made of precious stones and sashes of silver. The clever architect had given to this summer-house the appearance of an immense tulip. It was the Princess's custom to spend hours here, for the joy of feeling herself suspended between the azure of the river and the azure of the sky.

One day, as she was here, half reclining and half dreaming, her eyes half-closed and singing melancholy songs in a low voice, she did not perceive that the river was rising around her. At last the noise of the waves woke her out of her half-sleep, and, opening a window, she saw that the bridge which led to the little island was submerged, and that the water would soon come into the summer-house. She was frightened and cried out.

On the bank, the King, her father, Queen Cinderella, her mother, and Prince Tom Thumb were in despair, and all three together were raising their hands to Heaven. Suddenly,

Polyphemus appeared. He entered the stream, and the water hardly reached his girdle. In three steps he reached the summer-house, grasped the Princess carefully, and brought her to the bank.

"Oh!" said Mimi to herself, "how fine it is to be big and strong! And how pleasant it is to feel oneself thus protected! With him I could sleep tranquilly, and I should never have a fear or a care. I think it is he whom I shall choose."

She smiled on the giant, and the smile of that little mouth caused a tremor of pleasure to pass over the whole huge body of Polyphemus.

The following day she saw Tom Thumb so sad that, to console him, she proposed taking a walk with him through the fields.

She held him by the hand, and she pretended to dawdle so as not to walk too quickly, and not tire out her companion.

They met a flock of sheep. And as Tom Thumb wore that day a doublet of cherry-coloured satin, a ram, who disliked that colour, left the flock and, with horns lowered, rushed straight at the little prince.

Tom Thumb, who was very proud, kept his countenance, although he was greatly frightened. But at the moment when the ram was going to reach him, Mimi took Tom Thumb in her arms, and, at the same time, adroitly opened her parasol in the ram's nose. He stopped in surprise and almost immediately retraced his steps.

"He does well to go off," said Tom Thumb.

"I was not afraid of him, and you saw, Princess, how ready I was for him."

"Yes, little Prince, I know that you are brave," said Mimi.

And she thought:

"Oh! how good it is to protect those weaker than yourself! Certainly one must love those to whom one is useful; above all, when they are handsome and clever like this little man."

* * * * *

On the next day, Tom Thumb presented the Princess with a little rose, still almost a bud, but no rose had ever so rosy a tint or a more delicate perfume.

Mimi took the flower, saying:

"Thanks, dear little Prince."

She wore on that day a robe that changed its colour as it reflected the light, and that seemed to be made of the same fabric as the wings of a dragon-fly.

"Ah!" said Tom Thumb, "what a beautiful dress you are wearing!"

"Isn't it?" said Mimi. "And look how well your rose goes with my bodice."

"A rose!" thought Polyphemus, "what is a rose? I will show her what nosegays I can give her."

He went off to India; there he discovered a large tree covered with brilliant blooms as big as the bells of a cathedral; and he tore it up by the roots and brought it to Mimi with an air of triumph.

"It is very beautiful," said Mimi, laughing. "But what would you have me do with it, my dear Prince? I cannot put it in my bodice or in my hair."

The good giant was ashamed, and did not know what to say.

As he cast down his eyes, he noticed that Prince Tom Thumb was wearing a suit of the same stuff as the Princess's robe.

"Oh!" said he.

"Yes," she answered, "I have had this fine suit made for him out of a little piece that was left over from my robe. I could not give it to you, for it would not have been enough to make even a knot in your tie."

And, turning towards the King:

"Since the hour has come to decide, my father, it is Prince Tom Thumb that I will take as my husband. Prince Polyphemus will forgive me. I have much esteem for him, and I am sorry for his disappointment."

The giant heaved a sigh that made the whole palace tremble; then, as he was a gentleman, he loyally offered Tom Thumb his huge hand, in which that of the little Prince was lost.

"Make her happy," he said to him.

* * * * *

On the day of the wedding Princess Mimi was neither sad nor gay; for she had an undoubted affection for Tom Thumb, but she was not in love with him.

At the moment the procession started for the

church, it was announced that Prince Charming, who had been on his travels for several years, had just come back, and that he would be present at the wedding.

Prince Charming appeared. He was a little taller than the Princess, handsome, with a fine bearing, and full of intelligence. In brief, Prince Charming was charming.

The Princess had never seen him, and had never even heard him spoken of. But as soon as he presented himself, she turned quite pale, then quite red, and she said these words in spite of herself :

" Prince Charming, I was expecting you. I love you and I feel that you love me. But I have pledged my faith to this poor little man, and I cannot break my pledge."

As she said this she nearly fell into a swoon.

Polyphemus leant down to Tom Thumb :

" Little Prince, will you not have the courage to do what I did ? "

" But I love her," said Tom Thumb.

" That is the reason," said the good giant.

" Madam," said Tom Thumb to Princess Mimi, " this good giant is right. I love you too much to possess you against your will. We did not foresee the arrival of Prince Charming. Marry him, since you love him."

Princess Mimi, in a burst of joy, lifted the little Prince off the ground and kissed him on both cheeks, saying :

" Ah, how nice of you to do that ! "

Tom Thumb wept and said :

" That is crueller than all the rest."

"Come, poor little Prince," said Polyphemus. "You will tell me all about your grief. We will speak of her every day, and we will watch over her from afar."

He took Tom Thumb on his shoulder, and soon both disappeared over the horizon.

SOPHIE DE MONTCERNAY

SOPHIE DE MONTCERNAY

IN the Convent of the Abbaye-aux-Bois, where the girls of the highest nobility of France were educated, they were celebrating the birthday of Madame de Rochebrune, the head mistress.

The nuns, the lay sisters, the boarders, and a number of ladies, the mothers, relatives, or friends of the boarders, were gathered in the theatre, which had been built by the Duchess of Orleans, formerly abbess of the royal convent.

The long rows of little girls, seated on benches and wearing blue, white, or red ribbons on their dresses, according as they were in the junior, middle, or senior classes, formed a frame for the gleaming and sparkling audience, in which the high-pointed corsages of the ladies rose out of their stiff panniered skirts, and in which rosy faces with patches on them balanced in the movements of conversation the high powdered structures of their head-dresses.

A Red—that is to say, a senior—on the stage was playing a piece on the harp. Then some Blues recited fables by Florian, and a White declaimed verses by the Abbé Delille on the pleasures of the country.

Then the curtain was lowered for the interval. The curtain was a beautiful piece of old tapestry which represented the loves of Diana and Endymion. The evening was to end with the second act of *Athalie*.

Joad, Athalie, Abner, Mathan, Josabeth, and Joas were moving about in the wings, very busy. Joad was Mademoiselle de Montmorency decked with a hempen periwig and a beard, and displaying under the latter a little mouth as red as a cherry. Mademoiselle de Conflans, who played the part of Abner, wore a tin cuirass, moustaches, and a chin-tuft. Mademoiselle de Choiseul, very fair and very youthful, with a gentle and peaceable air, played the part of the fierce Athalie. She wore three patches, a round one on her temple, an almond-shaped one on her chin, and a star-shaped one on her cheek.

"Patches like the queen's for Athalie!" said Mademoiselle Sainte-Crinore (she was the nun who conducted the rehearsals). "What are you thinking of, mademoiselle?"

"Oh, Madame, let me keep them! She might have worn patches, for her mother, Jezebel, rouged herself. The text says so!"

Joas was played by little Sophie de Montcernay, a child of eight, who at the moment was looking into the auditorium from two holes pierced exactly through Endymion's eyes.

"What are you doing, Mademoiselle de Montcernay?"

"I am looking if my mother has come," said Sophie sadly.

"You know well she will not come. She sent you word this morning. Come! Think no more about it and pay attention to your part. Your mother will be pleased if she knows you have acted well."

The child endeavoured to smile. The per-

formance began. At the moment when Mademoiselle de Choiseul exclaimed, raising her voice :

" Let all my Tyrians take up arms ! "

Sophie de Montcernay made her entry with Josabeth, Zachariah, and the chorus.

As she was greatly moved, she uttered her first reply in so gentle and touching a manner that a little stir of pleasure and approbation ran through the rows of ladies. But when Athalie asked her :

" Are you then without parents ? "

her breast heaved, and she was scarcely heard to reply :

" They have abandoned me,"

and when the queen added :

" How and since when ? "

Sophie de Montcernay made a face like a child who is going to weep, stammered two or three times : " Since . . . since . . ." and suddenly burst into tears.

" You little fool," said Athalie to her in a whisper, shaking her by the arm. " You are going to make us all go wrong ! "

And she resumed :

" At least your country's name is not unknown ? "

But Sophie was sobbing with her head in her hands. The curtain had to be lowered.

The head mistress went into the wings and tried to comfort the child.

"What is the matter with you, little Sophie? Are you afraid of all these people?"

"No, Madame."

"What is the matter, then?"

"I don't know."

Madame de Rochebrune went back to the auditorium and kept Sophie beside her. And while the interrupted scene was resumed, and Abner, by a bold convention, spoke the part of Joas, Sophie, curled up at the feet of the old nun, continued to weep silently.

"Alas!" thought Madame de Rochebrune, "I know well what ails the poor little thing! But what is to be done?"

* * * * *

Certainly, Sophie's mother, the brilliant Marquise de Montcernay, was not unkind. Left a widow at the age of twenty, her principal occupation was to beautify herself and feel that she was pretty; but it must be admitted that the pleasure she took in this made her amiable, gentle, and indulgent to others. She even loved her daughter in her own way. When Sophie was quite little, she had occupied herself with her as if she were a doll; and in the parties she gave, if she dressed herself as a young Indian woman or a stage shepherdess, she amused herself by giving similar costumes to the child, and dressed her as an Indian baby or a tiny shepherdess. The little girl, who was very affectionate and very sensitive, took these amusements as evidences of affection. Seeing her pretty mother

always charmingly dressed and always triumphant, and not conceiving that any other woman could be so beautiful or so entertaining, she felt towards her as one does towards an idol; and she was perfectly happy to be her toy.

When this toy no longer amused her, that is to say, when Sophie was six years old, Madame de Montcernay placed her in the Abbaye-aux-Bois. The child yielded, in order not to displease her whom she adored. The Marquise came to see her two or three times a year, always more beautiful and as dazzling as an apparition; and Sophie lived only for those visits. Saved from continuous suffering by the instability of her age, she yet carried in her heart a secret wound. Sometimes even in the midst of her games, she would suddenly burst into tears. It is true that she was hardly more abandoned by her mother than were most of her companions. She understood, too, that the little girls of the nobility had to be brought up in a certain way and could not live much with their mothers. But she suffered none the less from all this. The nuns were good to her, and, if she wished, she could have found in the senior class (the Reds) some great friend who would have played the part of her little mother. But that was not enough for her. It was her mother she needed. She was born such, poor little child.

* * * * *

From the Blue (the junior), Sophie passed into the White (the middle) class to prepare for her first Communion.

Among her new mistresses, there was one, Madame Sainte-Thérèse, who was young and pretty, but who always seemed wearied and sad. When she made the Whites repeat their catechism, she had an air of thinking of something else a thousand leagues distant. These distractions suited the Whites well enough, and they profited by them to repeat their lessons at random. But Sophie was chilled by this indifference, and was very much afraid of Madame Sainte-Thérèse. On this very account she could not prevent herself from following her continually with her eyes; and doubtless this glance annoyed the young nun, for if she woke up from her reverie and languidly gave somebody a bad mark or some other punishment, it was always on Sophie that it fell.

Sophie said to herself: "She detests me," and she was very unhappy.

On the day of their first Communion all the mothers of the other girls were there. But Sophie's mother had written that she would not come, as she was detained by a party given by the Count d'Artois.

Sophie tried to console herself by thinking that she had the most beautiful and most admired mamma in the world, and the one who was most in request; and she prayed for her from the bottom of her heart—from her heart swollen with sorrow.

But in the evening, while the Whites were going up to their dormitory, she escaped from their ranks and remained alone, dreaming and weeping her fill in the Souls' Cloister (this was

the name given to the inner courtyard of the convent).

From the stone bench on which she was sitting, she saw the shadows of the arcades outlined by the moon. A bell rang slowly and sadly, and then was silent. And, no longer daring to stir on account of the silence, Sophie had a feeling of being completely and hopelessly deserted. . . .

A white form appeared in the gallery not far from the door that led to the rooms of the head mistress. Sophie thought that it was Madame de Rochebrune, and, with a despairing movement, flung herself into the folds of that snow-white robe.

"What is the matter, my child? and why are you not with your companions?"

Sophie recognized Madame Sainte-Thérèse, and was afraid; but, lifting her eyes, she saw that Madame Sainte-Thérèse was also weeping.

"What is the matter?" repeated the nun more gently, as she leant down towards the child and stroked her head with her long, pale hands.

Sophie, suffocated by her tears, could only say these words:

"Mamma! Mamma!"

"Ah, was that the reason?" murmured the nun, as if surprised.

She seized the little girl in her arms, squeezed her with all her strength, and lifted her on to the stone bench, covering her with long, long kisses.

Sophie remembered that she had not received kisses like these since the time when she had been

quite small, and that Madame Sainte-Thérèse's kisses were even warmer and better.

"Oh! Madame," she said, "how good you are!"

"Would you like me to be a little bit your mamma?"

The child only answered by pressing against the nun's breast. She buried herself in it as closely as she could, and hid herself completely beneath the large folds of the white veil.

And slowly Madame Sainte-Thérèse rocked her on her knees.

* * * * *

Madame Sainte-Thérèse's name in the world had been Madeleine de Frégeneuilles. When quite young she had had the vocation to maternity. As Colonel de Frégeneuilles was with the army, and Madame de Frégeneuilles was always ill, it was Madeleine who had brought up her little brother, now one of the king's pages, and her little sister, who had recently died. The Frégeneuilles were not rich, and she had resigned herself to enter the convent in order that her brother might have something with which to maintain the honour of the family. But what agony it was for her to renounce the joy of having children of her own to care for and to caress! If she remained cold towards her pupils in spite of the tenderness of her heart, the reason was that there were too many of them, these little Whites, and it was impossible for her to love them all in the unique fashion in which

she was able to love. And if at first she had been wanting in kindness towards Sophie, it was because she thought she saw in the child's eyes a curiosity that annoyed her.

But now at last they recognized and understood one another, the little girl who needed a mother, and the nun who needed a child to love.

Thenceforward, Madame Sainte-Thérèse and Sophie de Montcernay were happy. In the morning, when the nun passed before the girls' beds saying "*Benedicamus Domino*," she directed towards Sophie a look and a smile that gave her courage and gaiety for the whole day, and in the evening she tucked her up in her little bed. In class, she used to ask her for little services, such as to fetch a book or to pick up the rattle which she used to signal to the class; and the child, full of application, resting with her elbows on her desk and with her tongue stuck out a little so that she might write all the better, felt continually behind her Madame Sainte-Thérèse's head bending over her and watching her at work. Often also the nun led her into her cell, and there she went over Sophie's clothes, did her hair for her, beautified her, and kissed her every moment on both cheeks.

Both felt the joy of having a secret between them, of having a separate life of their own in the common life. They loved one another all the more because they suspected that in the innocent romance of their affection there might be something of which the austerity of the convent rule would not approve. And they kept

a little in the background so as to love one another.

* * * * *

In the following year, Sophie passed into the Red class. This was a great sorrow. She could no longer see Madame Sainte-Thérèse so often, and she found it difficult to go to sleep in her new dormitory—the dormitory of the bigger girls—where her friend no longer came to embrace her each evening. Still she found means of slipping into her cell sometimes during the hours of recreation. But, to crown their misfortunes, Madame de Rochebrune took it into her head that the excessive ardour of this "special friendship" of a nun for her pupil was contrary to the very spirit of the profession. She warned Madame Sainte-Thérèse of this, and at last, in order to put an end to the irregularity, gave her the duties of sacristan, which left her few opportunities of meeting the pupils.

Sophie's grief almost amounted to despair. It was her whole happiness of which she had been deprived, and then, in order to divert her grief and also to avenge herself for what she regarded as an abominable cruelty, she, who had formerly been so gentle and submissive, became the most turbulent and undisciplined little scapegrace among all the boarders.

Just at this period there was in the Red class a mistress whom all the pupils detested for her bad temper and her injustice. Her name was Madame Saint-Jérôme. The Reds had presented a petition to Madame Rochebrune that

she should be removed, but the head mistress had refused, not wishing to give the impression of yielding to the girls.

One day, during a class, two of the Reds, little Lastic and little Saint-Simon, had a dispute which ended with an open fight. Without knowing who was right or wrong, Madame Saint-Jérôme took Mademoiselle de Lastic by the arm and tried to force her to go down on her knees.

" Madame," said the child, " I assure you that it was not I who began."

At this, Madame Saint-Jérôme burst into a frightful temper, took her by the neck and flung her so violently to the ground that she fell on her nose and bled.

" Ladies," said Sophie, " you see how one of us has been attacked. Let us throw Madame Saint-Jérôme out of the window."

All the Reds leaped over the benches and thronged about the victim, uttering cries. Madame Saint-Jérôme lost her head and went out, saying she was going to complain to Madame de Rochebrune.

Sophie mounted on a table and made a speech to her companions. She said they ought to leave the class and only come back to it on honourable conditions. Led by her, the Reds crossed the garden and invaded the kitchens and the buttery : they hoped thus to conquer the nuns by famine. A nun and some lay sisters who were there fled in terror. The little insurgents kept back a lay sister to cook their dinner, bolted the doors, and passed the night in deliberation.

In order to prevent attempts at individual

corruption, they all swore solemnly that they would not enter into negotiations except with the head mistress or her official envoys.

On her side, Madame de Rochebrune, having assembled the nuns, decided that it was better to wait until the rebels grew tired and made their submission.

Towards morning, the Reds heard knocks at one of the doors. They opened. It was Madame Sainte-Thérèse.

Knowing that her little friend was most compromised in the affair, she had been unable to resist the desire of seeing her and speaking to her.

"Sophie," she said, "if you still love me, follow me."

Sophie longed to fling herself on her neck, but the feeling of duty restrained her.

"Do you come," asked the conspirators, "in your own name, or are you sent by Madame de Rochebrune?"

"I can only follow you in the latter case. . . . I have sworn it," said Sophie, very pale.

Madame Sainte-Thérèse hesitated a moment, and answered:

"I am sent by Madame de Rochebrune, but I would like to make her proposals known first to Mademoiselle de Montcernay, who will communicate them to you."

And, purple with the shame of her falsehood, she took Sophie by the hand and led her away hurriedly. She stopped and kissed her in the middle of the garden; then, without saying a word, she brought her to Madame de Rochebrune.

"Madame," she said gravely, "you will impose upon me whatever penance you wish; but I beg you first of all to save my honour. I told the young ladies that I brought them proposals from you. You would not wish them to have the thought that one of their mistresses has publicly lied."

"But," said Sophie, "if Madame Sainte-Thérèse spoke to us as she did, it was because she knew that I love her so much that I could not have prevented myself from following her; she wished to spare me the shame of that treason. It is therefore me whom you should scold and punish, Madame?"

And the nun and the child knelt down before the head mistress.

"You are both ridiculous," said Madame de Rochebrune. "But, God forgive me! you move me. Go and tell the young ladies that if they are back in their class by noon I will give them a complete amnesty. As for Madame Saint-Jérôme . . . make them understand that it is my duty at the present moment to uphold her, and that it is to their interest to make no further demands about her."

Sophie carried these words to the rebels, showed them that Madame de Rochebrune could do no more without losing her own dignity, and had not much trouble in convincing them of this, for they had already exhausted all the pleasure of their escapade.

Some days later, Madame Saint-Jérôme fell ill very opportunely, and was replaced by a less displeasing mistress.

Madame de Rochebrune was a kind-hearted woman; and, as the conduct of Madame Sainte-Thérèse seemed to her singular and touching, and as, moreover, she thought that they had brought about the fortunate solution of the whole business, she allowed them, as a reward, to see and love one another freely.

And the Marquise de Montcernay continued to lead her brilliant and amusing life at Versailles and Paris. Every three or four months she remembered her daughter and went to see her. During these short visits, Sophie spoke to her mother of nothing but Madame Sainte-Thérèse.

"That is excellent," the Marquise would say; "I see that you are not dull here."

And she would go off perfectly satisfied, with a rustle of skirts, and wearing a large plumed hat upon her unchangingly young and thoughtless head.

* * * * *

Two years later, in 1791.

The convent of the Abbaye-aux-Bois was dispersed.

Because she was either very heedless or very brave, the Marquise de Montcernay had remained in Paris. She had sent Sophie to an old country house in Savoy and had entrusted her to the care of an old steward, Maître Germain.

At first Sophie had buried herself in sombre and silent despair. But little by little the grandmotherly cares of Maître Germain's wife had softened and soothed her. She allowed herself to live. She followed the worthy man in his

trips through the woods, beside melancholy ponds, or over violet heaths. And her days passed in rather melancholy indolence which was not without its sweetness.

She roused herself from it only to carry on an impassioned correspondence with Madame Sainte-Thérèse, who was a refugee in Paris under a borrowed name. And she thought rarely of her mother.

* * * * *

. . . Madame Sainte-Thérèse's letters ceased to come. Sophie waited for a month, with increasing anxiety. Then one day she got hold of a newspaper which Maître Germain had badly hidden, and read the name of " the former Marquise de Montcernay " in a list of recently arrested suspects.

She saw her, in her childish imagination, stretched upon a straw bed in a frightful cell, with chains on her feet and hands, she so elegant and so delicate. . . . And suddenly the adoration she had felt when quite a child for that exquisite and frivolous mother, returned to her heart, all the more ardently because it was mingled with remorse. She said to herself that perhaps she had ignored the Marquise's affection, and imagined superior duties which had kept her apart from her child. At last she threw all the blame on her own timidity. " If I had been able," she thought, " to open my heart to her, to make her understand that I suffered from not seeing her, she would have had pity on me and would have shown me a more attentive

affection." She reproached herself for having so long loved another woman more than her mother, and she almost had a sort of grudge against Madame Sainte-Thérèse for having taken the place her mother had abandoned. Thenceforward she had but one thought: to see her mother and tell her all this; or simply to hold her in her arms and press her against herself—very strongly and very gently.

She persuaded Maître Germain to take her to Paris, and there, without too much difficulty, they obtained permission to pay Madame de Montcernay a visit in her prison.

The Marquise had appeared before the Revolutionary Tribunal on the previous day, and had been condemned to death. Maître Germain knew this and had hidden it from Sophie.

* * * * *

The prison was an old college, with an inner courtyard surrounded by arcades. The child, who expected thick walls, chains, gratings, and subterranean cells, was astonished to see this courtyard planted with trees and full of sunshine.

A jailer brought in the Citizeness Montcernay. She was still pretty and very graceful in her black dress. But it was no longer powder that made her hairs white.

As soon as she saw Sophie, she rushed to her, took her, lifted her up and carried her to a stone bench in the corner of the cloister, and covered her with mad kisses:

"Oh, my little girl! my little girl!"

And Sophie remembered another bench in another cloister, and the caresses of Madame Sainte-Thérèse. And she understood that there was something more in her mother's kisses, a tenderness of heart and flesh by which she felt deliciously enveloped, and she would have liked to die in that embrace.

For the frivolous Marquise had greatly changed. The certainty of approaching death had suddenly simplified and led back to nature and truth the frivolous creature of former days. A mother had awakened within her, a mother in despair at having neglected her child, eager to see her, to hold her, to pay her before dying such big arrears of love. She wished also, before parting with her for ever, to leave in her daughter's mind a memory and an image that would never be effaced. And just at the moment when Sophie was dragging Germain to Paris, she had written to the old steward : " Bring me my daughter."

Now she gazed at her, filling her eyes and her heart with the dear image of her child :

" Ah ! my poor little one," she said, " how guilty I have been towards you ! Say you forgive me ! "

And Sophie murmured :

" I am happy . . . very happy ! "

Then, while not forgetting that she would certainly die the next day, the Marquise began to chat with Sophie about a thousand charming nothings, as if she was in the parlour at the Abbaye-aux-Bois. She made her tell her in detail all about her days in the old country-house in Savoy, and asked about her clothes and the

state of her trousseau. And she plaited her hair and arranged her collar. . . . She wished to do, for at least an hour, what she should always have done.

The jailer warned them that they had only a few minutes more.

The Marquise had the courage to say almost gaily :

" *Au revoir,* my love."

But as she said " *au revoir,*" Sophie doubtless read " farewell " in her eyes. She had a feeling that if she left this mother whom she had at last recovered, she would never see her again. She slipped to the ground, clung about her feet, hung to her dress, and, shaken by sobs, she cried :

" No ! No ! I will not."

Madame de Montcernay bent towards her, knelt down, took her in her arms, and consoled her with the words that one says to tiny children. She added :

" You see this prison is not very terrible. If they wished to do me any harm they would have put me somewhere else. Think a little. They cannot condemn me, for I have done nothing. . . . In a few days, I swear to you, I shall go out of this place, and we shall never leave one another again. Be sensible then in the meantime if you don't want to make me unhappy."

These last words convinced Sophie.

" I will be sensible," she said, " I promise you."

At that moment the Marquise seemed to make a great effort :

" My daughter," she continued, " your great friend Madame Sainte-Thérèse has been a prisoner

here for the last month. Would you like to see her? I think the jailer, who is not a bad man, would allow you."

Perhaps Sophie divined the Marquise's secret thought, and that, in spite of her effort, she was but a mother, a jealous mother, who would suffer if, at that supreme moment, she had to share her child's heart with another, and, above all, with that other. Perhaps also there are hours that make us forget years and swallow up all the past. Madame Sainte-Thérèse's assumed motherhood was so distant now.

"Does she know that I came here?" Sophie asked.

"No."

"Then . . . say nothing to her about it."

Sophie never forgot the infinite joy which suddenly shone in her mother's eyes.

. . . A last kiss—so long, so sweet, so sad! Then the heavy door turned on its hinges and closed between mother and child with a dull sound. . . .

On the next day, the Marquise de Montcernay mounted the scaffold.

MELIE

MÉLIE

"ADORED?" said the Countess Christiane, "I am sure that I have been adored once in my life. Not by you, gentlemen, though several have told me so: for I know that it is a manner of speaking, and that merely to be liked is very pleasant. But, when quite a child, I was adored by a little girl of my own age, who was by far the most wretched little girl, the worst washed, and the greatest slattern one could see, and whose name was Mélie.

"Yes, adored; and I pray you to give the word its full meaning. There is no other for the feeling I inspired in Mélie. I understand now that I was her only thought, her only joy in the world, her only reason for living; that nothing existed for her apart from me, that she was really my property and belonged to me absolutely. . . .

"Where did this take place? In the old house in the provinces where I was born. A bright and deserted street, paved with sharp stones, bordered with grey gables and long convent walls. A large, sonorous house, with tall windows and wooden panels, with a vast garden, with a vine-carpeted arbour running through its whole length, where it was as dark and cool as a church, and which gave us three or four pipes of white wine every year. On each side of the arbour were three or four large squares planted with very old

fruit trees. At the end of the garden, a latticed door of wood opened on the fields. From here one could see the sunset, and, if one turned round, one saw the apse of the cathedral and its last buttresses, gilt by the evening light. Mélie's humble image is joined in my memory to that corner of earth with a deep and almost solemn peace.

* * * * *

"Every time I think of Mélie I see a little girl from ten to twelve, ugly, fairly tall, very thin, covered with freckles, her eyes shining through her tangled hair; her feet in old elastic boots, burst and down at heels; rags of no colour, her bodice badly buttoned, and some corner of her undergarments showing through a hole in her skirt. In short, a perfect little ragamuffin. Her best feature was a large mouth with teeth like those of a young dog, which she showed continually, at any rate to me, for she could not look at me without laughing with happiness.

"It seems that I was a fairly pretty little girl, very white, very delicate, with long hair the colour of a horse-chestnut. My brother, a little older than I was and a terrible tease, called it carrots so as to put me in a rage. Or he compared it with Petit-Blond's tail (Petit-Blond was a reddish, sturdy, and obstinate pony, a companion of our childhood, who took us out in fine weather, and who visibly derived great pleasure from upsetting us). At all events, whatever its colour, it was hair which my father greatly liked, and of which

great care was taken. Add to this, strange green eyes, and, in my whole person, something unhealthy and over-excitable. I had the air of an unreal little girl. I repeat what I have been told. It is evident that, for Mélie at all events, I belonged to a superior world, to the same world as the faces of the transparent saints and angels that she saw in the painted windows in the church.

* * * * *

"How did I make Mélie's acquaintance? I no longer know. Her parents were poor people of the neighbourhood. What is certain is that they did not bother themselves much about their daughter, that I was accustomed to see her everywhere on my paths, and that she lived in my shadow.

"I have no doubt that at the beginning my father tried to keep me away from that little witch. For, indeed, she was no companion for a rich, middle-class little girl such as I was. I imagine that he was conquered by Mélie's perseverance, by her snake-like suppleness in slipping away, appearing and disappearing, and perhaps also by her prayers. I felt, in truth, that I was for Mélie a sort of little Madonna; and a Madonna is not angry when ragamuffins pay her their devotions from the other end of the chapel.

"And poor Mélie was so little in the way! She only asked me to endure her, not even by my side, but behind me. In the morning, when my nurse led me to the convent, Mélie, hidden at

the corner of the door, would watch for my departure. She would take the satchel which held my books and would follow us at a distance of some paces. I used to say to her : 'Thank you, Mélie!' That was enough for her. She knew that my father would not have allowed her to walk by my side, and that he would not think it proper for her to engage in conversation with me in the street; and she herself was of the same opinion.

"Besides, she had her own dignity, the dignity which all disinterested love maintains without knowledge or effort. Thus, although she was poor, I never gave her pennies. Once, when I wished to give her one, she had refused, energetically shaking her head like a wolf's. Only when I had some dainties, chocolates or macaroons, I offered her some behind my back as I trotted along at my nurse's side; and she came and took them. Sweets she would accept.

"I sometimes ask myself why Mélie was so ragged, for certainly she must have been given at home old garments with which she could have clothed herself more decently. I sometimes rated her for her badly combed hair, her missing buttons, her stains and her torn clothes. Then she would sink her head, very confused, and say nothing. But she would appear again next day as shabby as before. It was doubtless stronger than she was.

"It must be said that with the life she led it would have been difficult for her to be neat. All the time she was not with me she spent playing in the street with young ragamuffins, or running

through the fields, climbing trees, gathering flowers, sleeping in the hay. A regular little faun! She could not read and had never gone to school, but she knew plants well, those that are good for a cold, those that are refreshing, those that cure pains, those that ease the smart of cuts. . . . She often brought some to the kitchen, and also lamb's lettuce, watercress, dandelion, and enormous bouquets of violets, snow-drops, cowslips, michaelmas daisies, poppies, and cornflowers.

"These were all so many pretexts for slipping into the house. Or she would wander about the kitchen, watching for an errand to run: for bread which was wanted just at lunch time, or when the butcher had not sent the meat. Mélie would run off, be back in a twinkling, and then would not go away, would hide herself in corners, pass through half-open doors, looking for me, and end by finding me.

"This happened oftenest in the garden. She showed herself at first from a distance, timidly. I would make her a sign to approach. And she would run to me, with a joy of Paradise in her eyes.

"'Oh! Mademoiselle! Mademoiselle!'

"We used to settle ourselves on a bench in the arbour, and there, well hidden, we would chat at our ease. I have forgotten what we spoke of, but I remember quite well what we did. Mélie was very ingenious. She taught me how to make whistles out of willow branches, guns out of pieces of elder, balls of cowslips, crowns of all sorts of flowers, pumps from straws fixed in

apricot stones (it is quite simple: you make a hole by rubbing the stones against a piece of sandstone, and you take out the kernel through these holes with a pin). When she received some pennies for her errands, she would buy bits of stuff and ends of ribbons from a dressmaker in the town, and by rolling and sewing these multi-coloured rags around a handful of hay and four little sticks, she used to make dolls which seemed to me superb, dazzling and fantastic dolls with heads of rose-coloured satin and unexpected gestures, dolls much more alive, much more suggestive than those one buys in shops.

"Mélie was also very generous. One day, as I was going out, I saw her waiting for me, leaning against a post and holding a large slice of bread on which smoked a layer of mashed potatoes seasoned with onions and other herbs. The layer of potatoes was much thicker than the bread, and it smelt so good! I could not restrain myself:

"'That cannot be bad, Mélie!'

"Immediately she stretched out to me the piece of bread, in which teeth like those of a wolf had cut out half-circles as if with a punching machine. And I, so delicate that I was always scolded because I did not eat, I devoured the bread and covered myself with the potatoes to the tip of my nose. And Mélie gazed at me with an odd air in which there were delight, pride at seeing that I appreciated her cooking so highly, and also, under it all, a little regret. . . . From that day forward, every time she had a special dish at home, she brought me some in a piece of paper. She

would take it out of her pocket with great mystery. . . . But it was not mashed potatoes! It was poor people's food and had a decidedly strong smell. I would try and taste it; but it was no good; I used to tell her that I was not hungry, and this used to sadden her.

"On the whole, Mélie inspired me, in some ways, with a sort of respect. Her strength, her agility, her boldness, astonished a timid, frail, retired, and sheltered little girl such as I was. I envied her power of being able to run everywhere and of fearing nothing. Sometimes she smelt of the hay in which she had been rolling, and had some blades of it in her hair. She made me dream of a free life in the fields, like Robinson Crusoe's. When we were quite sure that we were alone, she would climb the trees of the orchard, shake the branches, and send down a rain of ripe fruit, and pluck handfuls of it. She was very fond of green apples, and still more of green apricots as hard as little balls. She would assure me, as she ate them, that they were excellent, and I ate some also, out of pride and to do as she did. But all the same, I preferred ripe fruit. We had only very late cherries, and I once said to her that it was a nuisance not to have cherries yet. The next day she brought me an apron full. She had pillaged some garden of them. She robbed for me, she would have killed for me.

"As soon as she saw anybody from the house coming towards us—unless it was my nurse or the cook, with whom she was good friends—she would disappear, I know not how, through some hole in the hedge.

"The worst days for Mélie were those when other little friends came to see me. Mélie would continue to hover about me, but I used to pass before her without speaking to her, without seeming to know her. And then she would retire, efface herself, make herself small. She bore me no grudge, she understood that these elegant little girls must not know that she was my friend. She did not say to herself that I was ashamed of her, or if she did, she thought it quite natural that it should be so. But I felt all the same that it made her heart swell.

"Another grief for her was when my father took me with my brother to a very rustic country house, flanked by a small farm, that he possessed, at a distance of about a league from the town. She used to try and follow us in the distance, but my father would not allow it, and sharply sent her back. One day, as we were approaching the farm, I saw Mélie, covered with dust, rising out of a ditch in which she had hidden to see me pass. She remained there, trembling, ready to flee at the least hostile movement of my father. I was touched by it.

"'Father,' I said, very gently, 'let her walk behind us. What harm would it do?'

"My father consented; and Mélie, radiant, followed us like a good dog; and, from time to time, I stretched out my hand behind me without saying anything; she took it in hers, and laid her other little paw upon it just for a moment. Nothing more.

"Towards the end of luncheon, I took an opportunity to go out alone, and I brought

Mélie, who was crouching against the door, some bread and a little meat and cheese that I was able to take with me.

" ' Oh, Mademoiselle! Mademoiselle! '

" Then I played with my brother under the big trees that surrounded the farm; and, without seeing her, I divined that Mélie was in the neighbourhood, hidden behind some bush, and that she was looking at me, and that it pleased her.

" After a while, my brother left me, and soon I heard cries coming from the direction of the farm. I ran towards it, and saw, in front of the stable, poor Mélie drenched up to her knees, her dress soaking, her feet soused in her shoes. The naughty boy had captured her by surprise, and ducked her in the stone trough, full of rain water, where the horses drank. Mélie was weeping, but as soon as she saw me, knowing that I was going to scold my brother, and that this would cause a quarrel, and not wishing to disturb or vex me, or that I should be at the trouble of pitying her, or make an effort to defend her, she suddenly stopped her tears, and smiling with her big mouth, said:

" ' It's nothing, Mademoiselle. It was only fun.'

* * * * *

" When the time came for my first communion, I showed an ardent piety which greatly impressed Mélie. She wished to do as I did, and to communicate on the same day. She was far from

ready, never having learnt her catechism. It was I who gave her instruction, who spoke to her of God. But while my piety was full of love and hope, in hers there was, above all else, astonishment and fear.

"On the day of the ceremony, I had such a fever that my taper trembled in my hand and sprinkled the veils of my neighbours. It had to be taken from me. Mélie, who was in the last rank, almost clean, and very red in her thick muslin, which had turned blue from washing, did not leave me with her eyes. She prayed for her sickly little companion; for she never asked anything for herself, judging herself to be quite negligible in the eyes of God, and not thinking that He could take the least pleasure in bothering about her. But for me, that was a different matter!

"In the afternoon, my godfather, the Cardinal, confirmed me first of all, and my parents took me at once to our country house. Mélie was waiting in her ditch, bordering a field of oats. My heart softened and I blew her a kiss.

"They put me to bed. I could hear, from my bed, the noise of voices and laughter, for the whole family had met at dinner in honour of the occasion. I was thinking of nothing, overcome only by the sadness of evening, of that hour so grey and so melancholy in those large plains of Champagne. . . .

"I felt fresh flowers in my hands. Mélie was there, on her knees, her brow resting on the edge of my bed. I wanted to speak; she begged me to be silent, to remain calm, to sleep—so that

nobody would drive her away. . . . My father came to see me, and found me asleep, held by her, her arm beneath my head.

"He had not the courage to send her away on that day, and he sent her something to eat.

* * * * *

"Some time afterwards, my mother required me to learn all that a good housekeeper should know. Félicie, a very sweet little work-girl, a hunchback, who came to the house several times a week (I can still see the humble and odd outline of her form against the white curtains of the window), had orders to teach me to sew. Others were commissioned to teach me the care of linen and a little ironing. I had also to tidy my own things in my own room.

"All this bored me greatly, for I had one passion—reading. Luckily, my mother was often away from home; and Mélie had ended by getting herself tolerated in the house. She was present at the lessons of Félicie and the other work-women, and in her desire to help me she learnt far more quickly than I did. It was she who oftenest did the little tasks I was given—hemming, darning, folding up linen—and it was she who tidied my room.

"While she worked, I read, seated in a corner, stopping my ears with my fingers so that nothing should distract me. I read 'The Lives of the Saints,' Rollin's 'Roman History,' travels, and an old book with red edges which contained anecdotes of the eighteenth century. And when

Mélie had finished, I would tell her what I read. That was her reward.

"Rolled up in a ball at my feet, motionless, her eyes fixed upon me, she would listen in ecstasy, as one would listen to God. I repeated the stories very well, it seems, with the utmost seriousness, expressive gestures, and an extreme ardour of conviction. I remember that one of those stories began with the phrase:

"'At the time when Madame de Pompadour reigned over France . . .'

"I do not quite know what Madame de Pompadour represented to Mélie, or even to myself. But I remember that it was an excellent story.

* * * * *

"Here there is a great gap in my memory . . . a long illness, small-pox, fever, delirium. Of all this, but a single vision remains with me: Mélie at my side, stirring the draughts of medicine I had to take; Mélie crouching on the floor; Mélie at the head of my little bed, holding my hands gently, yet with all her strength, and preventing me from scratching my face.

"She had been told that if I scratched myself, I should become ugly; and she watched over my beauty like a gnome over his treasure.

"Why was she allowed near me, and exposed to the risk of catching my malady? Everything had been done to prevent her entering the house; then, one morning, she was surprised in a corner of my room, behind an arm-chair, where she had

spent the night. It was too late to send her away, and, besides, she would have found some way of coming back, for the doors were never very securely shut in that big house in the provinces.

"The day that I began to get better (it was already April, and the sun was shining on my bedclothes), Mélie brought me armfuls of flowers and balls of cowslips. We played at tossing these balls about; I was still so weak and awkward that I often let them fall. Mélie gathered them up out of the corners, from under the furniture, creeping on all fours with the agility of a cat; and that amused me.

"I had the childish whims of convalescence, whims beneath my age, although I was only a little girl. After so long and severe a shock, intelligence only came back to me very slowly. I found myself more on Mélie's level, almost as simple as she was; and when I tried to recall the past (how distant it seemed!) it was always with Mélie that I pictured myself, under the arch of the vine or in the orchard. And, very gravely, we exchanged our recollections.

"'Do you remember, Mélie? . . .'

"'Oh, yes, Mademoiselle!'

"And now it was she who best remembered the fine stories I had told her, and it was I who asked her for them and listened to her in my turn.

"'And that other one, don't you know it, Mélie? The one where they mention Madame de Pompadour?'

"'Wait, Mademoiselle, I'll think of it.'

" And Mélie began :

" ' At the time when Madame de Pompadour reigned over France . . .'

* * * * *

" One day Mélie did not come. It was the first day I was allowed to get up. I asked for her with insistence. My mother told me that Mélie was ill, but that she would come soon.

" Next day I was taken to the country. Everybody pressed around me, sought to amuse me, and made me play. My father spent hours with me, and, when the sun was hot, took me for walks under the fresh and tender foliage of the trees, and along paths snow-white with hawthorn. Still I did not forget Mélie, and I asked to see her.

" ' Mélie,' my father told me, ' is very ill. But don't be uneasy. I have sent the doctor to her, and she has everything she needs ; proper care is taken of her. You will see her when she is better.'

" My strength came back, little by little. I had a great appetite. I enjoyed everything thoroughly, the good air, the good warmth, the good little dishes they made for me, the flowers, the trees, the meadows, the walks, like somebody who is discovering life over again. I grew delightfully happy in the selfishness of convalescence. Once, however, I asked :

" ' And Mélie ? '

" ' Mélie is dead,' answered my mother sadly.

" ' Poor Mélie ! ' said I dreamily, as if thinking of something very vague and very distant.

" And I thought no more about her.

" But since then I have thought of her very often."

A CONSCIENCE

A CONSCIENCE

WE were speaking that evening of the sovereignty of money and its corrupting power. Some said that even the wisest and most virtuous have a respect for it. Instances were cited. Examples were given of strange indulgences, little hidden but undeniable meannesses, in which a regard for money was able to bend a man otherwise irreproachable and known for his austerity. These stories gradually gave us a sort of evil satisfaction, as if we ourselves were not completely sure of being secure from this universal temptation, and as if the statement of so many base acts were for us a sort of revenge. And the conversation took that easy turn of pessimism and misanthropy which pleases us so much to-day.

* * * * *

But one of us, who had not said much before, suddenly began to speak :

" Do not excite yourselves so much. Just as the total sum of forces is always the same in the physical universe, so I am tempted to believe that the quantity of virtue never varies in the moral world either. It is only the distribution of the forces that changes. The development of a vice leads to an increase of the contrary virtue. It was perhaps in the age of Nero and Heliogabalus that the finest examples of purity were seen. I am convinced that similarly in our own age,

which is the age of finance, we would discover, if we knew all souls, the finest examples of 'poorness in spirit.'

"When love of money frequently goes to the lengths of the most shameful folly, contempt for money, on this account all the more meritorious and based on a fuller knowledge, can reach the most sublime scrupulousness. You ask me where this is to be found. I do not know, for souls which really possess this contempt do not seek the light. I confess, in addition, that they must be rare.

"I believe, however, that I have known at least one of them. Yes, some months ago, I met a person who had a very sincere and profound contempt, hatred, and terror of money, and under conditions that gave something extravagant and unprecedented to that disinterestedness.

"I was living last year at the other end of Nogent, not far from Beauty Island. I often walked on the banks of the Marne, a little crowded on Sundays, but solitary, fresh, and charming during the rest of the week.

"I met there, on nearly every occasion, a lady of forty or forty-five, very simply dressed, with a folding-stool under her arm, on which she used to rest at the edge of the water with a book or some embroidery.

"One day my maid chanced to tell me the lady's name. It was Madame Durantin. She could not be rich, for she lived with one servant in a little furnished flat at Nogent. But she often received visits from 'high-class people,

carriage people,' and she was regarded as a lady of breeding.

"Suddenly, I remembered. Four years earlier I had made the acquaintance of the Baroness Durantin, the wife of the wealthy financier. With the rest of 'smart society,' I had gone to two or three of her evenings, and had called on her several times. Then, as I had kept away rather a long time, I did not go again to the house.

"Now, the lady who walked on the banks of the Marne resembled the Baroness and had the same name. The similarity of names alone or the likeness of faces alone would not have proved anything. But both at once?

"I wished to clear the matter up. The first time I met her on the towing-path, I went up to her, and with a profound bow, I boldly asked her:

"'The Baroness Durantin, I believe?'

"After a moment's hesitation, she quietly answered:

"'Yes.'

"I mentioned my name. She recognized me, and began to chat, cheerfully, and in the most natural manner possible.

"She was not very beautiful nor highly intelligent. But her whole person exhaled a perfect serenity. It was this which attracted me. Her companionship was soothing and calm. One felt in her a soul that had found rest.

"We soon became rather good friends. During the last fortnight of my holiday I saw her almost every day. I even once went into her rooms,

a little against her will, I must admit. The flat was extremely modest; at one side of the drawing-room there was an alcove which was used as a bedroom at night-time.

"And I remembered the Baroness Durantin, standing in evening dress and sparkling with diamonds, in the sumptuous reception rooms of her house in the Avenue de Friedland, stretching out her gloved hand to the long line of visitors, one of the wealthiest women in Paris.

"But she seemed to have so little recollection of all this, that, in spite of the most intense curiosity I have ever felt, I did not dare to question her, even in the most roundabout way, concerning so extraordinary a change.

"When I returned to Paris, I tried to find out the facts. I learned that Durantin continued to augment his millions, and that, a few winters ago, he had married his daughter to a Spanish duke. As regards Madame Durantin, nothing was known. She was believed to be travelling or on one of her country estates.

* * * * *

"At last I was lucky enough to discover among my acquaintances a lady who had long been Madame Durantin's intimate friend. I questioned her eagerly, and this is what she answered me:

"'I am going to tell you what I know, but I do not attempt to explain it to you. My friend was seventeen when she was married. She was the daughter of an honest manufacturer, and had

but a modest dowry, a hundred and fifty thousand francs, I think. I have been assured that Durantin married her for love. That is possible. But it is also true that at that time Durantin was only beginning his business career.

" ' Their marriage was like many others. After the first months passed, Durantin had mistresses, and it is said that he was harsh and brutal to his wife. But an understanding was reached, and of late years the couple seemed to have come to terms with one another.

" ' Now, one thing which I can state positively, is that, while Durantin was gathering millions, building a magnificent house, filling it with marvels—a little incongruously and ostentatiously—and living in almost royal style, his wife, amid all this luxury, continued to dress like a clerk's wife, spent nothing on herself, and, as far as I could see, gave away in charity the whole of the large allowance which her husband made her. There was in her mind a definite resolution not to profit by this immense fortune.

" ' In all this there was nothing affected or ostentatious. On special occasions, for example at the four or five balls that Durantin gave every winter, she allowed herself to wear dresses suited to her position and to display her admirable diamonds. But, I repeat, at other times, were it not for a certain air which she naturally had, you might have taken her for her own lady's maid.

" ' She had a daughter. She brought her up in the same habits of simplicity. She also made her work hard, and required the child to

pass all her examinations. And this, not out of vanity or to follow the fashion, which latter was beginning to change. No; she had another idea; she once said to me:

"'"I want Lucie to be able to earn her own living, if some day she wishes to do so."

"'One could have said that, the reverse of sensible mothers, she was endeavouring to develop romantic ideas in her daughter's mind. She had got it into her head that Lucie would make a love match, or, to speak with more precision, that she would only marry a man by whom she would be loved, who would love her, and who would be neither rich nor of high rank.

"'That was the position! But it is not so easy for a millionaire's daughter to marry solely for love. Add that Lucie had no such inclination. At heart, that little person was her father's daughter. Still, out of obedience, she tried, in succession, to kindle her imagination about two or three young men without a penny, writers or artists of some sort.

"'But always, at the decisive moment, Madame Durantin remembered that, if her daughter was marrying for love, nothing proved that the young man was not marrying for money. It is, in truth, quite impossible to know whether a girl who will one day have a hundred million francs is loved for herself alone.

"'My friend accordingly decided, after many useless experiments, to let her daughter be guided by her own nature and marry an impecunious duke.

"'I was present at the marriage. Madame

Durantin was perfectly calm. Immediately after the ceremony, she bade her daughter farewell, had her baggage placed on a cab which was waiting at the door of the house, got into the cab, and went off. . . .

" ' She has lived since then in the little flat you have seen. She has kept an income of only six thousand francs from her dowry. That is what she lives on. She has not even taken her jewels with her.

" ' What she did, and what seems so strange to us, she did discreetly, without noise, without emphasis, as if it were a thing on which she had been resolved for some time, a thing she felt obliged to do, which she could not refrain from doing, and from which, therefore, she could derive no merit. Her attitude clearly signifies that it is her wish that it should never be spoken of, that it should excite no surprise, and that people should act as if they had not noticed it.

" ' She did not try to hide herself or to shut herself up in a mysterious solitude. She very often goes to see her daughter, and sometimes lunches with her. She has not dropped her old acquaintances. She even comes, from time to time, to quiet dinners with us, just as she used to do. Only now she wears a dust-cloak, or carries an umbrella and goes home by omnibus.

" ' She is cheerful, of a very placid disposition, more and more indulgent to other people; very kind to her daughter and her son-in-law.

" ' She has not once asked for news of her

husband. He offered her a considerable allowance, but she refused it. I am convinced that she will never see him again.

"'I have often asked myself whether it was not as a result of some domestic quarrel that she left him. But I know beyond doubt that whatever may have been the differences between them, they never reached such a pitch as that, and, in any case, these differences belonged to the early years of their marriage.

"'I formed another theory. Perhaps she discovered some act of financial brigandage among her husband's business affairs, and she has wished to repudiate dishonest money so that she should not be an accomplice of the thief. I have questioned several competent persons on this point.

"'Now, it appears that Durantin has incredible audacity and extraordinary luck; but the speculations that have made him wealthy are those universally practised on the Stock Exchange; his wife has therefore nothing with which to reproach him on this head.

"'In a word, I am quite at sea as to the matter.'

* * * * *

"This is a faithful report of what Madame Durantin's friend told me. Do any of the rest of you understand it?"

Someone said:

"In my view, nothing could be clearer. It is a very fine and noble case of a woman's hatred. Doubtless one of those intimate and irreparable

wounds of her early married life. At some time or other, she must have suffered frightfully through her husband, perhaps without his suspecting it or believing that he had done anything particularly odious. But she was wounded to the quick, and she has remembered it. She waited for twenty years for the sake of her daughter, and, during these twenty years, nobody suspected her thought. Then, the first moment it was possible for her to leave the man she hated, without failing in any of her duties, she has done so.

"The length of that wait, the rapidity and serenity of that flight, that hatred pushed to the length of a woman who was a multi-millionaire finding delight in poverty, that is most remarkable. Madame Durantin is a woman of character."

Another replied:

"Madame Durantin is, in my opinion, something still greater—a woman of conscience. At bottom she is a soul who has taken the Gospel seriously, and who has acted according to the Gospel. But that is so rare to-day, so improbable, so extreme, above all in the circle in which she lived, that nobody has thought of so simple an explanation.

"Madame Durantin did not concern herself with the fact whether her husband's operations were or were not legitimate in the eye of the law. She saw only one thing, and this was that by a sort of game the working of which she did not understand—by an abominable game, in which the richest is always sure of

winning in the end—that vulgarian, without himself producing anything of value, was yearly adding millions to his pile of millions, and that those millions came *necessarily* from the thrift and labour of the poor. She saw that her husband was *too rich*, and she was afraid of that money, precisely because *she did not understand* how it was acquired.

"It seemed to her that to remain with her husband was to consent, and consequently contribute her own share, to unmerited sufferings, to monstrous injustices, to an evil the notion of which tortured her all the more because it was far from her eyes, because she could not form an exact notion of it or determine its extent. . . . And by leaving him, she redeemed her soul."

* * * * *

At these words, a distinguished financial journalist, who was one of our party, burst into a long, uncontrollable fit of laughter.

THE END

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