

Literature, &c.

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[Continued from our last.]

WHEN the bishop returned to his episcopal palace, faithful to his promise, he searched among the papers and the deeds his predecessors had deposited in the archives of his diocese. During a month of indefatigable labour, however, nothing was found relating to Mary. As the ancient almoner who had answered for the maiden at the font had been long dead, the prelate was extremely embarrassed. He well understood that the deceased abess would not have suffered so much anxiety for a person of mean origin. Her last words had hinted that Mary was the offspring of some noble family; but such incomplete proofs did not satisfy the rigours of ecclesiastical law; he resolved, therefore to consult the new abess of Notre Dame of Soissons. The lady who had been elected was precisely the one whom the superior had severely reprimanded before her death, and who, almost unconsciously, nourished on that account a sentiment of bitterness and illness against her protegee. She therefore discussed rigorously the question proposed by the bishop, and showed him that the verbal testimony of the departed abess, however respectable and worthy of credit, could not replace the written testimony of legitimacy and nobility which the rules of the order and the canons of the church required.

'Even if the abess had named the parents of the young lady,' said she; 'but she only uttered some vague words without connexion, in the midst of the distractions of fever and her last agony. Credit me, my lord, let us have the courage to accomplish to the end, and in a complete manner, the duties imposed on us. No one more than myself has suffered from the infraction of our laws, during twenty years, in the convent of Notre Dame, caused by the presence of a stranger.'

'What!' inquired the bishop, 'is it your intention to dismiss the youthful Mary from the convent which she has inhabited from her birth?'

'My lord, in receiving from your hands the investiture of the title of abess, I swore to respect and to cause to be respected, the rules of the house I govern, at the peril of my conscience. The presence of a stranger here is contrary to those rules, and introduces much inconvenience.'

'And what is to become of this poor creature, ignorant of the world, and whose life has been passed in the cloister, and without the slightest contact with the real things of the day?'

'My lord, you can place her in another convent.'

'Indeed, you counsel me then to infringe for other religious establishments the rules which for your own you require to be so rigorously enforced?' interrupted the bishop, severely.

'My lord, you will do what you think proper. It is not for an humble recluse to be your adviser. I fulfil my duty; I ask for the strict observance of the rules of our order; I put a term to deep abuses of the discipline of the convent. That is what my conscience imposes on me, nothing more.'

She departed, bowing respectfully to the bishop, who remained alone, disconcerted and embarrassed, for the new abess only fulfilled, strictly speaking, her duty. However, he hastened to Mary to inform her of the unfavourable result. The maiden was at that moment kneeling in the choir of the convent, near the sepulchral stone that covered the coffin of her benefactress, and at the sight of the bishop she arose full of hope; but as soon as her eyes rested on his dejected countenance she understood everything.

'You have not discovered anything among the papers of your predecessor?' said she.

The prelate shook his head by way of answer.

'Then I cannot take the veil and consecrate my life to God. May the divine will be done. There remains only the sad consolation of weeping and praying by the tomb of my benefactress.'

'Alas, my child, this poor happiness is denied you! The rules of the abbey of Notre Dame of Soissons forbid us to receive into its walls those who are not destined to take the veil.'

Mary uttered a piercing cry. I am banished! she exclaimed. Alas, alas, I am banished!

The bishop attempted to take her hand, but she would not suffer it.

'I am banished!' she repeated. 'My benefactress, you hear it, you hear it! I am banished! My lord, what will become of me in a world of which I know nothing, the sufferings and miseries of which I have alone heard of—without protection, without an asylum, without bread perhaps? Have pity on me, O Lord, and take me to thyself!'

'Do not thus give way to despair,' said the bishop moved with the deepest compassion. 'You shall have an asylum at my house; I am old, and have not many days to live, but after my death I shall be enabled through others, to offer you a shelter from the perils of the world. Come, my child; follow me and put an end to such painful emotions by quitting this place.' He drew her gently away; but she again escaped

from him, and threw herself on her knees by the tomb of her godmother.

'Adieu!' said she. 'Adieu, my mother! Adieu, thou who so tenderly sustained my youth—thou with whom I led so sweet and innocent a life! Adieu, I am banished from the cloister, I am forbidden to pray on this stone! Oh, you no longer hear my complaints and my sobs; you watch over me no longer!'

The bishop led her from the church, caused her to ascend his litter, which waited at the gate of the abbey, and they took the way to the episcopal palace.

The bishop of Soissons, though a charitable old man, was not endowed with great firmness of character. Long accustomed to the easy and brilliant manner, of the court of France, it was only for five or six years that he had come to reside in his diocese, where he sought to expiate, by a grave and well-regulated life, the errors of his past life. He had brought with him his sister Dame Lydorie de Penevant, widow of a count of that name, who had exercised over her husband, till he perished from the blow of an arquebusade before Rouen, the rudest and most severe authority. Having been left a widow she came to seek an asylum with her brother, for the death of the count had almost left her without fortune, and greatly influenced his determination to leave the court and reside in his diocese. By little and little and without much resistance and trouble, she governed and directed the mind of the bishop as she had formerly done that of her husband, and commanded him no less imperiously. Everything was done in the house by the orders of Dame Lydorie. Always dressed from head to foot in black, her countenance enveloped in her widow's band, she usually showed a discontented haughty visage; scolded from morning to night, always reprimanding, never approving, and practising to its fullest extent that maxim of the Roman emperor—'Let them hate me, provided they fear me.' At the commencement of this domination, the bishop, habituated to the easy and flattering life of a courtier, often revolted against its severity and rudeness; but as it became necessary always to struggle and combat—and even then his resistance led to nothing, the victory always remaining with his sister—he preferred, at length, a peaceable submission to a stormy one. By that he at least avoided fatigue and noise. Henceforth Dame Lydorie agitated according to her will in the episcopal palace; directed the servants, regulated the expenses, and even extended her temporal power over the spiritual affairs. She named the prebends, appointed the candidates for the curacies, and raised such an uproar because the bishop had one day secretly chosen a vicar without a family deliberation, that the poor man was nearly driven mad. For eight days there were reproaches, cries, complaints, and alarms, which he only put an end to by finding means to revoke the vicar's nomination and replacing him by a nominee of his sister's.

When these details are known the embarrassment of the good bishop, on approaching his residence with the maiden, may be understood. He had yielded at first to the inclination of his heart, and to the very natural compassion which Mary's distress inspired. But now he almost repented of his charitable action, for he felt his sister would never consent to the presence of a stranger with her, and, above all, of a stranger whose admission to the episcopal palace she had not authorised. He tried all his ingenuity to find some means of presenting the outcast Mary to the rude cerberus in a favourable light, but no idea occurred to him. In spite of the extreme rigour of the season, the sweat gathered on his forehead and his heart beat violently. But he could not retreat, the lot was cast, he must go forward whatever were the consequences of his resolution. Having once left the abbey of Notre Dame, Mary, if she would have returned, would have found the gates pitilessly shut against her, he advanced therefore towards the danger, internally accusing the mules of trotting too quickly, and feeling his courage fail still more as he perceived the windows of his habitation. At length the mules stopped. The bishop alighted, and, with a mechanical remembrance of the gallantry of his youth, he took off his hat and offered his arm to Mary, upon which she leant trembling. It was thus they ascended the steps and staircase of the episcopal palace of Soissons.

Nothing so quickly inspires eloquence and skill as necessity. While walking up these first steps the good bishop knew not in what manner to present Mary to the redoubtable widow, so as to obtain for her a less terrible reception. But the nearer he drew to his sister, and the imminence of the peril increased, his confused and alarmed ideas rallied in his brain, formed an intelligent cohort, and suggested two or three stratagems for the amelioration of the difficult position of the young lady. Arrived at the head of the staircase, he had resolved to inform Dame Lydorie that the young recluse was only temporarily in the episcopal habitation; that he would not decide on her fate without taking the good counsels of his sister; he even promised himself, as a very probable chance of success not to show any desire to keep Mary near him, and even to push Machiavellism so far as to appear reluctant to concede to such an arrangement.

Things thus arranged would doubtless have succeeded, had not a certain fatality deranged the projects of the worthy old man, and at the moment the page who preceded opened the door of Dame Lydorie's apartment, he did so hastily that, through inattention or awkwardness, it struck against the forehead of the irritable widow who was coming forward to meet her brother. The page received a blow applied

from one of the heaviest hands that ever graced the arm of a Duenna. But even this was not sufficient for the anger and pain excited in the furious woman. The bishop, by the glance which she threw on him and his protegee, understood that everything was undone; he wished he could have fled and lost all presence of mind; while Mary, timid, as might be expected of a young girl who had just left her convent, was silent and waited with her eyes cast down.

'Well, brother!' cried the widow, to whom the effervescence of her anger gave a double sight, 'what does this mean? Is our house to be made an asylum for all the vagabonds you meet with on your road?'

'Sister,' stammered the bishop, not well knowing what he said, 'if you abandon her, what will become of this poor child?'

'And who is this poor child?' inquired the gruff dame.

The bishop upon this sketched in a few words the history of Mary.

'A bastard was only required in your house!' interrupted the widow. 'By St. Lydorie, my patron, she is here!'

'Fie! sister, fie!' exclaimed the indignant prelate; 'fie. Should such words be on your lips before the servants of my house—before this maiden?'

'You will see that this maiden, who has already drawn upon me a lecture from your morality, will soon give occasion for more. Drive me out! Let her have my place! She may as well now as later.'

Mary, who was at that moment weeping bitterly, threw herself at Dame Lydorie's feet.

'Madam,' said she, 'I am without an asylum, without a guide, without support—alone in the world! I leave a convent from which I am banished, and in which I was placed almost the day of my birth. But sooner than occasion grief to my lord the bishop, sooner than excite your displeasure, I would leave this palace—I prefer dying.'

Dame Lydorie, however desirous to satisfy her inclination for scolding, would not commit a downright evil action. Mary's desire moved her the more, too, as the pain of the blow she had received on the head, was completely dissipated.

'Well, maiden,' said she, 'things are not quite so bad yet; I will not have it said in Soissons that I banish from the episcopal palace those to whom my brother offers hospitality, you will find an asylum here till we have both considered what will be best for you. Follow me, and leave off your tears and sobs, which are of no use.'

She took the young lady's arm, who felt like a sparrow in an eagle's talons, and thus led her to her apartments.

There was so much mildness, so much resignation, so much grace in the maiden's character, that by patience she at length gained the old woman's affection, and was almost loved by her. But Dame Lydorie loved her brother also, and one may judge, by the torments with which she harassed the worthy and inoffensive prelate, the trials which poor Mary had to endure.

Accustomed to the tender caress and maternal solicitude of her godmother, the abess, Mary, when she had lost the only affection she possessed in the world, had met, at least in the convent, with nothing but indifference and coldness. But in the face of this brutal protection, thrown to her as a charity, her heart was ready to break, and she shrunk from such hospitality.

'Go, my child,' said the bishop, softly, follow my sister.'

'Come, come then,' added Dame Lydorie.

On the least mistake in obeying her orders, the widow assailed her with the most violent reproaches, and the bitterest recriminations on her poverty and unknown birth, which placed her at the mercy of the episcopal charity. Besides in most things she filled the office of bed-chamber lady to the widow, never left her for a moment, and at night slept near her in a little apartment. Hence, the moment Dame Lydorie had the least symptom of sleeplessness, her pitiless voice awakened Mary, whose only consolation and refuge was in sleep; but it was necessary at the first call of her mistress to rise hastily, to sit by the old woman, listen to her cough, and her complaints upon the misfortune of being unable to repose, and proceed to read the worthy lady's breviary, till her eyes closed, and she was again asleep. Mary, when she was well assured of that, ventured to regain her couch, happy if Dame Lydorie did not oblige her once more to begin with a tired voice the spiritless lecture of the breviary. And if her limbs shivered; if her lips almost refused their office, and her fatigued eyes were ready to close, she was forced to hide these natural movements, for an inexorable voice was ever ready to reprove her and reproach her ingratitude in the severest and often the most insulting language. The poor child's strength failed more and more under the weight of so many sufferings. Her cheeks, once fresh and rosy took a deadly pale hue; her eyes had a strange brilliancy, and a smile never appeared on her lips, even at the pitying words addressed secretly to the bishop—secretly, for Dame Penevant's ill-humour was increased by any one appearing to compassionate Mary's fate.

A year thus passed without bringing the least change to the painful existence of Mary, and neither a reproach nor a complaint ever escaped her lips. When she spoke of her benefactress, for she thus called Dame Penevant, it was in respectful terms, and she had mildly imposed silence on those persons who seemed to pity her. 'It is not for me,' she would say, 'to judge, nor to suffer others to judge, the protectress who has received me. I shall

never, on the contrary, be able to requite the debt of gratitude I owe to her.' These sentiments were sincere, and from the bottom of her heart. Poor, delicate, and fragile ivy, she embraced in her slight branches the trunk of the old oak that sheltered her, in spite of the ruggedness of its bark! Mary, though extremely reserved in her relations with the inmates and servants of the episcopal palace, had nevertheless, by her mildness and beauty, gained the good will of every one, and was as much beloved as dame Lydorie was hated, so that within and without the building she was the theme of general praise. As for the bishop, he loved her as his own daughter, and his eyes frequently filled with tears, when he saw that she had to suffer many mortifications from the violent and evil temper of his sister. The only moment of the day when Mary tasted some relaxation, was at the time when Dame Lydorie, after her dinner, which, according to the custom of the age, was served at noon, indulged in a short siesta.

Mary then retired to her little chamber, opened the window, and enjoyed the fresh air, for it was not only the countess' system never to leave her apartments, but she also required that the windows should remain hermetically closed. The little round aperture which admitted light into Mary's closet, looked out upon a square planted with trees, and permitted her to extend her view, on the right, to the neighbouring house of a draper, the richest in Soissons, and whose sign, 'The Red Tree,' bore an unequalled celebrity through all the town. The domestic life of the peaceable family who inhabited this mansion had an inexpressible charm for the imprisoned orphan. The draper's name was Jehan Pastelot, and his mother and sister lived with him. The first took care of his house, the latter aided her brother in his commercial affairs. Every day after dinner, they walked for about a half an hour in the little garden at the back of their mansion; for at that time no customers were in the shop, the whole town being at dinner or repose. They availed themselves of these moments to take the air, to water the flowers which flourished in their borders, or to sit in an arbour covered with the large leaves and golden fruits of an opulent vine. More than once the heart of Mary bounded at the sight of the happiness enjoyed by these favoured persons! More than once it was oppressed at the thought that she had no brother to protect her like Jehan, nor mother to love her like Jane! Oh, how she desired, like that young girl, to throw her arms around a brother, to look on him with smiles, and, for a gay surprise, to throw at him handfuls of rose leaves, then running away, certain, when overtaken, to receive a kiss on the forehead! Then afterwards, how sweet it would have been to her to give her arm to an old mother, who, leaning on it, openly blessed God for the joy occasioned by her children, and who had for no one a look or a word of reproach! Oh, at this price, how gladly would she have sat at the counter of the shop and worked all day without relaxation—how she would have aided the good old woman in her domestic labours, for everything was joy in this tenderly united family—work as well as rest. Hence Mary passed all her short time of peace, during the countess' siesta, in regarding with envy the agreeable recreations of the Pastelot family. One day it happened that Jane was running from her brother, whose cheeks she had disfigured with the juice of a large black cherry, and Mary, leaning from the window to lose no part of this amusing warfare, was perceived by the jovial couple. Almost ashamed to be surprised in their innocent and childish amusements, by a person especially belonging to the bishopric, Jehan and Jane stopped short; Jane, blushing and confused, hid herself in the arbour, and Jehan feigned to regard with particular attention a rose which grew in the midst of a large bush. Mary was no less disconcerted, and precipitately left the window; but quick as she was, Jehan found time to remark her beauty, and to recognise the young lady whom he had before seen at the palace, and to whom he had brought some velvet for a robe; and he looked with particular attention.

Mary was still standing almost hidden near the window, trembling with emotion, and her heart beating rapidly, when Dame Lydorie, who had called her, and who, owing to her agitation, had not been heard, suddenly entered.

'What are you doing here?' cried she, delighted at having found some pretext for scolding Mary. 'This is how you abuse my confidence, and how you profit by my sleep. What is it then attracts you to this window?' so saying, she leaned forward and perceived Jehan only, for the arbour hid Jane. 'Intrigues from the window; correspondence with a young man. These are fine scandals for a bishop's house. You show your gratitude in a strange manner for the hospitality I have given you. The old abess who brought you up must have inculcated singular ideas as regards the modesty belonging to maidens. But you must know things cannot remain in this state. I am going to my lord the bishop to consult with him what must be done in such a case.'

'Dear madam,' she stammered, 'do not accuse me without hearing me. I am simply of having by chance looked in the neighbouring court, and being perceived by the persons who inhabited it.'

'Add not falsehood to intrigue,' interrupted Dame Lydorie, severely, who made the unhappy girl pass before her, led her to her own chamber, locked the door, and hastened to the bishop.

Dame Lydorie, arrived in her brother's apartment, found the bishop in a large arm-chair, his thoughts wandering in a thousand