

FOR THE AMERICAN.

THE NUN.

An Episode of Convent Life.

(Translated from the French by Rev. M. J. P. F. A. M.)

CHAPTER III.

CONVENT LIFE.—Continued.

"Oh! dear! loved Pauline!" replied Clarisse, "my dear sisters, you will not cast me away." And she threw her arms around Pauline and wept passionately.

"So, dear sister, you wish to become again what you were formerly?" said Pauline. "They accuse you of refusing obedience to the commandments of the church; of hating our holy mysteries. Do you wish to know your sin, if it exists, and pray to be pardoned?"

"O, my God!" exclaimed Clarisse, raising her clasped hands, "have pity upon me, and give me strength to say that this out to be—that this cannot be!"

"What is this that ought not to be, that cannot be?" demanded Pauline.

But before Clarisse was able to respond, we perceived Annunciata approaching. "The nun was coming in such a way that the rays of the lamp fell upon her figure. A cold, calm severity was impressed upon her beautiful features, and raising her hand she said:

"Go, Clarisse, leave these holy sisters; do not be like a second satan occupied in tempting the children of Paradise. Return to your chamber; do not pretend a feebleness that does not affect you. That which fortifies you in your rebellion against the All-Powerful will not abandon you in the hour of need."

Her upper lip curved with scorn while her eyes followed the trembling Clarisse, who passed slowly under the arch of the corridor, and thus obeyed the commandment of her who had been, at one time, dearer than the dearest friend. But Pauline was not able to endure this cold and cruel contempt, and Clarisse had scarcely disappeared when she cried out in noble indignation:

"Annunciata, is it becoming in you, who were formerly her dearest friend, to sharpen the sword destined to pierce the heart of her who is already wounded to death? I grant that she may have fallen, she who was at one time the light, the glory and the ornament of the community. But who knows if you may not be, sooner or later, an object of contempt? Have you received the power of infallibility? Your pride, the sentiment of your dignity, your actual sanctity—are they not able to furnish to the evil one the means to disquiet you? We have seen, we have comprehended to what lengths your influence goes, and I will be frank with you, Annunciata, we think that the severe measures that you have counseled have riveted the chains which hold the unfortunate Clarisse."

It was impossible to stop Pauline. The politic Annunciata was delighted to discover all that she found in the bottom of our hearts. But when my friend had said all that she had in her mind, Annunciata coldly responded: "This affair must be referred to Madame; for the present, our duties call us to the close of the service. Madame sent me to ask Sisters Pauline and Angelique to return immediately to the choir." And saying these words she walked majestically before us, and we followed her trembling with emotion and especially with fear.

We were sure that the remarks of Pauline would not be passed over in silence, but one of the characteristic traits of a religious establishment is that the displeasure of the superiors does not show itself at once; it is like a volcano, it bursts forth when one least expects it.

The following morning, Madame had as serene an air and Sister Annunciata was as impenetrable as though nothing had happened. But we noticed that poor Clarisse did not appear, and I never saw her again in the choir.

I was obliged to go to confessional this morning. As I presented myself, Father Joachim asked many questions about Clarisse. I confessed my personal opinions, but I took care to say nothing of the opinions of others. I said, however, that the general sentiment was that Clarisse underwent too harsh ordeals, and that some of the strange symptoms which were manifested in her could have originated in fright. I was equally free to say that I would change convents and finish my novitiate in the house of the order of St. Francis de Sales. I spoke with a view to this event—though I had secretly resolved never to leave Pauline, but to remain with her always.

The father did not make any remark upon this project, but he told me in confidence that there were many things in Clarisse which rendered her society dangerous, and that he thought it best that I should not approach her.

"We desire," said he, "to restore her by gentleness, if it is possible, and if the most sincere prayers are able to have any influence, mine and those of the superior for the poor child will restore her to the bosom of her spiritual mother. But for the present, my daughter, permit me to assure you that we employ the gentlest measures to-

ward the dying soul of this unhappy child."

I wished to reply, but he dismissed me, and, dating from that day, many weeks passed without any change. Clarisse did not assist in our public services but she was at liberty in the house, and I often met her in the gallery, though I did not speak to her. Had I desired it, that would have been impossible, for we were under more strict surveillance than ever.

CHAPTER IV.

THE REVELATION.

About this time I received a visit from Mme. Verani. The superior accompanied me to the grate; we were not able then to have any private conversation. We talked of the state of politics. I cannot definitely state the year when I took the white veil—suffice it to say that it was during one of the revolutions which have broken out in France, and whose effect was felt in the neighboring countries. At this time the kingdom of Sardinia began to be the center of revolt. Mme. Verani brought the news that a rebellion was master of Turin.

"But I hope," said she, "that we may be able to be quiet at St. Siffren and that we have nothing to fear."

They talked of the suppression of many convents; the abbess expressed the hope that no such horrors would be repeated in her country. As Sister Eustasia was to assume the black veil a few days later, Mme. Verani asked the abbess to reserve for her some places for the ceremony. I noticed that my friend insisted strongly upon this point, and as I had learned to read the looks since I entered the convent, I made my remarks accordingly. She asked me a moment later, if I had made any acquaintance in the family, and if the young ladies composing it were Italians or foreigners.

"We have," I replied, "many French sisters, one Italian, and one English."

"And who is this last?" demanded the abbess.

I was about to say, "Sister Clarisse," but I recollected that this name always excited her anger, and I hesitatingly responded: "She, Madame, whose father was English."

"Yes," she replied, "an English heretic."

These words were pronounced in a low voice and with much bitterness, but they were not lost upon Mme. Verani; but she made no remark and soon after took her leave.

I have already said that the ceremony of profession of a sister gave a day of vacation to the family. That of taking the black veil differed so little from the ceremony of vestures that I will not dwell longer upon details; only this solemnity is more moving than the other because it is irrevocable. But I was a spectator in this scene and I was able to make my observations at my ease.

I was situated in a way to be able to exchange, from time to time, glances with Mme. Verani through the grate, and I was happy, for this friend had become dearer than ever to me. Mme. Verani sat at her right, and at her left was a young man, who, lacking a seat, stood all the time leaning against a column. My attention was not entirely captivated by this stranger.

I had not yet assisted at a taking of the black veil; this scene moved me profoundly; but there were in the choir some persons who had already seen this ceremony, and were less interested than I; so they were able to frequently turn their eyes to the other side of the grates. Nuns have eyes as well as other women, and they talk of trifles and prattle about the things of the world as much as other young girls of their age. So when we were in the refectory, the superiors being absent with the bishop, they talked about the handsome stranger who was standing during the service, and they asked me if I knew him.

"How did he look?" said I, for I had scarcely noticed him.

At once they gave a large number of descriptions which described him as an extremely handsome man. But I was unable to furnish any additional information to their accounts. We pursued this topic which was able to lead us further than we believed, when one of the most aged sisters having made the remark that such a subject of conversation was not suitable for cloistered nuns, the remarks concerning the young man terminated with a description of the emotion he betrayed when the veil was placed upon the head of Sister Eustasia.

I ought, in justice to our society, to say that I do not remember of having heard a single frivolous conversation among the sisters. There were, without doubt, among us some very different characters, but the house was not injured by frivolity as certain convents in other countries. If any vice of that nature existed among us—that which, after many circumstances coming to my knowledge since I had left the convent, I have the strongest reasons for suspicion was covered with a veil black with hypocrisy, and as my well beloved Pauline was, even then, an object of divine grace—I escaped the company of persons whose conversation would have been pernicious to me.

After the repast we all went to walk in the garden. Pauline and I, as usual, were together, and profited by our lib-

erty to talk more than we had yet done. Our conversation fell naturally upon Clarisse, and we occupied ourselves in seeking for motives for the treatment she underwent.

"What could have been her crime?" said Pauline; "what mysterious fault has she committed? Do you believe what they said of the influence of the devil? Do you not think they have a secret design in acting as they have? Truly, Sister Angelique, I wish I was able to free myself from strange thoughts which constantly possess me. I have some cousins in Switzerland; they are members of what is called the Reformed church. I do not know any of them save my cousin William. He desired me to pledge myself to read the Holy Scriptures and to judge of them for myself; but I was offended with this proposition, and I demanded on my side as a proof of his affection that he professed for me, that he should abandon his religion. He refused and I was enraged with him; in my anger I threw myself into the net where I am now entangled. Oh! that the thoughts which possess me had come sooner!"

And Pauline wept bitterly, but recovering herself she said: "Sister Angelique, you recall the response to the prayer, which is found in the catechism of the bishop of Montpellier? We ought to pray to God as the source of all grace, and Jesus Christ as our only mediator. We can address ourselves to the virgin and the saints as to our intercessors with Jesus Christ."

"I recall the passage," I responded, "but what do you wish to say?"

"I do not know how to express it," said Pauline, "but you must not be vexed. If I ask how these saints are able to hear our prayers? How are created beings able to be everywhere? And holiness—how can it inhere in images built by human hands? For example, did I not break yesterday, by accident, a little waxen image of Jesus into a thousand pieces? Have I then become guilty of a horrible sacrilege? Help me to clear my thoughts, for they are in frightful confusion. I have heard tell of holy men who disapproved of the worship of images. Do you believe that poor Clarisse had some idea of this sort?"

"Pauline, you distract me!" I responded. "In the name of Notre Dame de Misericorde, do not say another word. Have I not heard you say that a religious ought neither to think nor reason? We have placed our consciences and our eternal interests in the hands of our directors, and we ought to leave them there."

"It is true," replied Pauline, "it is only too true! But this poor Clarisse! I have tried to discover where she sleeps and eats; and I think that I have succeeded. Last night I thought I heard some steps in the corridor, a little before midnight. Fearing that I might be late for the service I dressed in all haste and went into the lower gallery. I saw the lower door open and a sister who crossed the chamber with a candle in her hand. I was curious to know where she went and I quietly followed her. I saw her enter into the gallery which leads to the Madame's apartments, then open a door to the left and enter. She had something in her hand which she carried into the chamber. I heard her speak to some one in the interior and I heard an answer. I am sure that it was the voice of Clarisse. O Angelique! what would I not give for an hour's conversation with that dear creature! I am convinced that there is underneath all a mighty mystery that we have not been able to penetrate."

"That may be," I responded, "but could you return to your cell without being discovered?"

"Yes," she replied, "it was Mother Ursula that I had followed, and she did not discover me."

Some days after this conversation, my friend, Mme. Verani, presented herself at the grate, desiring to speak with the superior. When Madame appeared, my friend gave an excellent excuse for her visit. She said that she desired to communicate to Madame some news that she had received from Turin; at the same time she asked permission to see me a moment.

"My friend," said she, "had at one time a strong desire to enter a convent in Turin; I wish to tell her something that I have heard which is not to the advantage of that convent; I hope to be able thus to lead her to decide to live in the happy position where she now finds herself. But I must take caution. This is the reason; if you will permit me to see her and talk with her in your presence, I will introduce the subject by chance, and thus influence her to remain here."

All this was recounted to me soon after by my friend. She told me the joy with which the superior sent to find me. I had scarcely arrived behind the grate when Mme. Verani found a new letter for the superior, containing numerous details of an attack directed by the French against the convent of St. Clara at Nice; the sacred building had already been transformed into a stable for the republican armies and all the sisters had fled. This recital gave the abbess so lively an interest that she forgot us. She turned towards the door to call Mother Ursula in order to read the recital of all these horrors, and she remained at the entrance sufficiently long to permit my friend to

slip into my hand a little package. I had already hidden it in my large sash when the abbess returned with the assistant mother to the side of the grate.

Perhaps my agitation betrayed me, for the abbess seemed to cast upon me a scrutinizing glance. But a few minutes later she gave me an excellent opportunity to relieve myself of the package by sending me to find Sister Annunciata; I had to go through a long corridor, where I met my faithful Pauline. I confided the package to her, and passed on as quickly as possible so as not to excite suspicion. I truly believe that the following hour, passed in hearing political news, was longest of my life. Nevertheless I was obliged to bridle my impatience; it was not until the following day after dinner, that I was able to examine the contents of the package.

Then, shut in with Pauline in my cell, and our work spread before us to deceive Mother Genevieve in case she came, we opened the envelope. It contained many finely written sheets. The first was a letter from Mme. Verani. She cautioned me to be discreet and not betray either her or the friend who by my aid could send a letter to a well beloved sister whom he had tried for a long time to see.

"Ah!" said Pauline, "doubtless it is the young man who was at the church the day of Sister Eustasia's profession." Mme. Verani's letter contained little of importance; we laid it aside for the time to examine the other papers. One of these sheets contained a petition to the amiable and pious Sister Angelique, beseeching her to assist a brother and to aid him in bringing a souvenir to a cherished sister who would, doubtless, never be seen by him upon earth. The arguments he employed were such that I could not resist, and Pauline entered into them with all her natural ardor.

(To be Continued.)

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