

FOR THE AMERICAN:

THE NUN.

An Episode of Convent Life.

Translated from the French by Rev. N. J. P. Chatelet, A. M.

CHAPTER VII.

EXTERIOR TROUBLES.

It was in June that I took the veil; the plague had broken out a few weeks later; it had remained about a month in the house, and since that time until the end of September nothing of importance had taken place; but it would be impossible to describe the sadness which filled our hearts during this time. Our number had been greatly diminished; some of us seemed upon the point of falling; Mother Genevieve seemed very much broken down, and the superior appeared incapable of doing what she did.

The exterior troubles were not less than the interior troubles of the family. The revolutionary spirit was let loose with such violence at St. Siffren that many of the richest families were obliged to abandon the place. The results of these movements sometimes reached even within our walls, so when these symptoms of tumult reached us—as there are no such timid creatures as nuns—we pressed one against the other like a flock of frightened sheep.

One morning, after a night during which our repose had been more troubled than usual, Mme. Verani presented herself at the grate, asking to speak to the abbess and myself. The abbess responded to her appeal, and leaning upon my arm, in a state of extremely violent excitement, we came to the grate, and I saw that my friend was very much disturbed. She opened the conversation, informing us of the decision of M. Verani. The tumults were becoming each day more serious, and they thought it would be much better to remove before things came to extremes. She was about to continue, when the abbess, placing her hand upon my arm, cried: "O, Angeli! what shall we do?" and throwing herself backward into her chair she burst into tears.

Mme. Verani at the same time gave me a significant look, and I succeeded while occupied with the abbess, in placing myself between her and the grate, and I received a package which I slipped into my pocket. Having attained her object, my friend took her leave; and as the eyes that used to watch the novices were closed forever, I soon found an opportunity to open my packet in the presence of Pauline.

The news it contained was very interesting. There was first a letter from Mme. Verani to me; another from Edward Beaumont for his sister, and a third from the cousins of Pauline from Switzerland. They all had the same purpose. They gave alarming details concerning the frightful political condition of the country, and said that they had heard of some reports of a religious who had been imprisoned twenty years in the dungeons of the convent, and that the people threatened to force the doors of the monastery to assure themselves of the fact.

These letters declared that the position of the sisters would be horrible if they were exposed, without protection, to the brutality of the furious populace. They ended with the most pressing prayers, made in the name of friendship and the most ardent interest, for the three sisters, Pauline, Clarisse, and Angeli, to allow themselves to be persuaded, if any tumult took place, to make a knot in their veil, and to abandon themselves to the protection of those who addressed them by the words calling them "the sisters of the knotted veil."

"What shall we do?" said I to Pauline. "What we can," responded she. "Are you able to hesitate when Providence opens the door before us? Shall we not escape from this horrible place? What will her brother say when he learns that she is no more?"

We wept freely at the thought of this devoted brother when he should learn the terrible end of his sister. We asked ourselves if we ought not to give some alarm to the abbess; but we were arrested in this project by the fear of perhaps hastening the death of the unfortunate creature whom they had shut up in the subterranean chamber. We did not dare to talk directly about the subject of our letters, but we spoke to the mothers and sisters of many things they had heard, asking them what they would do if the convent should be treated like that of St. Clara of Nice.

"If such a thing happens," said Mother Aimee, "I will hide among the debris and there give up my spirit, for it is here that I have lived during the time that I have been under the long protection of our Mere de Misericorde, and it is here that I wish to leave my old bones that my dust may mingle with the sisters that have preceded me."

"Mother," said Pauline, who had drawn Mother Aimee away from the other sisters, "what would become of Sister Agnes if the prisons were opened?" "Agnes!" said the old woman, trembling; "what do you know about her?"

"I know her whole history," responded Pauline. "And who has told you, my child?" demanded the aged mother. "The tongue that will never speak again," said Pauline. "Ah!" cried the mother, who, as I have already said, was almost in her second childhood, "she knows all. It was very sad, my daughters. The poor child was so young, she was not more than eighteen years old, and she is scarcely fifty if she is still living."

"She is alive, you know it, my mother." "I do not know," said the mother, "I never was in their confidence; but I have always heard that she died ten years after her incarceration."

"Who told you that she was dead, my mother?" "I cannot recall," said she, "but—she had known when—my memory has gone. Did she not die with the plague?" "Who?"

"Did you not speak of poor Clarisse?" asked Mother Aimee. "No," replied Pauline, "of poor Agnes. Is she dead or is she still imprisoned?" "What! in this house, do you say?" cried the mother. "How could she be still living? It is at least thirty years since that, I tell you."

"But why did they imprison her?" questioned Pauline. "I don't know," responded the aged nun. "Who am I to pass judgment upon my superiors? Have they not done what the church commanded? Our holy church, is it not infallible?"

At the same time she made the sign of the cross, murmured a prayer, and then fell into her ordinary state of imbecility. "Poor soul!" said Pauline; "she is not among those who deceive; at least she is innocent of this crime."

"Those who deceive," I repeated; "your principles change, then, Pauline." "That is possible," said she; "but this poor Agnes."

"God only knows what has become of her," said I; "but I am tired with all these mysteries. I have lost all confidence in my spiritual guides. I am ready to doubt all forms of religion and to believe that they have been invented by ambitious men and women in view of their interests."

"Why," said Pauline, "have you forgotten Clarisse and all that she said in that frightful subterranean interview? Are you able to doubt for a single instant the reality of what supported that young girl, so sweet and delicate, in such terrible circumstances as those in which she found herself? O Angeli! there ought to be in religion more than we have been able to learn up to this time."

I am unable to recall the rest of the conversation; the events which followed have effaced it from my memory. It was about four days later—days during which nothing extraordinary occurred, and which we passed in the same course of monotonous observances—that, being in the garden with Pauline, and deeply absorbed in conversation upon the details which had been mentioned in the letter of Mme. Verani, we were surprised, during a pause in our conversation, to hear a rumbling sound like a distant cataract when it falls in a torrent.

"Hear!" cried Pauline. The noise continued and became more and more distinct. "It is the wind," said I, for though the day had been beautiful, still there had been a great deal of stir among the cedar branches.

"No," said Pauline with a frightened air; "no, it is not the wind." "It is the mountain torrent," said I, "and if it is that we will see if the brook is swollen." We went toward the grate, but we saw no change. The brook continued its peaceable course between its flower bordered banks, and we looked at it in silence.

"O Angeli," said Pauline, "why am I so sad, so full of apprehension?" and joining her hands she continued: "O God! God be merciful, direct us, guide us; if we are in error, dissipate the clouds of doubt and the shadows which obscure our minds. Lead us into the truth; make us capable of placing our confidence where it only should be placed, and as to the rest—as to this world, do for us as seemeth good unto Thee."

In saying these words she threw her arms around me and then continued: "But if it is Thy good pleasure, O Lord, grant that I may not be separated from my Angeli." For a moment we were carried away by our feelings, but recovering ourselves, we perceived that the noise increased.

"Oh heaven!" cried Pauline, "St. Siffren is in revolt. Do you not distinguish the sound of voices? It is a general tumult." Saying these words she ran towards the house, and meeting some of the sisters she spread the alarm in the establishment. There was a narrow door in an arch leading from one of the chambers which opened upon a narrow circular stairway that led to a high tower from which one could see the whole village. This door was ordinarily closed; but the abbess, hearing our cries, sent to find the portress, and

having opened the door, she ascended with some of the sister sisters, while the younger ones remained behind. Having reached one of the narrow windows which gave a view of the village, we were distracted in hearing the noise which was made in the streets, and in seeing the sign of desolation, the tri-colored flag, floating at the summit of the cathedral from which the cross had been torn.

"Angeli," said Pauline, "the time for resolution has come; our deliverance or death is coming. Shall we speak? Shall we tell the abbess what there is to be feared?" "Agnes!" I responded, "that poor, unhappy creature, would we not aggravate her position? No; let things take their course. If they have committed this crime, they merit their punishment, unless God shall protect them."

At this moment the abbess passed us, descending the staircase, with great swiftness, and giving command to call Father Joachim. The abbess being away, many of the aged nuns retired to their cells, doubtless to invoke their wooden idols that were about to be destroyed. The younger sisters remained by the tower window gazing upon the village, and not noticing the approach of night until the black outlines of the village wall were seen upon the horizon, and a new luminary appeared to lighten the scene. This proved to be an enormous bonfire that had been kindled in the grand square. The tumult increased, and the most horrible howling was heard in the street. But as no preparation seemed to be made for an attack upon the convent, and as we had omitted vespers, we were called to compile an hour sooner than usual. Father Joachim was not present, and another priest officiated in his place.

It was the last day of September, and night had already fallen before the service was ended. Just at the moment when it was to terminate, a frightful noise resounded in the long corridors of the convent and died away in the chapel. The glimmering light of the torches illuminated the sanctuary. Each of the sculptures seemed to detach itself and stand out in relief upon the wall. A terrible blow struck upon the door made us tremble. Throwing our books away we fled in all directions—some to the right side and others to the left, while Pauline and I ran to the cemetery, trying to open a door which gave entrance to the garden; but before we could ascertain whether the door would open, I heard my name pronounced, and the portress, all in a tremble, told me that I must go to the saloon and present myself to the mayor of St. Siffren.

"Heaven!" I cried, "what now?" The portress was not able to respond to this question, but tearing me away from Pauline—for this faithful friend would have followed me even to death—she pushed me before her into the saloon, where I found the abbess in conversation with a man of the coarsest aspect, who was sitting outside the grate. He was seated, though the abbess was standing, and he wore the tri-colored cockade.

"This young girl," said he, continuing a conversation already commenced, "that is to say, the cousin of Citizen Verani, is the person I wish to see. Citizen Verani is one of my friends, and that is why I wish to show some affection to his cousin. You have no need to trouble yourself as to my motives, and I do not wish to hear your jargon. I know that the rest of you cloistered people are accustomed to fabricate falsehoods; that is why I warn you that I know Citizeness Cecilia Ricordi, who has lived some time with her cousins at St. Siffren, and I desire to speak with her myself." Then perceiving me he said:

"Come on, young girl, and lift your veil; show me your face. It is possible that I have seen some less beautiful." I looked at the abbess, to know what must be done, and this short delay provoked a torrent of oaths and blasphemy on the part of the rebobate. When he had looked at me some time through the grate, he laughed and made some pleasant remarks about the barriers of the grate, and swore that he would break them down as soon as all the young birds were driven into their nests.

"Ah well!" my beautiful citizeness, I desire you to understand that you are as free as myself, and that you can do nothing better than to put yourself under my protection; and if you are not happy it will not be my fault. That is what I have to say to you, Citizeness Ricordi. But to you," said he, turning towards the superior, his features agitated with anger and fury, "to you I have to talk in another manner. Do not flatter yourself, vile instrument of vile hypocrites, that your abominable actions are unknown; do not hope to escape the vengeance of the people. You tremble, I see it, and you have reason. I have only to say the word, and a justly enraged populace will force these doors and oblige you to avow your secret and hidden actions. You have only one chance for safety, miserable woman! Show us the unfortunate creature that you have held imprisoned so many years. Go immediately and open her dungeon and bring her here, or—and he pronounced a horrible oath—the people will enter here and tear you in pieces, limb by limb."

The superior, more dead than alive, protested her innocence, and assured him that though she could not answer as to what had been done by her predecessors, there had never been, to her knowledge, a living creature shut up in the subterranean dungeons.

The mayor shook his head. "Well," said he, "you have sealed your own condemnation; it is finished." And murmuring some words, among which we could only understand some oaths which fairly tore the blood in our veins, he turned away. We were left behind the grate in a state of terror that is beyond my power of description. During this time all fear of the superior had left me, and when I found myself alone with her I brought her to deliver immediately the unhappy creature who was shut up in the subterranean dungeon, telling her that she could leave her by the door of the garden and conduct her into a window where she would be sheltered from the populace. I offered to do this work, and I promised to prevent the prisoner from saying anything against her persecutors.

"I assure you that you are mistaken," said the abbess, "and you can believe me when I declare unto you in the Name of the Ruler of heaven that at this time there is no prisoner under this roof."

(To be Continued.)

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S. V. C.—C. H. ALLEN, South Omaha. (Conductor—H. S. BARTHOLOMEW, Plattsmouth. Warden—F. S. McALEE, So. Omaha. Secretary—A. H. ELLERWOOD, So. Omaha; R. P. DOLMAN, Omaha. Representatives to Nat. Council—Wm. F. KNAPP, H. L. DAY, W. A. MESSICK, F. S. McALEE and J. W. HOLLIER.

The next regular meeting will be held on the third Tuesday in July, 1891, at Omaha.

FRANCIS S. KEY COUNCIL No. 6 meets every Friday evening at O. A. R. Hall, Plattsmouth, Neb. Visiting brothers constantly invited. W. E. COOPER, Sec. Soc.

WASHINGTON COUNCIL No. 1, meets every Friday evening in Goodrich Hall, 24th and Franklin streets. Visiting brothers always welcome. J. C. PAGE, Sec'y.

LINCOLN COUNCIL No. 2, meets in Lincoln, Nebraska.

COLUMBIA COUNCIL No. 3, meets every Tuesday evening in Patterson block, 15th and Farnam Streets. S. T. WIGGINS, Sec'y. 1301 Jackson Street.

GARFIELD COUNCIL No. 5, meets every Tuesday night in South Omaha. WILLIAM FARR, Sec'y.

LIBERTY COUNCIL