

YONGE CHARLOTTE MARY

Stray Pearls: Memoirs of Margaret
De Ribaumont, Viscountess of
Bellaise

Charlotte Yonge

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PREFACE

No one can be more aware than the author that the construction of this tale is defective. The state of French society, and the strange scenes of the Fronde, beguiled me into a tale which has become rather a family record than a novel.

Formerly the Muse of the historical romance was an independent and arbitrary personage, who could compress time, resuscitate the dead, give mighty deeds to imaginary heroes, exchange substitutes for popular martyrs on the scaffold, and make the most stubborn facts subservient to her purpose. Indeed, her most favoured son boldly asserted her right to bend time and place to her purpose, and to make the interest and effectiveness of her work the paramount object. But critics have lashed her out of these erratic ways, and she is now become the meek hand maid of Clio, creeping obediently in the track of the greater Muse, and never venturing on more than colouring and working up the grand outlines that her mistress has left undefined. Thus, in the present tale, though it would have been far more convenient not to have spread the story over such a length of time, and to have made the catastrophe depend upon the heroes and heroines, instead of keeping them mere ineffective spectators, or only engaged in imaginary adventures for which a precedent can be found, it has been necessary to stretch out their narrative, so as to be at least consistent with the real history, at the entire sacrifice of the plot. And it may be feared that thus the story may partake of the confusion that really reigned over the tangled thread of events. There is no portion of history better illustrated by memoirs of the actors therein than is the Fronde; but, perhaps, for that very reason none so confusing.

Perhaps it may be an assistance to the reader to lay out the bare historical outline like a map, showing to what incidents the memoirs of the Sisters of Ribaumont have to conform themselves.

When Henry IV. succeeded in obtaining the throne of France, he found the feudal nobility depressed by the long civil war, and his exchequer exhausted. He and his minister Sully returned to the policy of Louis XI., by which the nobles were to be kept down and prevented from threatening the royal power. This was seldom done by violence, but by giving them employment in the Army and Court, attaching them to the person of the King, and giving them offices with pensions attached to them.

The whole cost of these pensions and all the other expenses of Government fell on the townspeople and peasantry, since the clergy and the nobles to all generations were exempt from taxation. The trade and all the resources of the country were taking such a spring of recovery since the country had been at peace, and the persecution of the Huguenots had ceased, that at first the taxation provoked few murmurs. The resources of the Crown were further augmented by permitting almost all magistrates and persons who held public offices to secure the succession to their sons on the payment of a tariff called LA PAULETTE, from the magistrate who invented it.

In the next reign, however, an effort was made to secure greater equality of burthens. On the meeting of the States-General—the only popular assembly possessed by France—Louis XIII., however, after hearing the complaints, and promising to consider them, shut the doors against the deputies, made no further answer, and dismissed them to their houses without the slightest redress. The Assembly was never to meet again till the day of reckoning for all, a hundred and seventy years later.

Under the mighty hand of Cardinal Richelieu the nobles were still more effectually crushed, and the great course of foreign war begun, which lasted, with short intervals, for a century. The great man died, and so did his feeble master; and his policy, both at home and abroad, was inherited by his pupil Giulio Mazarini, while the regency for the child, Louis XIV., devolved on his mother, Anne of Austria—a pious and well-meaning, but proud and ignorant, Spanish Princess—who pinned her faith upon Mazarin with helpless and exclusive devotion, believing him the only pilot who could steer her vessel through troublous waters.

But what France had ill brooked from the high-handed son of her ancient nobility was intolerable from a low-born Italian, of graceful but insinuating manners. Moreover, the war increased the burthens of the country, and, in the minority of the King, a stand was made at last.

The last semblance of popular institutions existed in the Parliaments of this was the old feudal Council of the Counts of Paris, consisting of the temporal and spiritual peers of the original county, who had the right to advise with their chief, and to try the causes concerning themselves. The immediate vassals of the King had a right to sit there, and were called Paris De France, in distinction from the other nobles who only had seats in the Parliament in whose province their lands might lie. To these St. Louis, in his anxiety to repress lawlessness, had added a certain number of trained lawyers and magistrates; and these were the working members of these Parliaments, which were in general merely courts of justice for civil and criminal causes. The nobles only attended on occasions of unusual interest. Moreover, a law or edict of the King became valid on being registered by a Parliament. It was a moot question whether the Parliament had the power to baffle the King by refusing to register an edict, and Henry IV. had avoided a refusal from the Parliament of Paris, by getting his edict of toleration for the Huguenots registered at Nantes.

The peculiarly oppressive house-tax, with four more imposts proposed in 1648, gave the Parliament of Paris the opportunity of trying to make an effectual resistance by refusing the registration. They were backed by the municipal government of the city at the Hotel de Ville, and encouraged by the Coadjutor of the infirm old Archbishop of Paris, namely, his nephew, Paul de Gondi, titular Bishop of Corinth in partibus infidelium, a younger son of the Duke of Retz, an Italian family introduced by Catherine de Medici. There seemed to be a hope that the nobility, angered at their own systematic depression, and by Mazarin's ascendancy, might make common cause with the Parliament and establish some effectual check to the advances of the Crown. This was the origin of the party called the Fronde, because the speakers launched their speeches at one another as boys fling stones from a sling (*fronde*) in the streets.

The Queen-Regent was enraged through all her despotic Spanish haughtiness at such resistance. She tried to step in by the arrest of the foremost members of the Opposition, but failed, and only provoked violent tumults. The young Prince of Conde, coming home from Germany flushed with victory, hated Mazarin extremely, but his pride as a Prince of the Blood, and his private animosities impelled him to take up the cause of the Queen. She conveyed her son secretly from Paris, and the city was in a state of siege for several months. However, the execution of Charles I. in England alarmed the Queen on the one hand, and the Parliament on the other as to the consequences of a rebellion, provisions began to run short, and a vague hollow peace was made in the March of 1649.

Conde now became intolerably overbearing, insulted every one, and so much offended the Queen and Mazarin that they caused him, his brother, and the Duke of Bouillon, to be arrested and imprisoned at Vincennes. His wife, though a cruelly-neglected woman whom he had never loved, did her utmost to deliver him, repaired to Bordeaux, and gained over the Parliament there, so that she held out four months against the Queen. Turenne, brother to Bouillon, and as great a general as Conde, obtained the aid of Spaniards, and the Coadjutor prevailed on the King's uncle, Gaston, Duke of Orleans, to represent that the Queen must give way, release the Princes, part with Mazarin, and even promise to convoke the States-General. Anne still, however, corresponded with the Cardinal, and was directed by him in everything. Distrust and dissension soon broke out, Conde and the Coadjutor

quarrelled violently, and the royal promises made to both Princes and Parliament were eluded by the King, at fourteen, being declared to have attained his majority, and thus that all engagements made in his name became void.

Conde went of to Guienne and raised an army; Mazirin returned to the Queen; Paris shut its gates and declared Mazarin an outlaw. The Coadjutor (now become Cardinal de Retz) vainly tried to stir up the Duke of Orleans to take a manly part and mediate between the parties; but being much afraid of his own appanage, the city of Orleans, being occupied by either army, Gaston sent his daughter to take the charge of it, as she effectually did—but she was far from neutrality, being deluded by a hope that Conde would divorce his poor faithful wife to marry her. Turenne, on his brother's release, had made his peace with the Court, and commanded the royal army. War and havoc raged outside Paris; within the partisans of the Princes stirred the populace to endeavour to intimidate the Parliament and municipality into taking their part. Their chief leader throughout was the Duke of Beaufort, a younger son of the Duke of Vendome, the child of Gabrielle d'Estrees. He inherited his grandmother's beauty and his grandfather's charm of manner; he was the darling of the populace of Paris, and led them, in an aimless sort of way, whether there was mischief to be done; and the violence and tumult of this latter Fronde was far worse than those of the first.

A terrible battle in the Faubourg St. Antoine broke Conde's force, and the remnant was only saved by Mademoiselle's insisting on their being allowed to pass through Paris. After one ungrateful attempt to terrify the magistrates into espousing his cause and standing a siege on his behalf, Conde quitted Paris, and soon after fell ill of a violent fever.

His party melted away. Mazarin saw that tranquillity might be restored if he quitted France for a time. The King proclaimed an amnesty, but with considerable exceptions and no relaxation of his power; and these terms the Parliament, weary of anarchy, and finding the nobles had cared merely for their personal hatreds, not for the public good, were forced to accept.

Conde, on his recovery, left France, and for a time fought against his country in the ranks of the Spaniards. Beaufort died bravely fighting against the Turks at Cyprus. Cardinal de Retz was imprisoned, and Mademoiselle had to retire from Court, while other less distinguished persons had to undergo the punishment for their resistance, though, to the credit of the Court party be it spoken, there were no executions, only imprisonments; and in after years the Fronde was treated as a brief frenzy, and forgotten.

Perhaps it may be well to explain that Mademoiselle was Anne Genevieve de Bourbon, daughter of Gaston, Duke of Orleans, by his first wife, the heiress of the old Bourbon branch of Montpensier. She was the greatest heiress in France, and an exceedingly vain and eccentric person, aged twenty-three at the beginning of the Fronde.

It only remains to say that I have no definite authority for introducing such a character as that of Clement Darpent, but it is well known that there was a strong under-current of upright, honest, and highly-cultivated men among the bourgeoisie and magistrates, and that it seemed to me quite possible that in the first Fronde, when the Parliament were endeavouring to make a stand for a just right, and hoping to obtain further hopes and schemes, and, acting on higher and purer principles than those around him, be universally misunderstood and suspected.

C. M. YONGE.

CHAPTER I. – WHITEHALL BEFORE THE COBWEBS

I have long promised you, my dear grandchildren, to arrange my recollections of the eventful years that even your father can hardly remember. I shall be glad thus to draw closer the bonds between ourselves and the English kindred, whom I love so heartily, though I may never hope to see them in this world, far less the dear old home where I grew up.

For, as perhaps you have forgotten, I am an English woman by birth, having first seen the light at Walwyn House, in Dorsetshire. One brother had preceded me—my dear Eustace—and another brother, Berenger, and my little sister, Annora, followed me.

Our family had property both in England and in Picardy, and it was while attending to some business connected with the French estate that my father had fallen in love with a beautiful young widow, Madame la Baronne de Solivet (nee Cheverny), and had brought her home, in spite of the opposition of her relations. I cannot tell whether she were warmly welcomed at Walwyn Court by any one but the dear beautiful grandmother, a Frenchwoman herself, who was delighted again to hear her mother tongue, although she had suffered much among the Huguenots in her youth, when her husband was left for dead on the S. Barthelemi.

He, my grandfather, had long been dead, but I perfectly remember her. She used to give me a sugar-cake when I said 'Bon soir, bonne maman,' with the right accent, and no one made sugar-cake like hers. She always wore at her girdle a string of little yellow shells, which she desired to have buried with her. We children were never weary of hearing how they had been the only traces of her or of her daughter that her husband could find, when he came to the ruined city.

I could fill this book with her stories, but I must not linger over them; and indeed I heard no more after I was eight years old. Until that time my brother and I were left under her charge in the country, while my father and mother were at court. My mother was one of the Ladies of the Bedchamber of Queen Henrietta Maria, who had been enchanted to find in her a countrywoman, and of the same faith. I was likewise bred up in their Church, my mother having obtained the consent of my father, during a dangerous illness that followed my birth, but the other children were all brought up as Protestants. Indeed, no difference was made between Eustace and me when we were at Walwyn. Our grandmother taught us both alike to make the sign of the cross, and likewise to say our prayers and the catechism; and oh! we loved her very much.

Eustace once gave two black eyes to our rude cousin, Harry Merricourt, for laughing when he said no one was as beautiful as the Grandmother, and though I am an old woman myself, I think he was right. She was like a little fairy, upright and trim, with dark flashing eyes, that never forgot how to laugh, and snowy curls on her brow.

I believe that the dear old lady made herself ill by nursing us two children day and night when we had the smallpox. She had a stroke, and died before my father could be fetched from London; but I knew nothing of all that; I only grieved, and wondered that she did not come to me, till at last the maid who was nursing me told me flatly that the old lady was dead. I think that afterwards we were sent down to a farmer's house by the sea, to be bathed and made rid of infection; and that the pleasure of being set free from our sick chambers and of playing on the shore drove from our minds for the time our grief for the good grandma, though indeed I dream of her often still, and of the old rooms and gardens at Walwyn, though I have never seen them since.

When we were quite well and tolerably free from pock-marks, my father took us to London with him, and there Eustace was sent to school at Westminster; while I, with little Berry, had a tutor to teach us Latin and French, and my mother's waiting-maid instructed me in sewing and embroidery. As I grew older I had masters in dancing and the spinnet, and my mother herself was most careful of my deportment. Likewise she taught me such practices of our religion as I had not learnt from my grandmother, and then it was I found that I was to be brought up differently from Eustace and the

others. I cried at first, and declared I would do like Eustace and my father. I did not think much about it; I was too childish and thoughtless to be really devout; and when my mother took me in secret to the queen's little chapel, full of charming objects of devotion, while the others had to sit still during sermons two hours long, I began to think that I was the best off.

Since that time I have thought much more, and talked the subject over both with my dear eldest brother and with good priests, both English and French, and I have come to the conclusion, as you know, my children, that the English doctrine is no heresy, and that the Church is a true Church and Catholic, though, as my home and my duties lie here, I remain where I was brought up by my mother, in the communion of my husband and children. I know that this would seem almost heresy to our good Pere Chavand, but I wish to leave my sentiments on record for you, my children.

But how I have anticipated my history! I must return, to tell you that when I was just sixteen I was told that I was to go to my first ball at Whitehall. My hair was curled over my forehead, and I was dressed in white satin, with the famous pearls of Ribaumont round my neck, though of course they were not to be mine eventually.

I knew the palace well, having often had the honour of playing with the Lady Mary, who was some years younger than I, so that I was much less alarmed than many young gentlewomen there making their first appearance. But, as my dear brother Eustace led me into the outer hall, close behind my father and mother, I heard a strange whistle, and, looking up, I saw over the balustrade of the gallery a droll monkey face looking out of a mass of black curls, and making significant grimaces at me.

I knew well enough that it was no other than the Prince of Wales. He was terribly ugly and fond of teasing, but in a good-natured way, always leaving off when he saw he was giving real pain, and I liked him much better than his brother, the Duke of York, who was proud and sullen. Yet one could always trust the Duke, and that could not be said for the Prince.

By the time we had slowly advanced up the grand staircase into the banqueting-hall, and had made our reverences to the king and queen—ah, how stately and beautiful they looked together!—the Prince had stepped in some other way, and stood beside me.

'Well, Meg,' he said, in an undertone—'I beg pardon, Mrs. Margaret—decked out in all her splendour, a virgin for the sacrifice!'

'What sacrifice, sir?' I asked, startled.

'Eh!' he said. 'You do not know that le futur is arrived!'

'She knows nothing, your Highness,' said Eustace.

'What, oh, what is there to know?' I implored the Prince and my brother in turn to inform me, for I saw that there was some earnest in the Prince's jests, and I knew that the queen and my mother were looking out for a good match for me in France.

'Let me show him to you,' presently whispered the Prince, who had been called off by his father to receive the civilities of an ambassador. Then he pointed out a little wizened dried-up old man, who was hobbling up to kiss Her Majesty's hand, and whose courtly smile seemed to me to sit most unnaturally on his wrinkled countenance. I nearly screamed. I was forced to bite my lips to keep back my tears, and I wished myself child enough to be able to scream and run away, when my mother presently beckoned me forward. I hardly had strength to curtsy when I was actually presented to the old man. Nothing but terror prevented my sinking on the floor, and I heard as through falling waters something about M. le Marquis de Nidemerle and Mrs. Margaret Ribmont, for so we were called in England.

By and by I found that I was dancing, I scarcely knew how or with whom, and I durst not look up the whole time, nor did my partner address a single word to me, though I knew he was near me; I was only too thankful that he did not try to address me.

To my joy, when we had made our final reverences, he never came near me again all the evening. I found myself among some young maidens who were friends of mine, and in our eager

talk together I began to forget what had passed, or to hope it was only some teasing pastime of the Prince and Eustace.

When we were seated in the coach on the way to our house my father began to laugh and marvel which had been the most shy, the gallant or the lady, telling my mother she need never reproach the English with bashfulness again after this French specimen.

‘How will he and little Meg ever survive to-morrow’s meeting!’ he said.

Then I saw it was too true, and cried out in despair to beg them to let me stay at home, and not send me from them; but my mother bade me not be a silly wench. I had always known that I was to be married in France and the queen and my half-brother, M. de Solivet, had found an excellent parti for me. I was not to embarrass matters by any folly, but I must do her credit, and not make her regret that she had not sent me to a convent to be educated.

Then I clung to my father. I could hold him tight in the dark, and the flambeaux only cast in a fitful flickering light. ‘Oh, sir,’ said I, ‘you cannot wish to part with your little Meg!’

‘You are your mother’s child, Meg,’ he said sadly. ‘I gave you up to her to dispose of at her will.’

‘And you will thank me one of these days for your secure home,’ said my mother. ‘If these rogues continue disaffected, who knows what they may leave us in England!’

‘At least we should be together,’ I cried, and I remember how I fondled my father’s hand in the dark, and how he returned it. We should never have thought of such a thing in the light; he would have been ashamed to allow such an impertinence, and I to attempt it.

Perhaps it emboldened me to say timidly: ‘If he were not so old—’

But my mother declared that she could not believe her ears that a child of hers should venture on making such objections—so unmaidenly, so undutiful to a parti selected by the queen and approved by her parents.

As the coach stopped at our own door I perceived that certain strange noises that I had heard proceeded from Eustace laughing and chuckling to himself all the way. I must say I thought it very unkind and cruel when we had always loved each other so well. I would hardly bid him good-night, but ran up to the room I shared with nurse and Annora, and wept bitterly through half the night, little comforted by nurse’s assurance that old men were wont to let their wives have their way far more easily than young ones did.

CHAPTER II. – A LITTLE MUTUAL AVERSION

I had cried half the night, and when in the morning little Nan wanted to hear about my ball, I only answered that I hated the thought of it. I was going to be married to a hideous old man, and be carried to France, and should never see any of them again. I made Nan cry too, and we both came down to breakfast with such mournful faces that my mother chid me sharply for making myself such a fright.

Then she took me away to the still-room, and set me for an hour to make orange cakes, while she gave orders for the great dinner that we were to give that day, I knew only too well for whose sake; and if I had only known which orange cake was for my betrothed, would not it have been a bitter one! By and by my mother carried me off to be dressed. She never trusted the tiring-woman to put the finishing touches with those clumsy English fingers; and, besides, she bathed my swollen eyelids with essences, and made me rub my pale cheeks with a scarlet ribbon, speaking to me so sharply that I should not have dared to shed another tear.

When I was ready, all in white, and she, most stately in blue velvet and gold, I followed her down the stairs to the grand parlour, where stood my father, with my brothers and one or two persons in black, who I found were a notary and his clerk, and there was a table before them with papers, parchment, a standish, and pens. I believe if it had been a block, and I had had to lay my head on it, like poor Lady Jane Grey, I could not have been much more frightened.

There was a sound of wheels, and presently the gentleman usher came forward, announcing the Most Noble the Marquis de Nidemerle, and the Lord Viscount of Bellaise. My father and brothers went half-way down the stairs to meet them, my mother advanced across the room, holding me in one hand and Annora in the other. We all curtsied low, and as the gentlemen advanced, bowing low, and almost sweeping the ground with the plumes in their hats, we each had to offer them a cheek to salute after the English fashion. The old marquis was talking French so fast that I could not understand him in the least, but somehow a mist suddenly seemed to clear away from before me, and I found that I was standing before that alarming table, not with him, but with something much younger—not much older, indeed, than Eustace.

I began to hear what the notary was reading out, and behold it was—‘Contract of marriage on the part of Philippe Marie Francois de Bellaise, Marquis de Nidermerle, and Eustace de Ribaumont, Baron Walwyn of Walwyn, in Dorset, and Baron de Ribaumont in Picardy, on behalf of Gaspard Henri Philippe, Viscount de Bellaise, nephew of the Marquis de Nidemerle, and Margaret Henrietta Maria de Ribaumont, daughter of the Baron de Ribaumont.’

Then I knew that I had been taken in by the Prince’s wicked trick, and that my husband was to be the young viscount, not the old uncle! I do not think that this was much comfort to me at the moment, for, all the same, I was going into a strange country, away from every one I had ever known.

But I did take courage to look up under my eye-lashes at the form I was to see with very different eyes. M. de Ballaise was only nineteen, but although not so tall as my father or brother, he had already that grand military bearing which is only acquired in the French service, and no wonder, or he had been three years in the Regiment de Conde, and had already seen two battles and three sieges in Savoy, and now had only leave of absence for the winter before rejoining his regiment in the Low Countries.

Yet he looked as bashful as a maiden. It was true that, as my father said, his bashfulness was as great as an Englishman’s. Indeed, he had been bred up at his great uncle’s chateau in Anjou, under a strict abbe who had gone with him to the war, and from whom he was only now to be set free upon his marriage. He had scarcely ever spoken to any lady but his old aunt—his parents had long been dead—and he had only two or three times seen his little sister through the grating of her convent. So, as he afterwards confessed, nothing but his military drill and training bore him through the affair. He

stood upright as a dart, bowed at the right place, and in due time signed his name to the contract, and I had to do the same. Then there ensued a great state dinner, where he and I sat together, but neither of us spoke to the other; and when, as I was trying to see the viscount under my eyelashes, I caught his eyes trying to do the same by me, I remember my cheeks flaming all over, and I think his must have done the same, for my father burst suddenly out into a laugh without apparent cause, though he tried to check himself when he saw my mother's vexation.

When all was over, she highly lauded the young gentleman, declaring that he was an example of the decorum with which such matters were conducted in France; and when my father observed that he should prefer a little more fire and animation, she said: 'Truly, my lord, one would think you were of mere English extraction, that you should prefer the rude habits of a farmer or milkmaid to the reserve of a true noble and lady of quality.'

'Well, dame, I promised that you should have it your own way with the poor lass,' said my father; 'and I see no harm in the lad, but I own I should like to know more of him, and Meg would not object either. It was not the way I took thee, Margaret.'

'I shall never make you understand that a widow is altogether a different thing,' said my mother.

I suppose they never recollected that I could hear every word they said, but I was full in view of them, and of course I was listening most anxiously for all I could gather about my new life. If I remember right, it was an envoy-extraordinary with whom the marquis and his nephew had come, and their stay was therefore very short, so that we were married after a very few days in the Queen's Chapel, by her own almoner.

I do not remember much about the wedding, as indeed it was done very quietly, being intended to be kept altogether a secret; but in some way, probably through the servants, it became known to the mob in London, and as we drove home from Whitehall in the great coach with my father and mother, a huge crowd had assembled, hissing and yelling and crying out upon Lord Walwyn for giving his daughter to a French Papist.

The wretches! they even proceeded to throw stones. My young bridegroom saw one of these which would have struck me had he not thrown himself forward, holding up his hat as a shield. The stone struck him in the eye, and he dropped forward upon my mother's knee senseless.

The crowd were shocked then, and fell back, but what good did that do to him? He was carried to his chamber, and a surgeon was sent for, who said that there was no great injury done, for the eye itself had not been touched, but that he must be kept perfectly quiet until the last minute, if he was to be able to travel without danger, when the suite were to set off in two day's time. They would not let me go near him. Perhaps I was relieved, for I should not have known what to do; yet I feared that he would think me unkind and ungrateful, and I would have begged my mother and Eustace to thank him and make my excuses, but I was too shy, and I felt it very hard to be blamed for indifference and rudeness.

Indeed, we four young ones kept as much together as we could do in the house and gardens, and played all our dear old games of shuttlecock, and pig go to market, and proverbs, and all that you, my children, call very English sports, because we knew only too well that we should never play at them altogether again. The more I was blamed for being childish, the more I was set upon them, till at last my mother said that she was afraid to let me go, I was so childish and unfeeling; and my father replied that she should have thought of that before. He and I were both more English at heart than French, and I am sure now that he perceived better than I did myself that my clinging to my brothers and sister, and even my noisy merriment, were not the effect of want of feeling.

As to my bridegroom, I have since known that he was dreadfully afraid of us, more especially of me, and was thankful that the injury kept him a prisoner. Nay, he might have come downstairs, if he had been willing, on the last evening, but he shrank from another presentation to me before the eyes of all the world, and chose instead to act the invalid, with no companion save Eustace, with whom he had made friends.

I will not tell you about the partings, and the promises and assurances that we should meet again. My father had always promised that my mother should see France once more, and he now declared that they would all visit me. Alas! we little thought what would be the accomplishment of that promise.

My father and Eustace rode with us from London to Dover, and all the time I kept close to them. M. de Bellaise was well enough to ride too. His uncle, the marquis, went in a great old coach with the ladies, wives of some of his suite, and I should have been there too, but that I begged so hard to ride with my father that he yielded, after asking M. le Vicomte whether he had any objection. M. le Vicomte opened great eyes, smiled, blushed and bowed, stammering something. I do not think that he had quite realised previously that I was his wife, and belonged to him. My father made him ride with us, and talked to him; and out in the open air, riding with the wind in our cheeks, and his plume streaming in the breeze, he grew much less shy, and began to talk about the wolf-hunts and boar-hunts in the Bocage, and of all the places that my father and I both knew as well as if we had seen them, from the grandam's stories.

I listened, but we neither of us sought the other; indeed, I believe it seemed hard to me that when there was so little time with my father and Eustace, they should waste it on these hunting stories. Only too soon we were at Dover, and the last, last farewell and blessing were given. I looked my last, though I knew it not at that dear face of my father!

CHAPTER III. – CELADON AND CHLOE

My tears were soon checked by dreadful sea-sickness. We were no sooner out of Dover than the cruel wind turned round upon us, and we had to go beating about with all our sails reefed for a whole day and night before it was safe to put into Calais.

All that time I was in untold misery, and poor nurse Tryphena was worse than I was, and only now and then was heard groaning out that she was a dead woman, and begging me to tell some one to throw her over board.

But it was that voyage which gave me my husband. He was not exactly at his ease, but he kept his feet better than any of the other gentlemen, and he set himself to supply the place of valet to his uncle, and of maid to me, going to and fro between our cabins as best he could, for he fell and rolled whenever he tried to more; sharp shriek or howl, or a message through the steward, summoned him back to M. le Marquis, who had utterly forgotten all his politeness and formality towards the ladies.

However, our sufferings were over at last. My husband, who was by this time bruised from head to foot by his falls, though he made no complaints, came to say we should in a few moments be in port. He helped me to dress, for Tryphena thought she was dead, and would not move; and he dragged me on deck, where the air revived me, and where one by one the whole party appeared, spectacles of misery.

M. le Marquis did not recover himself till he was on shore, and caused himself to be assisted to the quay between his nephew and the valet, leaving me to myself; but the dear viscount returned for me, and after he had set me ashore, as he saw I was anxious about Tryphena, he went back and fetched her, as carefully as if she had been a lady, in spite of the grumblings of his uncle and of her own refractoriness, for she was horribly frightened, and could not understand a word he said to her.

Nevertheless, as soon as we had all of us come to ourselves, it turned out that he had gained her heart. Indeed, otherwise I should have had to send her home, for she pined sadly for some time, and nothing but her love for me and her enthusiastic loyalty to him kept her up during the first months.

As to my husband and me, that voyage had made us as fond of one another's company on one side of the Channel as we had been afraid of it before on the other, but there was no more riding together for us. I had to travel in the great coach with M. le Marquis, the three ladies, and all our women, where I was so dull and weary that I should have felt ready to die, but for watching for my husband's plume, or now and then getting a glance and a nod from him as he rode among the other gentlemen, braving all their laughter at his devotion; for, bashful as he was, he knew how to hold his own.

I knew that the ladies looked on me as an ugly little rustic foreigner, full of English mauvaise honte. If they tried to be kind to me, it was as a mere child; and they went on with their chatter, which I could hardly follow, for it was about things and people of which I knew nothing, so that I could not understand their laughter. Or when they rejoiced in their return from what they called their exile, and found fault with all they had left in England, my cheeks burned with indignation.

My happy hours were when we halted for refreshments. My husband handed me to my place at table and sat beside me; or he would walk with me about the villages where we rested. The ladies were shocked, and my husband was censured for letting me 'faire l'Anglaise,' but we were young and full of spirits, and the being thus thrown on each other had put an end to his timidity towards me. He did indeed blush up to his curls, and hold himself as upright as a ramrod, when satire was directed to us as Celadon and Chloe; but he never took any other notice of it, nor altered his behaviour in consequence. Indeed, we felt like children escaping from school when we crept down the stairs in early morning, and hand-in-hand repaired to the church in time for the very earliest mass among the peasants, who left their scythes at the door, and the women with their hottes, or their swaddled babies at their backs. We would get a cup of milk and piece of barley-bread at some cottage, and

wander among the orchards, fields, or vineyards before Mesdames had begun their toiles; and when we appeared at the dejeuner, the gentlemen would compliment me on my rouge au naturel, and the ladies would ironically envy my English appetite.

Sometimes we rested in large hostels in cities, and then our walk began with some old cathedral, which could not but be admired, Gothic though it were, and continued in the market-place, where the piles of fruit, vegetables, and flowers were a continual wonder and delight to me. My husband would buy bouquets of pinks and roses for me; but in the coach the ladies always said they incommoded them by their scent, and obliged me to throw them away. The first day I could not help shedding a few tears, for I feared he would think I did not value them; and then I perceived that they thought the little Englishwoman a child crying for her flowers. I longed to ask them whether they had ever loved their husbands; but I knew how my mother would have looked at me, and forbore.

Once or twice we were received in state at some chateau, where our mails had to be opened that we might sup in full toilet; but this was seldom, for most of the equals of M. le Marquis lived at Paris. Sometimes our halt was at an abbey, where we ladies were quartered in a guest-chamber without; and twice we slept at large old convents, where nobody had lived since the Huguenot times, except a lay brother put in by M. l'Abbe to look after the estate and make the house a kind of inn for travelers. There were fine walled gardens run into wild confusion, and little neglected and dismantled shrines, and crosses here and there, with long wreaths of rose and honeysuckle trailing over them, and birds' nests in curious places. My Viscount laughed with a new pleasure when I showed him the wren's bright eye peeping out from her nest, and he could not think how I knew the egg of a hedge-sparrow from that of a red-breast. Even he had never been allowed to be out of sight of his tutor, and he knew none of these pleasures so freely enjoyed by my brothers; while as to his sister Cecile, she had been carried from her nurse to a convent, and had thence been taken at fourteen to be wedded to the grandson and heir of the Count d'Aubepine, who kept the young couple under their own eye at their castle in the Bocage.

My husband had absolutely only seen her twice, and then through the grating, and the marriage had taken place while he was in Savoy last autumn. He knew his brother-in-law a little better, having been his neighbour at Nid de Merle; but he shrugged his shoulders as he spoke of 'le chevalier,' and said he was very young, adored by his grandparents, and rather headstrong.

As to growing up together in the unity that had always existed between an absolute surprise to him to find that my dear brother was grieved at parting with me. He said he had lain and heard our shouts in the passages with wonder as we played those old games of ours.

'As though you were in a den of roaring wild beasts,' I said; for I ventured on anything with him by that time, voices, I teased him about his feelings at having to carry off one of these same savage beasts with him; and then he told me how surprised he had been when, on the last evening he spent in his chamber in our house, Eustace had come and implored him to be good to me, telling him—ah, I can see my dear brother's boyish way!—all my best qualities, ranging from my always speaking truth to my being able to teach the little dog to play tricks, and warning him of what vexed or pained me, even exacting a promise that he would take care of me when I was away from them all. I believe that promise was foremost in my husband's mind when he waited on me at sea. Nay, he said when remembered the tears in my brother's eyes, and saw how mine arose at the thought, his heart smote him when he remembered that his sister's marriage had scarcely cost him a thought or care, and that she was an utter stranger to him; and then we agreed that if ever we had children, we would bring them up to know and love one another, and have precious recollections in common. Ah! l'homme propose, mais Dieu dispose.

It was only on that day that it broke upon me that we were to be separated immediately after our arrival in Paris. M. de Bellaise was to go to his regiment, which was at garrison at Nancy, and I was to be left under the charge of old Madame la Marquise de Nidemerle at Paris. I heard of it first from the Marquise himself in the coach, as he thanked one of the ladies who invited me—with him

—to her salon in Paris, where there was to be a great entertainment in the summer. When I replied that M. de Bellaise would have rejoined his regiment, they began explaining that I should go into society under Madame de Nidemerle, who would exert herself for my sake.

I said no more. I knew it was of no use there; but when next I could speak with my husband—it was under an arbour of vines in the garden of the inn where we dine—I asked him whether it was true. He opened large eyes, and said he knew I could not wish to withdraw him from his duty to his king and country, even if he could do so with honour.

‘Ah! no,’ I said; ‘I never thought of that.’ But surely the place of a wife was with her husband, and I had expected to go with him to his garrison at Nancy, and there wait when he took the field. He threw himself at my feet, and pressed my hands with transport at what he called this unheard-of proof of affection; and then I vexed him by laughing, for I could not help thinking what my brothers would have said, could they have seen us thus.

Still he declared that, in spite of his wishes, it was hardly possible. His great-uncle and aunt would never consent. I said they had no right to interfere between husband and wife, and he replied that they had brought him up, and taken the place of parents to him; to which I rejoined that I was far nearer to him. He said I was a mutinous Englishwoman; and I rejoined that he should never find me mutinous to him.

Nay, I made up my mind that if he would not insist on taking me, I would find means to escape and join him. What! Was I to be carried about in the coach of Madame de Nidemerle to all the hateful salons of Paris, while my husband, the only person in France whom I could endure, might be meeting wounds and death in the Low Countries while I might be dancing!

So again I declined when the ladies in the coach invited me to their houses in Paris. Should I go to a convent? they asked; and one began to recommend the Carmelites, another the Visitation, another Port Royal, till I was almost distracted; and M. le Marquis began to say it was a pious and commendable wish, but that devotion had its proper times and seasons, and that judgment must be exercised as to the duration of a retreat, etc.

‘No, Monsieur,’ said I, ‘I am not going into a convent. A wife’s duty is with her husband; I am going into garrison at Nancy.’

Oh, how they cried out! There was such a noise that the gentlemen turned their horses’ heads to see whether any one was taken ill. When they heard what was the matter, persecution began for us both.

We used to compare our experiences; the ladies trying to persuade me now that it was improper, now that I should be terrified to death now that I should become too ugly to be presentable; while the gentlemen made game of M. de Bellaise as a foolish young lover, who was so absurd as to encumber himself with a wife of whom he would soon weary, and whose presence would interfere with his enjoyment of the freedom and diversions of military life. He who was only just free from his governor, would he saddle himself with a wife? Bah!

He who had been so shy defended himself with spirit; and on my side I declared that nothing but his commands, and those of my father, should induce me to leave him. At Amiens we met a courier on his way to England, and by him we dispatched letters to my father.

M. de Nidemerle treated all like absurd childish nonsense, complimenting me ironically all the while; but I thought he wavered a little before the journey was over, wishing perhaps that he had never given his nephew a strange, headstrong, English wife, but thinking that, as the deed was done, the farther off from himself she was the better.

At least, he no longer blamed his nephew and threatened him with his aunt; but declared that Madame de Rambouillet would soon put all such folly out of our minds.

I asked my husband what Madame de Rambouillet could have to do with our affairs; and he shrugged his shoulders and answered that the divine Arthenice was the supreme judge of decorum, whose decisions no one could gainsay.

CHAPTER IV. – THE SALON BLEU

We arrived at Paris late in the day, entering the city through a great fortified gateway, and then rolling slowly through the rough and narrow streets. You know them too well, my children, to be able to conceive how strange and new they seemed to me, accustomed as I was to our smooth broad Thames and the large gardens of the houses in the Strand lying on its banks.

Our carriage turned in under the porte cochere of this Hotel de Nidemerle of ours, and entered the courtyard. My husband, his uncle, and I know not how many more, were already on the steps. M. de Nidemerle solemnly embraced me and bade me welcome, presenting me at the same time to a gentlemen, in crimson velvet and silver, as my brother. My foolish heart bounded for a moment as if it could have been Eustace; but it was altogether the face of a stranger, except for a certain fine smile like my mother's. It was, of course, my half-brother, M. le Baron de Solivet, who saluted me, and politely declared himself glad to make the acquaintance of his sister.

The Marquis then led me up the broad stairs, lined with lackeys, to our own suite of apartments, where I was to arrange my dress before being presented to Madame de Nidemerle, who begged me to excuse her not being present to greet me, as she had caught cold, and had a frightful megrim.

I made my toilet, and they brought me a cup of eau sucrée and a few small cakes, not half enough for my hungry English appetite.

My husband looked me over more anxiously than ever he had done before; and I wished, for his sake, that I had been prettier and fitter to make a figure among all these grand French ladies.

My height was a great trouble to me in those unformed days. I had so much more length to dispose of than my neighbours, and I knew they remarked me the more for it; and then my hair never would remain in curl for half an hour together. My mother could put it up safely, but since I had left her it was always coming down, like flax from a distaff; and though I had in general a tolerably fresh and rosy complexion, heat outside and agitation within made my whole face, nose and all, instantly become the colour of a clove gillyflower. It had so become every afternoon on the journey, and I knew I was growing redder and redder every moment, and that I should put him, my own dear Viscount, to shame before his aunt.

‘Oh! my friend,’ I sighed, ‘pardon me, I cannot help it.’

‘Why should I pardon thee?’ he answered tenderly. ‘Because thou hast so great and loving a heart?’

‘Ah! but what will thine aunt think of me?’

‘Let her think,’ he said. ‘Thou art mine, not Madame's.’

I know not whether those words made me less red, but they gave me such joyous courage that I could have confronted all the dragoons, had I been of the colour of a boiled lobster, and when he himself sprinkled me for the last time with essences, I felt ready to defy the censure of all the marchionesses in France.

My husband took me by the hand and led me to the great chamber, where in an alcove stood the state bed, with green damask hangings fringed with gold, and in the midst of pillows trimmed with point-lace sat up Madam la Marquis, her little sallow face, like a bit of old parchment, in the midst of the snowy linen, and not—to my eyes—wearing a very friendly aspect.

She had perhaps been hearing of my wilfulness and insubordination, for she was very grand and formal with me, solemnly calling me Madame la Vicomtesse, and never her niece, and I thought all the time that I detected a sneer. If I had wished for my husband's sake to accompany him, I wished it ten thousand times more when I fully beheld the alternative.

Ah! I am writing treason. Had I been a well-trained French young girl I should have accepted my lot naturally, and no doubt all the family infinitely regretted that their choice has fallen on one so impracticable.

I was happier at the supper-table, to which we were soon summoned, for I had become accustomed to M. de Nidemerle, who was always kind to me. Poor old man, I think he had hoped to have something young and lively in his house; but I never thought of that, and of course my husband was my only idea.

M. de Solivet set by me, and asked many questions about my mother and the rest of the family, treating me more as a woman than anyone else had done. Nor was it long before I caught slight resemblances both to my mother and to my brother Berenger, which made me feel at home with him. He was a widower, and his two daughters were being educated in a convent, where he promised to take me to visit them, that I might describe them to their grandmother.

Poor little things! I thought them very stiff and formal, and pitied them when I saw them; but I believed they were really full of fun and frolic among their companions.

M. de Solivet was consulted on this wild scheme of mine, and the Marchioness desired him to show me its absurdity. He began by arguing that it was never when to act in the face of custom, and that he had only known of two ladies who had followed their husbands to the wars, and both them only belonged to the petite noblesse, and were no precedent for me! One of them had actually joined her husband when wounded and made prisoner, and it was said that her care had saved his life!

Such a confession on his part rendered me the more determined, and we reminded M. de Nidemerle of his promise to consult Madame de Rambouillet, though I would not engage even then to abide by any decision except my father's, which I daily expected. I overheard people saying how much M. de Bellaise was improved by his marriage, and how much more manly and less embarrassed he had become, and I felt that my resolution made him happy, so that I became the more determined.

Children, you who have laughed at *Les Precieuses* can have little idea what the Hotel de Rambouillet was when, three nights after arrival, I went thither with my husband and his uncle and aunt.

The large salon, hung and draped with blue velvet, divided by lines of gold, was full of people ranged in a circle, listening eagerly to the recital of poem by the author, an Abbe, who stood in the midst, declaiming each couplet with emphasis, and keeping time with his foot, while he made gestures with his uplifted hand. Indeed, I thought at first he was in a furious passion and was going to knock someone down, till I saw calmly everyone sat; and then again I fancied we had come to a theatre by mistake; but happily I did not speak, and, without interrupting the declamation, chairs were given us, and exchanging a mute salutation with a lady of a noble cast of beauty, who guided us to seats, we quietly took our places. She was Julie d'Argennes, the daughter of Madame de Rambouillet. A gentleman followed her closely, the Duke of Montausier, who adored her, but whom she could not yet decide on accepting.

I found it difficult to fit from laughing at the gestures of the Abbe, especially when I thought of my brother and how they would mock them; but I knew that this would be unpardonable bad taste, and as I had come in too late to have the clue to the discourse, I amused myself with looking about me.

Perhaps the most striking figure was that of the hostess, with her stately figure, and face, not only full of intellect, but of something that went far beyond it, and came out of some other higher world, to which she was trying to raise this one.

Next I observed a lady, no longer in her first youth, but still wonderfully fair and graceful. She was enthroned in a large arm-chair, and on a stool beside her sat her daughter, a girl of my own age, the most lovely creature I had ever seen, with a profusion of light flaxen hair, and deep blue eyes, and one moment full of grave thought, at another of merry mischief. A young man sat by, whose cast of features reminded me of the Prince of Wales, but his nose was more aquiline, his dark blue eyes far more intensely bright and flashing, and whereas Prince Charles would have made fun of all the flourishes of our poet, they seemed to inspire in this youth an ardour he could barely restrain, and when there was something vehement about *Mon epee et ma patrie* he laid his hand on his sword, and his eyes lit up, so that he reminded me of a young eagle.

This was the Princess of Conde, who in the pride of her youthful beauty had been the last flame of Henri IV., who had almost begun a war on her account; this was her lovely daughter, Mademoiselle de Bourbon, and her sons, the brave Duke of Enghien, with his deformed brother, the Prince of Conti.

When the recital was over, there was a general outburst of applause, in which M. de Nidemerle joined heartily. Madame de Rambouillet gave her meed of approbation, but her daughter, Mademoiselle d' Argennes, took exception at the use of the word *chevaucher*, for to ride, both as being obsolete, and being formed from the name of a single animal, instead of regularly derived from a Latin verb.

The Abbe defended his word, and for fully twenty minutes there was an eager argument, people citing passages and derivations, and defining shades of meaning with immense animation and brilliant wit, as I now understand, though then it seemed to me a wearisome imbroglio about a trifle. I did not know what real benefit was done by these discussions in purifying the language from much that was coarse and unrefined. Yes, and far more than the language, for Madame de Rambouillet, using her great gifts as a holy trust for the good of her neighbour, conferred no small benefit on her generation, nor is that good even yet entirely vanished. Ah! If there were more women like her, France and society would be very different.

When the discussion was subsiding, Mademoiselle d' Argennes came to take me by the hand, and to present us to the queen of the salon.

'Here, my mother, are our Odoardo and Gildippe,' she said.

You remember, my children, that Odoardo and Gildippe are the names bestowed by Tasso on the English married pair who went together on the first crusade, and Gildippe continued to be my name in that circle, my *nom de Parnasse*, as it was called—nay, Madame de Montausieur still gives it to me.

The allusion was a fortunate one; it established a precedent, and, besides, English people have always been supposed to be eccentric. I am, however, doing the noble lady injustice. Arthenice, as she was called by an anagram of her baptismal name of Catherine, was no blind slave to the conventional. She had originality enough to have been able to purify the whole sphere in which she moved, and to raise the commonplace into the ideal. 'Excuse me,' she said to her friends, and she led my husband apart into a deep window, and there, as he told me, seemed to look him through and through. And verily he was one who needed not to fear such an inspection, any more than the clearest crystal.

Then, in like manner, she called for me, and made me understand that I was condemning myself to a life of much isolation, and that I must be most circumspect in my conduct, whole, after all, I might see very little of my husband; I must take good care that my presence was a help and refreshment, not a burden and perplexity to him, or he would neglect me and repent my coming. 'It may seem strange,' she said, 'but I think my young friend will understand me, that I have always found that, next of course to those supplied by our holy religion, the best mode of rendering our life and its inconveniences endurable is to give them a colouring of romance.' I did not understand her then, but I have often since thought of her words, when the recollection of the poetical aspect of the situation has aided my courage and my good temper. Madame de Rambouillet looked into my eyes as she spoke, then said: 'Pardon an old woman, my dear;' and kissed my brow, saying: 'You will not do what I have only dreamt of.'

Finally she led us forward to our great-uncle, saying: 'Madame le Marquis, I have conversed with these children. They love one another, and so long as that love lasts they will be better guardians to one another than ten governors or twenty dames de compagnie.'

In England we should certainly not have done all this in public, and my husband and I were terribly put to the blush; indeed, I felt my whole head and neck burning, and caught a glimpse of myself in a dreadful mirror, my white bridal dress and flaxen hair making my fiery face look, my brothers would have said, 'as if I had been skinned.'

And then, to make it all worse, a comical little crooked lady, with a keen lively face, came hopping up with hands outspread, crying: 'Ah, let me see her! Where is the fair Gildippe, the true heroine, who is about to confront the arrows of the Lydians for the sake of the lord of her heart?'

'My niece,' said the Marquis, evidently gratified by the sensation I had created, 'Mademoiselle de Scudery does you the honour of requesting to be presented to you.'

I made a low reverence, terribly abashed, and I fear it would have reduced my mother to despair, but it was an honour that I appreciated; for now that I was a married woman, I was permitted to read romances, and I had just begun on the first volume of the *Grand Curus*. My husband read it to me as I worked at my embroidery, and you may guess how we enjoyed it.

But I had no power of make compliments—nay, my English heart recoiled in anger at their making such an outcry, whether of blame or praise, at what seemed to me the simplest thing in the world. The courtesy and consideration were perfect; as soon as these people saw that I was really abashed and distressed, they turned their attention from me. My husband was in the meantime called to be presented to the Duke of Enghien, and I remained for a little while unmolested, so that I could recover myself a little. Presently a soft voice close to me said 'Madame,' and I looked up into the beautiful countenance of Anne Genevieve de Bourbon, her blue eyes shining on me with the sweetest expression. 'Madame,' she said, 'permit me to tell you how glad I am for you.'

I thanked her most heartily. I felt this was the real tender sympathy of a being of my own age and like myself, and there were something so pathetic in her expression that I felt sorry for her.

'You are good! You will keep good,' she said.

'I hope so, Mademoiselle,' I said.

'Ah! yes, you will. They will not make you lose your soul against your will!' and she clenched her delicate white hand.

'Nobody can do that, Mademoiselle.'

'What! Not when they drag you to balls and fete away from the cloister, where alone you can be safe?'

'I hope not there alone,' I said.

'For me it is the only place,' she repeated. 'What is the use of wearing haircloth when the fire of the Bourbons is in one's blood, and one has a face that all the world runs after?'

'Mais, Mademoiselle,' I said; 'temptation is only to prove our strength.'

'You are strong. You have conquered,' she said, and clasped my hand. 'But then you loved him.'

I suppose I smiled a little with my conscious bliss, for this strange young princess hastily asked: 'Did you love him? I mean, before you were married.'

'Oh no,' I said, glad to disavow what was so shocking in my new country.

'But he is lovable? Ah! that is it. While you are praying to Heaven, and devoting yourself to a husband whom you love, remember that if I ruin my soul, it is because they would have it so!'

At that moment there was a pause. A gentleman, the Marquis de Feuquieres, had come in, bringing with him a very young lad, in the plian black gown and white collar of a theological student; and it was made known that the Marquis had been boasting of the wonderful facility of a youth was studying at the College of Navarre, and had declared that he could extemporise with eloquence upon any subject. Some one had begged that the youth might be fetched and set to preach on a text proposed to him at the moment, and here he was.

Madame de Rambouillet hesitated a little at the irreverence, but the Duke of Enghien requested that the sermon might take place, and she consented, only looking at her watch and saying it was near midnight, so that the time was short. M. Voiture, the poet, carried round a velvet bag, and each was to write a text on a slip of paper to be drawn out at haphazard.

We two showed each other what we wrote. My husband's was—'Love is strong as death;' mine—'Let the wife cleave unto her husband.' But neither of them was drawn out. I saw by the start that Mademoiselle de Bourbon gave that it was hers, when the first paper was taken out—'Vanity of

vanities, all is vanity!’ a few minutes were offered to the young Abbe to collect his thoughts, but he declined them, and he was led to a sort of a dais at the end of the salon, while the chairs were placed in a half-circle. Some of the ladies tittered a little, though Madame de Rambouillet looked grave; but they composed themselves. We all stood and repeated the Ave, and then seated ourselves; while the youth, in a voice already full and sweet, began solemnly: ‘What is life? what is man?’

I can never convey to you how this world and all its fleeting follies seemed to melt away before us, and how each of us felt our soul alone in the presence of our Maker, as though nothing mattered, or ever would matter, but how we stood with Him. One hardly dared to draw one’s breath. Mademoiselle de Bourbon was almost stifled with the sobs she tried to restrain lest her mother should make her retire. My husband held my hand, and pressed it unseen. He was a deeper, more thoughtful man ever after he heard that voice, which seemed to come, as it were, from the Angel at Bochim who warned the Israelites; and that night we dedicated ourselves to the God who had not let us be put asunder.

I wished we could have gone away at once and heard no more, and so must, I think, the young preacher have felt; but he was surrounded with compliments. M. Voiture said he had never heard ‘so early nor so late a sermon;’ while others thronged up with their compliments.

Madame de Rambouillet herself murmured: ‘He might be Daniel hearing the compliments of Belshazzar on his deciphering the handwriting,’ so impassively did he listen to the suffrages of the assembly, only replying by a bow.

The Duke of Enghien, boldest of course, pressed up to him and, taking his hand, begged to know his name.

‘Bossuet, Monseigneur,’ he answered.

There were one or two who had the bad taste to smile, for Bossuet (I must tell my English kindred) means a draught-ox; but once more the lovely sister of the young Duke grasped my hand and said: ‘Oh, that I could hide myself at once! Why will they not let me give myself to my God? Vanity of vanities! why am I doomed?’

I was somewhat frightened, and was glad that a summons of ‘my daughter’ from the Princess of Conde interrupted these strange communications. I understood them better when we were called upon to tell the old Marchioness the names of every one whom we had met at the Hotel de Rambouillet, and on hearing of the presence of Mademoiselle de Bourbon she said: ‘Ah! yes, a marriage is arranged for the young lady with the Duke of Longueville.’

‘But!’ exclaimed my husband, ‘the Duke is an old man, whose daughter is older than I.’

‘What has that to do with it?’ said his aunt. ‘There is not much blood in France with which a Montmorency Bourbon can match. Moreover, they say the child is devote, and entetee on Madam de Port Royal, who is more than suspected of being outree in her devotion; so the sooner she is married the better!’

Poor beautiful girl, how I pitied her then! Her lovely, wistful, blue eyes haunted me all night, in the midst of my own gladness; for a courier had come that evening bringing my father’s reply. He said my mother deplored my unusual course, but that for his part he liked his little girl the better for her courage, and that he preferred that I should make my husband’s home happy to my making it at court. All he asked of me was to remember that I had to guard the honour of my husband’s name and of my country, and he desired that I should take Tryphena with me wherever I went.

CHAPTER V. – IN GARRISON

I am almost afraid to dwell on those happiest days of my life that I spent in garrison. My eyes, old as they are, fill with tears when I am about to write of them, and yet they passed without my knowing how happy they were; for much of my time was spent in solitude, much in waiting, much in anxiety; but ah! there then always was a possibility that never, never can return!

Nancy seems to me a paradise when I look back to it, with its broad clean streets and open squares, and the low houses with balconies, and yet there I often thought myself miserable, for I began to learn what it was to be a soldier's wife. Madame de Rambouillet had kindly written to some of her friends in the duchy of Lorraine respecting me, and they assisted us in obtaining a lodging and servants. This might otherwise have been difficult, for the Duke was I the Spanish army, while we held his territories, and naturally we were not in very good odour with the people.

My husband had to leave me, immediately after he had placed me in my little house at Nancy, to join the army in Germany under Marshal Guebriant. I lived through that time by the help of the morning mass, of needlework, and of the Grand Cyrus, which I read through and then began again. My dear husband never failed to send me a courier once a week with letters that were life to me, and sometimes I heard from England; but my mother's letters were becoming full of anxiety, affairs were looking so ill for the king.

After a gallant victory over the Swedes my Viscount returned to me without a wound, and with distinguished praise from the Marshal. That was an important winter, for it saw the deaths of the great Cardinal and of King Louis XIII., moreover of the old Marchioness. My husband's loving heart sorrowed for her and for his uncle; but that same week brought thee to my arms, my dear son, my beloved Gaspard! Oh! what a fight Tryphena and I had to prevent his being stifled in swaddling clothes! And how all the women predicted that his little limbs would be broken and never be straight.

That winter was only clouded by the knowledge that spring would take my husband away again. How good he was to me! How much pleasure and amusement he gave up for my sake! He had outgrown his bashfulness and embarrassment in this campaign, and could take his place in company, but he remained at home with me. Had neither the grace nor the vivacity that would have enabled me to collect a society around me, and I seldom saw his brother officers except my brother M. de Solivet, and his great friend M. de Chamillard, who was quite fatherly to me.

The Duke of Enghien took the command of the army of Picardy, and asked for our regiment. I entreated not to be sent back to Paris, and prevailed to be allowed to take up my abode at Mezieres, where I was not so far from the camp but that my dear M. de Bellaise could sometimes ride over and see me. He told me of the murmur of the elder men of the army that the fiery young inexperienced prince was disregarding all the checks that the old Marshal de l'Hopital put in his way; but he himself was delighted, and made sure of success. The last time he came he told me he heard that Rocroy was invested by the enemy. I was made to promise that in case of any advance on the enemy's part I would instantly set off for Paris. He said it was the only way to make him fight with a free heart, if a battle there were, and not repent of having permitted me to follow him, and that I must think of my child as well as myself; but he did not expect any such good fortune as a battle, the old marshal was so set against it!

But I knew that he did expect a battle, by the way he came back and back again to embrace me and his child.

I have waited and watched many times since that day, but never as I then waited. With what agony I watched and prayed! how I lived either before the altar, or at the window! how I seemed to be all eyes and ears! How reports came that there was fighting, then that we had the day, then that all was lost! Then came a calm, and it was said that Marshal de l'Hopital had refused to fight, and was in full retreat, with the Duke of Enghien cursing and swearing and tearing his hair. My landlord

had a visit from the mayor to say that he must prepare to have some men billeted on him, and I sent out to inquire for horses, but decided that, as it was only our own troops retreating, there would be plenty of time. Then one of the maids of the house rushed in declaring that firing was plainly to be heard. Half the people were out in the streets, many more had gone outside the city to listen. Tryphena sat crying with fright, and rocking the baby in her lap, and wishing she had never come to this dreadful country. Alas! poor Tryphena she would have been no better off in her own at that moment! I ran from window to door, unable to rest a moment, listening to the cries in the streets, asking the landlady what she heard, and then running back to my own room to kneel in prayer, but starting up at the next sound in the streets.

At last, just before sunset, on that long, long 19th of May, all the bells began to ring, clashing as if mad with joy, and a great roaring shout burst out all over the city: 'Victory! Victory! Vive le Roi! Vive le Duc d'Enghien!'

I was at the window just in time to see a party of splendid horsemen, carrying the striped and castellated colours of Spain, galloping through the town, followed by universal shouts and acclamations. My man-servant, Nicole, frantic with joy, came in to tell me that they had only halted at the inn long enough to obtain fresh horses, on their way to the Queen-Regent with the news of the great victory of Rocroy. More standards taken, more cannon gained, more of the enemy killed and captive than could be counted, and all owing to the surpassing valour of the Duke of Enghien!

'And my husband!' I cried, and asked everybody, as if, poor little fool that I was, any one was likely to know how it fared with one single captain of the dragoons of Conde on such a day as that.

The good landlady and Tryphena both tried to reassure me that if there were ill news it would have been sent to me at once; but though they persuaded me at last to go to bed, I could not sleep, tossing about and listening till morning light, when I dropped into a sound sleep, which lasted for hours. I had longed for the first morning mass to go and pray there, but after all I only heard the bells through my slumber, feeling as if I could not rouse myself, and then—as it seemed to me, in another moment—I heard something that made me turn round on my pillow and open my eyes, and there he stood—my husband himself. His regiment had surpassed itself; he had received the thanks of his colonel; he had but snatched a few hours' sleep, and had ridden off to assure his Gildippe of his safety by her own eyes, and to rejoice over our splendid victory.

And yet he could not but shudder as he spoke. When they had asked a Spanish prisoner how many there had been in the army, 'Count the dead,' he proudly answered. Nor could my husband abstain from tears as he told me how the old Spanish guards were all lying as they stood, slain all together, with their colonel, the Count of Fontanes, at their head, sitting in the armchair in which he had been carried to the field, for he was more than eighty years old, and could not stand or ride on account of the gout.

The Duke of Enghien had said that if he had not been victorious, the next best thing would be to have died like that.

But his charges, his fire, his coolness, his skill, the vehemence which had triumphed over the caution of the old marshal, and the resolution which had retrieved the day when his colleague was wounded; of all this M. de Bellaise spoke with passionate ardour and enthusiasm, and I—oh! I think that was the happiest and most glorious day of all my life!

When we went together to mass, how everybody looked at him! and when we returned there was quite a little crowd—M. le Gouverneur and his officials eager to make their compliments to M. de Bellaise, and to ask questions about the Duke and about the battle, and whether he thought the Duke would march this way, in which case a triumphal entry should be prepared. They wanted to have regaled M. de Bellaise with a banquet, and were sadly disappointed when he said he had only stolen a few hours to set his wife's heart at rest, and must return immediately to the camp.

There was little after that to make me anxious, for our army merely went through a course of triumphs, taking one city after another in rapid succession. I remained at Mezieres, and M. de

Bellaise sometimes was able to spend a few days with me, much, I fear, to the derision of his fellow-soldiers, who could not understand a man's choosing such a form of recreation. We had been walking under the fine trees in the PLACE on a beautiful summer evening, and were mounting the stairs on our return home, when we heard a voice demanding of the hostess whether this were the lodging of Captain de Bellaise.

I feared that it was a summons from the camp, but as the stranger came forward I saw that he was a very young man in the dress of a groom, booted, spurred, and covered with dust and dried splashes of mud, though his voice and pronunciation were those of a gentleman.

'Do you bring tidings from M. le Marquis?' inquired my husband, who had recognized our livery.

'Ah! I have deceived you likewise, and no wonder, for I should not have known you, Philippe,' cried the new comer.

'Armand d'Aubepine! Impossible! I thought your child was a girl,' exclaimed my husband.

'And am I to waste my life and grow old ingloriously on that account?' demanded the youth, who had by this time come up to our rooms.

'Welcome, then, my brother,' said my husband a little gravely, as I thought. 'My love,' he added, turning to me, 'let me present to you my brother-in-law, the Chevalier d'Aubepine.'

With infinite grace the Chevalier put a knee to the ground, and kissed my hand.

'Madame will be good enough to excuse my present appearance,' he said, 'in consideration of its being the only means by which I could put myself on the path of honour.'

'It is then an evasion?' said my husband gravely.

'My dear Viscount, do not give yourself the airs of a patriarch. They do not suit with your one-and-twenty years, even though you are the model of husbands. Tell me, where is your hero?'

'The Duke? He is before Thionville.'

'I shall be at his feet in another day. Tell me how goes the war. What cities are falling before our arms?'

He asked of victories; M. de Bellaise asked of his sister. 'Oh! well, well, what do I know?' he answered lightly, as if the matter were beneath his consideration; and when I inquired about his child, he actually made a grimace, and indeed he had barely seen her, for she had been sent out to be nursed at a farmhouse, and he did not even recollect her name. I shall never forget how he stared, when at the sound of a little cry my husband opened the door and appeared with our little Gaspard, now five months old, laughing and springing in his arms, and feeling for the gold on his uniform. The count had much the same expression with which I have seen a lady regard me when I took a caterpillar in my hand.

'Ah! ah!' cried our Chevalier; 'with all his legs and arms too! That is what comes of marrying an Englishwoman.' [he did not know I was within hearing, for I had gone in to give Tryphena orders about the room he would occupy.] 'Beside, it is a son.'

'I hope one day to have a daughter whom I shall love the more, the more she resembles her mother,' said my husband, to tease him.

'Bah! You will not have to detest her keeping you back from glory! Tell me, Philippe, could a lettre de cachet reach me here?'

'We are on French soil. What have you been doing, Armand?'

'Only flying from inglorious dullness, my friend. Do not be scandalized, but let me know how soon I can reach the hero of France, and enroll myself as a volunteer.'

'The Duke is at Binche. I must return thither tomorrow. You had better eat and sleep here tonight, and then we can decide what is to be done.'

'I may do that,' the youth said, considering. 'My grandfather could hardly obtain an order instantaneously, and I have a fair start.'

So M. de Bellaise lent him some clothes, and he appeared at supper as a handsome lively-looking youth, hardly come to his full height, for he was only seventeen, with a haughty bearing, and large, almost fierce dark eyes, under eyebrows that nearly met.

At supper he told us his story. He was, as you know the only scion of the old house of Aubepine, his father having been killed in a duel, and his mother dying at his birth. His grandparents bred him up with the most assiduous care, but (as my husband told me) it was the care of pride rather than of love. When still a mere boy, they married him to poor little Cecile de Bellaise, younger still, and fresh from her convent, promising, on his vehement entreaty, that so soon as the succession should be secured by the birth of a son, he should join the army.

Imagine then his indignation and despair when a little daughter—a miserable little girl, as he said—made her appearance, to prolong his captivity. For some centuries, he said—weeks he meant—he endured, but then came the tidings of Rocroy to drive him wild with impatience, and the report that there were negotiations for peace completed the work. He made his wife give him her jewels and assist his escape from the window of her chamber; bribed a courier—who was being sent from M. de Nidemerle to my husband—to give him his livery and passport and dispatches, and to keep out of sight; and thus passed successfully through Paris, and had, through a course of adventures which he narrated with great spirit, safely reached us. Even if the rogue of a courier, as he justly called his accomplice, had betrayed him, there was no fear but that he would have time to put himself on the roll of the army, whence a promising young noble volunteer was not likely to be rejected.

My husband insisted that he should write to ask the pardon of his grandfather, and on that condition engaged to introduce him to the Duke and to the lieutenant-colonel of his regiment. M. de Bellaise then inquired anxiously after the health of our uncle, who, on the death of his wife, had retired to his own estate at Nid de Merle, close to the Chateau d'Aubepine. Of this the young gentleman could tell little or nothing.

'Bah!' he said, adding what he thought was a brilliant new military affirmation, unaware that it was as old as the days of the League. 'What know I? He is, as all old men are, full of complaints.'

Handsome, graceful, courteous, spirited as was this young Chevalier, I could not like him, and I afterwards told my husband that I wondered at his assisting him.

'My love,' he said, 'the Chateau d'Aubepine is dull enough to die of. The poor fellow was eating out his own heart. He has followed his instinct, and it is the only thing that can save him from worse corruption.'

'His instinct of selfishness,' I said. 'His talk was all of glory, but it was of his own glory, not his duty nor the good of his country. He seems to me to have absolutely no heart!'

'Do not be hard on him; remember how he has been brought up.'

'You were brought up in like manner by two old people.'

'Ah! but they loved me. Besides, my tutor and his were as different as light and darkness.'

'And your poor little sister,' I said.

'She must have won his gratitude by her assistance. He will have learnt to love her when he returns. Come, ma mie, you must forgive him. If you knew what his captivity was, you could not help it. He was the play-fellow of my boyhood, and if I can help him to the more noble path, my aid must not be wanting, either for his sake or that of my sister.'

How wise and how noble these two years had made my dear husband; how unlike the raw lad I had met at Whitehall! It was the training in self-discipline that he had given himself for my sake—yes, and for that of his country and his God.

CHAPTER VI. – VICTORY DEARLY BOUGHT

No difficulty was made about enrolling the Chevalier d'Aubepine as a volunteer in the regiment of Conde, and as the *lettre de cachet*, as my brother De Solivet said, the Cardinal understood his game too well to send one to bring back a youth who had rushed to place himself beneath the banners of his country in the hands of a prince of the blood.

Indeed, we soon learned that there was no one to pursue him. His grandfather had a stroke of apoplexy in his rage on hearing of the arrest, and did not survive it a week, so that he had become Count of Aubepine. The same courier brought to my husband a letter from his sister, which I thought very stiff and formal, all except the conclusion: 'Oh, my brother, I implore you on my knees to watch over him and bring him back to me!'

Yet, as far as we knew and believed, the young man had never written at all to his poor little wife. My husband had insisted on his producing a letter to his grandfather; but as to his wife, he shrugged his shoulders, said that she could see that he was safe, and that was enough for her.

He was, in fact, like one intoxicated with the delights of liberty and companionship. He enjoyed a certain eclat from the manner of his coming, and was soon a universal favourite among the officers. Unfortunately, the influence and example there were not such as to lead him to think more of his wife. The Duke of Enghien had been married against his will to a poor little childish creature, niece to Cardinal de Richelieu, and he made it the fashion to parade, not only neglect, but contempt, of one's wife. He was the especial hero of our young Count's adoration, and therefore it was the less wonder that, when in the course of the winter, the chaplain wrote that the young Madame le Comtesse was in the most imminent danger, after having given birth to the long desired son and heir, he treated the news with supreme carelessness. We should never have known whether she lived or died, had not the courier, by whom M. de Bellaise wrote to her as well as to his uncle, brought back one of her formal little letters, ill-spelt and unmeaning, thanking Monsieur son frere and Madame sa femme for their goodness, and saying she was nearly recovered.

'It cuts me to the heart to receive such letters,' said my husband, 'and to feel how little I can be to her. Some day I hope I may know her better, and make her feel what a brother means.'

All this happened while we were in garrison for the winter at Nancy. Again we offered M. d'Aubepine a room in our house; but though he was, in his way, fond of my husband, and was polite to me, he thought a residence with us would interfere with his liberty, and, alas! his liberty consisted in plunging deeper and deeper into dissipation, gambling, and all those other sports which those about him made him think the privileges of manhood. We could do nothing; he laughed at M. de Bellaise, and so indeed did these chosen friends of his. I believe plenty of wit was expended on us and our happy domestic life; but what was that to us? The courage of M. de Bellaise was well known, and he had so much good-temper and kindness that no one durst insult him.

He was doubly tender to me that winter and spring because the accounts from England were so sad. My dear brother Berenger had been killed at the battle of Alresford, and affairs looked very ill for the royal cause. I wept for my brother; but, ah! those tears were as nothing compared with what I was soon to shed.

The Duke of Enghien arrived. He was not to take the command of the army of the Low Countries, but of that of Germany. He came on the very day we had heard of the loss of Freiburg in Brisgau, and all was at once activity. I saw the inspection of the army just outside the city, and a glorious sight it was; bodies of infantry moving like one great machine, squadrons of cavalry looking invincible, all glittering with gold, and their plumes waving, the blue and gold banners above their heads; and the dear regiment of Conde, whence salutes from eye and hand came to me and my little Gaspard as they rode past.

I did not tremble as in the last campaign. Ah! perhaps I did not pray so much. I heard of the crossing of the Rhine at Brisach, and then came rumours of a tremendous battle at Freiburg. The bells had only just begun to ring, when Pierre, our groom, galloped into the town, and sent up at once his packet. His master, he said, was wounded, but not badly, and had covered himself with glory. I tore open the packet. There were a few lines by his own dear hand;—

‘My heart—I shall be with thee soon to rest in thy care—D.G. Kiss your son. Thy B.’

The rest of the packet was from my half-brother De Solivet, and told how, in the frightful attack on the vineyard at Freiburg, seven times renewed, my dear, dear Philippe had received a shot in the knee, just as he was grasping a Bavarian standard, which he carried off with him. He would have returned to the charge, but faintness overpowered him, and he was supported on horseback from the field to the tent. The wound had been dressed, and the surgeon saw no occasion for alarm. M. de Solivet, who had a slight wound himself, and M. d’Aubepine, who was quite uninjured, though he had done prodigies of valour, would tend him with all their hearts. I had better send the carriage and horses at once to bring him back, as the number of wounded was frightful, and means of transport were wanting. Then followed a message of express command from my husband that I was not to think of coming with the carriage. He would not have me at Freiburg on any account.

I submitted; indeed I saw no cause for fear, and even rejoiced that for a long time I should have my husband to myself. I made all ready for him, and taught my little Gaspard now he would say: ‘Soyez le bienvenu, mon papa.’

So passed a week. Then one day there was a clanking of spurs on the stairs; I flew to the door and there stood M. d’Aubepine.

‘Is he near?’ I cried, and then I saw he was white and trembling.

‘Ah! no,’ he cried; ‘he is at Brisach! We could bring him no farther. Can you come with me, Madame? He asked incessantly for you, and it might—it might be that your coming may revive him.’

And then this wild headstrong youth actually sank into a chair, hid his face on the table, and sobbed as if his heart would break.

I had no time for weeping then. I sent for the first physician in Nancy, and offered him any sum in the world to accompany me; I had to make almost wild efforts to procure a horse, and at last had to force one from the governor by my importunities. I collected wine and cordials, and whatever could be of service, and after his first outburst my young brother-in-law helped me in a way I can never forget. No doubt the pestiferous air caused by the horrible carnage of Freiburg had poisoned the wound. As soon as possible my husband was removed; but the mischief had been already done; the wound was in a bad state, fever had set in, and though he struggled on stage after stage, declaring that he should be well when he saw me, the agony had been such on the last day that they barely got him to Brisach, and he there became delirious, so that M. de Solivet decided on remaining with him, while the Count came on to fetch me. He had ridden ever since four o’clock in the morning, and yet was ready to set out again as soon as my preparations were complete. Oh, I can never overlook what he was to me on that journey!

Hope kept us up through that dismal country—the path of war, where instead of harvest on the August day we saw down-trodden, half-burned wheat fields, where a few wretched creatures were trying to glean a few ears of wheat. Each village we passed showed only blackened walls, save where at intervals a farmhouse had been repaired to serve as an estafette for couriers from the French army. The desolation of the scene seemed to impress itself on my soul, and destroy the hopes with which I had set forth; but on and on we went, till the walls of Brisach rose before us.

He was in the governor’s quarters, and only at the door, I perceived the M. d’Aubepine had much doubted whether we should find him alive. However, that one consolation was mine. He knew me; he smiled again on me; he called me by all his fondest names; he said that now he could rest. For twenty-four hours we really thought that joy was working a cure. Alas! then he grew worse again,

and when the pain left him, mortification had set in, and we could only send for a priest to administer the last Sacraments.

I am an old woman now, and what was then the cruelest anguish touches me with pleasure when I think how he called me his guardian angel, and thanked me for having been his shield from temptation, placing his son in my sole charge, and commending his sister and his old uncle to me—his poor little sister whose lot seemed to grieve him so much. He talked to the Count, who wept, tore his hair, and made promises, which he really then intended to execute, and which at least comforted my Philippe.

The good priest who attended him said, he had never seen anything more edifying or beautiful, and that he had never heard the confession of a military man showing a purer heart, more full of holy love, trust, and penitence. There was a great peace upon us all, as his life ebbed away, and even the Count stood silent and awestruck. They took me away at last. I remember nothing but the priest telling me that my husband was in Paradise.

I felt as if it were all a dream, and when presently my brother came and took my hand, I cried out: 'Oh, wake me! Wake me!' And when he burst into tears I asked what he meant.

Looking back now I can see how very kind he was to me, though I made little return, being altogether bewildered by the sudden strangeness of my first grief. Poor M. de Solivet! he must have had a heavy charge for Armand d'Aubepine was altogether frantic with grief, and did nothing to help him, while I could not weep, and sat like a statue, hardly knowing what they said to me. Nay, when the tidings came that my father had been killed in the battle of Marston Moor three weeks before, I was too dull and dead to grieve. Eustace had written to my husband in order that he might prepare me; I opened the letter, and all that I can remember feeling was that I had no one to shield me.

I had but one wish and sense of duty at that moment, namely, to carry home those dear remains to the resting-place of his father in Anjou, where I hope myself to rest. It was of no use to tell me that all places would be alike to my Philippe when we should awake on the Resurrection day. I was past reason, and was possessed with a feeling that I would be sacrilege to leave him among the countless unnamed graves of the wounded who, like him, had struggled as far as Brisach to die. I fancied I should not be able to find him, and, besides, it was an enemy's country! I believe opposition made me talk wildly and terrify my brother; at any rate, he swore to me that the thing should be done, if only I would return to Nancy and to my child. I fancied, most unjustly, that this was meant to deceive me, and get me out of the way while they buried him whom I loved so much, and I refused to stir without the coffin.

How my brother contrived it, I do not know, but the thing was done, and though I was but a cart that carried the coffin to Nancy, I was pacified.

At Nancy he arranged matters more suitably. Here M. d'Aubepine, in floods of tears, took leave of me to return to the army, and M. de Solivet, whose wound disabled him from active service, undertook to escort me and my precious to Anjou.

It was a long tedious journey, and my heart beats with gratitude to him when I think what he undertook for me, and how dreary it must have been for him, while I was too dead and dull to thank him, though I hope my love and confidence evinced my gratitude in after life.

My dearest went first in a hearse drawn by mules, as was also my large carriage,—that which we had so joyously bought together, saying it would be like a kind of tent on our travels. I traveled in it with my child and my women, and M. de Solivet rode with our men-servants. Our pace was too slow for the fatigue to be too much for him, and he always preceded me to every place where we halted to eat, or where we lodged for the night, and had everything ready without a thought or a word being needful from me. He always stood ready to give me his arm to take me to hear mass before we set out each day. The perfect calm, and the quiet moving on, began to do me good. I felt as if the journey had always been going on, and only wished it were endless, for when it was over I should feel my desolation, and have no more to do for my Philippe. But I began to respond to my

poor boy's caresses and playfulness a little more; I was not so short and maussade with my women or with my good brother, and I tried to pray at mass. My brother has since told me that he never felt more relieved in his life than once when he made little Gaspard bring me some blue corn-flowers and wheat, which reminded me of my English home, so that I began to weep so profusely, that he carried away the poor frightened child, and left me to Tryphena.

One afternoon at a little village there was a look of festival; the bells were ringing, everybody was hurrying to the church, and when we stopped at the door of the inn my brother came to the carriage-window and said he was afraid that we should not find it easy to proceed at once, for a mission priest was holding a station, and no one seemed able to attend to anything else.

'He is a true saint! he is just about to preach,' said the landlady, who had come out with her gayest apron, her whitest cap, and all her gold chains. 'Ah! the poor lady, it would do her heart good to hear him preach; and by that time the roast would be ready—an admirable piece of venison, sent for the occasion. There he is, the blessed man!'

And as I had just alighted from the carriage, for our mules had made a double stage and could not go farther, I saw coming from the prebytere three or four priests, with the sexton and the serving boys. One of them, a spare thin man, with a little bronze crucifix in his hand, paused as he saw the hearse drawn up, clasped his hands in prayer, and then lifted them in benediction of him who lay within. I saw his face, and there was in it an indescribable heavenly sweetness and pity which made me say to my brother: 'I must go and hear him.'

My brother was so glad to hear me express any wish, that I believe, if I had asked to go and dance on the village green, he would almost have permitted it; and leaving my little one to play in the garden under Tryphena's care, he gave me his arm, and we went into the church, crowded—crowded so that we could hardly find room; but my deep mourning made the good people respectfully make place for us and give us chairs.

Ah! that sermon! I cannot tell you it in detail; I only know that it gave the strongest sense of healing balm to my sore heart, and seemed in a wonderful way to lift me up into the atmosphere where my Philippe was gone, making me feel that what kept me so far—far from him was not death, nor his coffin, but my own thick husk of sin and worldliness. Much more there was, which seems now to have grown into my very soul; and by the time it was over I was weeping tears no longer bitter, and feeling nothing so much as the need to speak to that priest.

M. de Solivet promised that I should, but we had long to wait, for the saintly Abbe de Paul would not postpone the poor to the rich; nor could my grief claim the precedence, for I was not the only broken-hearted young widow in France, nor even in that little village.

I cannot be grateful enough to my brother that he put up with all the inconveniences of sleeping at this little village, that I might carry out what he thought a mere woman's enthusiastic fancy: but in truth it was everything to me. After vespers the holy man was able to give me an hour in the church, and verily it was the opening of new life to me. Since my light had been taken from me, all had been utter desolate darkness before me. He put a fresh light before me, which now, after fifty years, I know to have been the dawn of better sunshine than even that which had brightened my youth—and I thank my good God, who has never let me entirely lose sight of it.

Very faint, almost disappointing, it seemed to me then. I came away from my interview feeling as if it had been vain to think there could be any balm for a crushed heart, and yet when I awoke the next morning, and dressed myself to hear mass before resuming my journey, it was with the sense that there I should meet a friend and comforter. And when I looked at my little son, it was not only with dreary passionate pity for the unconscious orphan, but with a growing purpose to bring him up as his father's special charge,—nay, as that from even a greater and nearer than my Philippe.

While, as we journeyed on, I gradually dwelt less on how piteous my arrival would be for myself, and thought more and more of its sadness for the poor old Marquis who had loved his nephew so much, till, instead of merely fearing to reach Nid de Merle, I began to look forward to it, and consider

how to comfort the poor old man; for had not my husband begged me to be the staff of his old age, and to fill a daughter's place to him?

CHAPTER VII. – WIDOW AND WIFE

We had avoided Paris, coming through Troyes and Orleans, and thus our sad strange journey lasted a full month. Poor old M. de Nidemerle had, of course, been prepared for our coming, and he came out in his coach to meet us at the cross-roads. My brother saw the mourning liveries approaching, and gave me notice. I descended from my carriage, intending to go to him in his, but he anticipated me; and there, in the middle of the road, the poor old man embraced me, weeping floods of passionate tears of grief. He was a small man, shrunk with age, and I found him clinging to me so like a child that I felt an almost motherly sense of protection and tenderness towards his forlorn old age; but my English shyness was at the moment distressed at the sense of all the servants staring at such a meeting, and I cried out: 'Oh, sir! you should not have come thus.' 'What can I do, but show all honour to the heroic wife of my dear child?' sobbed he; and, indeed, I found afterwards that my persistence in bringing home my dearest to the tombs of his forefathers had won for me boundless gratitude and honour. They took the hearse to the church of the convent at Bellaise, where its precious burthen was to rest. The obsequies, requiem, and funeral mass were to take place the next day, and in the meantime I accompanied the Marquis to the chateau, and we spent the evening and great part of the night in talking of him whom we had both loved so dearly, and in weeping together.

Then came the solemn and mournful day of the funeral. I was taken early to the convent, where, among the nuns behind the grille, I might assist at these last rites.

Thickly veiled, I looked at no one except that I curtsied my thanks to the Abbess before kneeling down by the grating looking into the choir. My grief had always been too deep for tears, and on that day I was blessed in a certain exaltation of thoughts which bore me onward amid the sweet chants to follow my Philippe, my brave, pure-hearted, loving warrior, onto his rest in Paradise, and to think of the worship that he was sharing there.

So I knelt quite still, but by and by I was sensible of a terrible paroxysm of weeping from some one close to me. I could scarcely see more than a black form when I glanced round, but it seemed to me that it was sinking; I put out my arm in support, and I found a head on my shoulder. I knew who it must be—my husband's poor little sister, Madame d'Aubepine, and I held my arm round her with an impulse of affection, as something that was his; but before all was over, I was sure that she was becoming faint, and at last I only moved just in time to receive her in my lap and arms, as she sank down nearly, if not quite, unconscious.

I tore back the heavy veil that was suffocating her, and saw a tiny thin white face, not half so large as my little Gaspard's round rosy one. Numbers of black forms hovered about with water and essences; and one tall figure bent to lift the poor child from me, apologizing with a tone of reproof, and declaring that Madame la Comtesse was ashamed to inconvenience Madame.

'No,' I said; 'one sister could not inconvenience another,' and I felt the feeble hand stealing round my waist, and saw a sort of smile on the thin little lips, which brought back one look of my Philippe's. I threw off my own veil, and raised her in my arms so as to kiss her, and in that embrace I did indeed gain a sister.

I did not heed the scolding and the murmuring; I lifted her; she was very small, and light as a feather; and I was not merely tall, but very strong, so I carried her easily to a chamber, which one of the nuns opened for us, and laid her on the bed. She clung to me, and when some one brought wine, I made her drink it, and prayed that they would leave us to ourselves a little while.

I know now that nothing but the privileges of my position on that day would have prevailed to get that grim and terrible dame de compagnie out of the room. However, we were left alone, and the first thing the poor young thing did when she could speak or move, was to throw herself into my arms and cry:

'Tell me of him!'

‘He sent his love. He commended you to me,’ I began.

‘Did he? Oh, my dear hero! And how is he looking?’

So it was of her husband, not her brother, that she was thinking. I gave me a pang, and yet I could not wonder; and alas, d’Aubepine had not given me any message at all for her. However, I told her what I thought would please her—of his handsome looks, and his favour with the Duke of Enghien, and her great dark eyes began to shine under their tear-swollen lids; but before long, that terrible woman knocked at the door again to say that Madame la Comtesse’s carriage was ready, and that M. le Marquis awaited Madame la Vicomtesse.

We arranged our disordered dress, and went down hand-in-hand. The Marquis and the Abbess both embraced the poor little Countess, and I assured her that we would meet again, and be much together.

‘Madame la Comtesse will do herself the honour of paying her respects to Madame la Vicomtesse,’ said the dame de compagnie with the elder M. d’Aubepine, and had regulated her household of late years.

‘I congratulate myself on not belonging to that respectable household,’ said my brother.

M. de Nidemerle laughed, and said the good lady had brought with her a fair share of Calvinist severity. In fact, it was reported that her conversion had been stimulated by the hope that she should be endowed with her family property, and bestowed in marriage on the young d’Aubepine, the father of the present youth, and that disappointment in both these expectations had embittered her life. I was filled with pity for my poor little sister-in-law, who evidently was under her yoke; and all the more when, a day or two later, the two ladies came in great state to pay me a visit of ceremony, and I saw how pale and thin was the little Countess, and how cowed she seemed by the tall and severe duenna.

Little Gaspard was trotting about. The Marquis was delighted with the child, and already loved him passionately; and the little fellow was very good, and could amuse himself without troubling any one.

He took refuge with me from Mademoiselle de Gringrimeau; but as I held him to kiss his aunt, her eyes filled with tears; and when I asked whether her little girl could walk as well as he did, she faltered so that I was startled, fearing that the child might have died and I not have heard of it.

‘She is out at nurse,’ at last she murmured.

‘Children are best at farms,’ said Mademoiselle de Gringrimeau; ‘Madame la Comtesse Douariere is not to be incommoded.’ The old man held out his arms to my little boy, and said something of his being a pleasure instead of an inconvenience; but though the lady answered politely, she looked so severe that my poor child hid his face on my bosom and began to cry, by way of justifying her.

However, when she was gone, both the gentlemen agreed that the little fellow was quite right, and showed his sense, and that if they had been only two years old, they would have cried too.

That was all in my favour when I entreated M. de Nidemerle to let me have a visit from my sister-in-law,—not a mere call of ceremony, but a stay at the chateau long enough for me to get acquainted with her. Not only was she the only sister of my dear Philippe, but the Marquis, her uncle, was her guardian and only near relative, so that he had a right to insist, more especially as the old Countess was imbecile and bedridden.

I think he felt towards me much as he would have done if he had been shut up in a room with Gaspard, ready to give me anything I begged for, provided I would not cry. He was very good to me, and I could not but be sorry for the poor, bereaved, broken old man, and try to be a daughter to him; and thus our relations were very different from what they had been on our journey to Paris together in the coach. At any rate, he promised me that I should be gratified, and the day after my brother left us, he actually went over to Chateau d’Aubepine, and brought off his niece in the carriage with him, presenting her to me in the hall like the spoils of war. She was frightened, formal, and ceremonious all super time, but I thought she was beginning to thaw, and was more afraid of the Marquis than of

me. We played at cards all the evening, the Cure being sent for to make up the set, and now and then I caught her great eyes looking at me wistfully; indeed, I was obliged to avoid them lest they should make me weep; for it was almost the look that my Philippe used to cast on me in those early days when we had not begun to know one another.

At last we went up to bed. The rooms were all en suite, and I had given her one opening into mine, telling her we would never shut the door save when she wished it. I saw her gazing earnestly at her brother's portrait and all the precious little objects consecrated to his memory, which I had arranged by my benitier and crucifix, but I did not expect her first exclamation, when our woman had left us: 'Ah! Madame, how happy you are!'

'I was once!' I sighed.

'Ah! but you ARE happy. You have your child, and your husband loved you.'

'But your husband lives, and your children are well.'

'That may be. I never see them. I have only seen my daughter twice, and my son once, since they were born. They will not let them come to the chateau, and they say there is no road to the farms.'

'We will see to that,' I said, and I made her tell me where they were; but she knew no more of distances than I did, never going anywhere save in the great family coach. Poor child! When I called her Cecile, she burst into tears, and said no one had called her by that name since she had left her friend Amelie in the convent, and as to calling me Marguerite, Mademoiselle de Gringrimeau would be sure to say it was bourgeois and ill-bred to use familiar names, but then we need never let her hear us.

I took the poor little forlorn creature to sleep with me, and then, and in the course of the next day or two, the whole sad state of things came before me.

The little Cecile de Bellaise had been carried to a convent at Angers from the farm that she could just remember. Here she had spent all the happy days of her life. The nuns were not strict, and they must have been very ignorant, for they had taught her nothing but her prayers, a little reading, some writing, very bad orthography, embroidery, and heraldry; but they were very good-natured, and had a number of pensionnaires who seemed to have all run wild together in the corridors and gardens, and played all sorts of tricks on the nuns. Sometimes Cecile told me some of these, and very unedifying they were,—acting ghosts in the passages, fastening up the cell doors, ringing the bells at unearthly hours, putting brushes or shoes in the beds, and the like practical jokes.

Suddenly, from the midst of these wild sports, while still a mere child under fourteen, Cecile was summoned to be married to Armand d'Aubepine, who was two years older, and was taken at once to Chateau d'Aubepine.

There was no more play for her; she had to sit upright embroidering under the eyes of Madame la Comtesse and of Mademoiselle de Gringrimeau; nor did she ever go out of doors except for a turn on the terrace with the ladies, or a drive in the great coach. Of course they were disappointed in having such a little unformed being on their hands, but they must have forgotten that they had ever been young themselves, when they forced her to conform rigidly to the life that suited them, and which they thought the only decorous thing for a lady of any age.

There was nothing else that was young near her except her husband, and he thought her an ugly little thing, and avoided her as much as possible. He had expected to be freed from his tutor on his marriage, and when he was disappointed, he was extremely displeased, and manifested his wrath by neglect of her. His governor must have been a very different one from my dear husband's beloved abbe, for I know that if I had been five times as ugly and stupid as I was, my Philippe would have tried to love me, because it was his duty—and have been kind to me, because he could not be unkind to any one. But the Chevalier d'Aubepine had never learnt to care for any one's pleasure but his own; he was angry at, and ashamed of, the wife who had been imposed on him; he chafed and raged at not being permitted to join the army and see the world; and in the meantime he, with the connivance

of his governor, from time to time escaped at night to Saumur, and joined in the orgies of the young officers in garrison there.

Nevertheless, through all his neglect, Cecile loved him with a passionate, faithful adoration, surpassing all words, just as I have seen a poor dog follow faithfully a savage master who gives him nothing but blows. She never said a word of complaint to me of him. All I gathered of this was from her simple self-betrays, or from others, or indeed what I knew of himself; but the whole sustenance of that young heart had been his few civil words at times when he could make her useful to him. I am persuaded, too, that Mademoiselle de Gringrimeau exercised her spite in keeping the two young creatures from any childish or innocent enjoyments that might have drawn them together. If etiquette were the idol of that lady, I am sure that spite flavoured the incense she burned to it.

I think, if I had been in Cecile's position, I should either have gone mad, or have died under the restraint and dreariness; but she lived on in the dull dream of half-comprehended wretchedness, and gave birth to her daughter, but without being in the least cheered, for a peasant woman was in waiting, who carried the child off while she was still too much exhausted to have even kissed it. All she obtained was universal murmuring at the sex of the poor little thing. It seemed the climax of all her crimes, which might be involuntary, but for which she was made to suffer as much as if they had been her fault.

Her husband was more displeased than any one else; above all when he heard the news of Rocroy; and then it was that he devised the scheme of running away, and in discussing it with her became more friendly than ever before. Of course it was dreadful to her that he should go to the war, but the gratification of helping him, keeping his secret, plotting with him, getting a few careless thanks and promises, carried the day, and bore her through the parting. 'He really did embrace me of his own accord,' said the poor young creature; and it was on that embrace that she had ever since lived, in hope that when they should meet again he might find it possible to give her a few shreds of affection.

Of course, when she was found to have been cognizant of his departure, she was in the utmost disgrace. Rage at his evasion brought on the fit of apoplexy which cost the old count his life; and the blame was so laid upon her, not only by Mademoiselle de Gringrimeau, but by Madame and by her confessor, that she almost believed herself a sort of parricide; and she had not yet completed the course of penitential exercises that have been imposed on her.

By the time—more than half a year later—her son was born, the old countess had become too childish to be gratified for more than a moment. Indeed, poor Cecile herself was so ill that she survived only by a wonder, since no one cared whether she lived or died, except her own maid, who watched over her tenderly, and gave her, when she could read it, a letter from her husband upon the joyful news. She wore that letter, such as it was, next her heart, and never told her how my husband had absolutely stood over him while he wrote it.

So she recovered, if it can be called recovery—for her health had been shattered by all this want of the most care and consideration; she was very weak and nervous, and suffered constantly from headache, and her looks were enough to break one's heart. I suppose nothing could have made her beautiful, but she had a strange, worn, blighted, haggard, stunted look, quite dreadful for one not yet eighteen; she was very short, and fearfully thin and pale, but out of the sad little face there looked my Philippe's eyes, and now and then his smile.

After talking till late I fell asleep, and when I woke to dress for morning mass, I found that she had not slept at all, and had a frightful headache. I bade her lie still till I came back, and she seemed hardly able to believe in such luxury. Mademoiselle said nothing but resolution was wanting to shake off a headache.

'Have you found it so?' I asked.

'At any rate, it is better than the doses Mademoiselle gives me,' she said.

‘You shall try my remedy this time,’ I said; and I set out for the little village church, which stood at the garden-gate, with a fixed determination that this state of things—slow torture and murder, as it seemed to me—should not go on. If one work bequeathed to me by my dear Philippe was to take care of his uncle, another surely was to save and protect his sister.

CHAPTER VIII. – MARGUERITE TO THE RESCUE

It was in my favour that M. de Nidemerle had conceived a very high opinion of me, far above my deserts. My dear husband's letters had been full of enthusiasm for me. I found them all among the Marquis's papers; and his tenderness and gratitude, together with the circumstances of my return, had invested me with a kind of halo, which made me a sort of heroine in his eyes.

Besides, I did my best to make the old man's life more cheerful. I read him the Gazette that came once a week, I played at cards with him all the evening, and I sometimes even wrote or copied his letters on business; and, when I sat at my embroidery, he liked to come and sit near me, sometimes talking, playing with Gaspard, or dozing. He was passionately fond of Gaspard, and let the child domineer over him in a way that sometimes shocked me.

Thus he was ready to believe what I told him of his niece, and assured me I might keep her with me as long as I wished, if the Countess, her mother-in-law, would consent. The first thing we did together was that I took her to see her children. The boy was at a farm not very far off; he was seven months old, and a fine healthy infant, though not as clean as I could have wished; but then Tryphena and I had been looked on as barbarians, who would certainly be the death of Gaspard, because we washed him all over every evening, and let him use his legs and arms. Cecile was enchanted; she saw an extraordinary resemblance between her son and his father; and hugged the little form like one who had been famished.

Our search for the little Armantine was less prosperous. Cecile could not ride, nor could even walk a quarter of a mile without nearly dying of fatigue; nay, the jolting of the coach as we drove along the road would have been insupportable to her but for her longing to see her little one. We drove till it was impossible to get the coach any farther, and still the farm was only just in sight.

I jumped out and said I would bring the child to her, and I went up between the hedges with two lackeys behind me, till I came to a farmyard, where three or four children, muddy up to the very eyes, were quarrelling and playing with the water of a stagnant pool. I made my way through animals, dogs, and children, to the farm kitchen, where an old grandmother and a beggar sat on two chairs opposite to one another, on each side of the fire, and a young woman was busy over some raw joints of an animal. They stared at me with open mouths, and when I said that Madame la Comtesse d'Aubepine was come to see her child, and was waiting in the carriage, they looked as if such a thing had never been heard of before. The young woman began to cry—the old woman to grumble. I think if they had dared, they would have flown into a passion, and I was really alarmed lest the child might be sick or even dead. I told them impressively who I was, and demanded that they would instantly show me the little one.

The young woman, muttering something, stepped out and brought in her arms the very dirtiest child of the whole group I had left in the gutter, with the whole tribe behind her. My first impulse was to snatch it up and carry it away to its mother, taking it home at once to Nid de Merle; but it squalled and kicked so violently when I held out my arms to it, that it gave me time to think that to carry it thus away without authority might only bring Cecile into trouble with those who had the mastery over her, and that to see it in such a condition could only give her pain. I should not have objected to the mere surface dirt of grubbing in the farmyard (shocking as it may sound to you, Mademoiselle mes Petites Filles). Eustace and I had done such things at Walwyn and been never the worse for it; but this poor little creature had a wretched, unwholesome, neglected air about her that made me miserable, and the making her fit to be seen would evidently be a long business, such as could hardly be undertaken in the midst of the salting of a pig, which was going on.

I therefore promised the woman a crown if she would make the child tidy and bring her to Nid de Merle on the Sunday. Something was muttered about Mademoiselle having said the child

was not to be constantly brought to the house to incommode Madame la Comtesse; but I made her understand that I meant Nid de Merle, and trusted that the hope of the money would be a bait.

Cecile was sorely disappointed when I returned without the child, and conjured me at once to tell her the worst, if it were indeed dead; but she let herself be pacified by the hope of seeing it on Sunday, and indeed she was half dead with fatigue from the roughness of the road.

The child was duly brought by the foster-mother who was in the full costume of a prosperous peasant, with great gold cross and gay apron; but I was not better satisfied about the little one, though she had a cleaner face, cap, and frock. Unused to the sight of black, she would let neither of us touch her, and we could only look at her, when she sat on her nurse's knee with a cake in her hand. I was sure she was unhealthy and uncared for, her complexion and everything about her showed it, and my Gaspard was twice her size. It was well for the peace of the young mother that she knew so little what a child ought to be like, and that her worst grief was that the little Armantine would not go to her.

'And oh! they will send her straight into a convent as soon as she is weaned, and I shall never have her with me!' sighed Cecile.

'ON' ON had done many harsh things towards my poor little sister-in-law, and I began now to consider of whom ON now consisted. It seemed to me to be only Mademoiselle de Gringrimeau acting in the name of the doting Countess and the absent husband, and that one resolute effort might emancipate the poor young thing.

I was still considering the matter, and rallying my forces, when a message came from the Chateau l'Aube that Madame la Douairiere was dying, and Madame la Comtesse must return instantly. I went with her; I could not let her return alone to Mademoiselle's tender mercies, and the Marquis approved and went with us. In fact, the two chateaux were not two miles apart, through the lanes and woods, though the way by the road was much longer.

The old Countess lingered another day and then expired. Before the funeral ceremonies were over, I had seen how Mademoiselle de Gringrimeau tyrannise over this young sister-in-law, who was still a mere gentle child, and was absolutely cowed by the woman. When I tried to take her home with me, Mademoiselle had the effrontery to say that the Count himself, as well as the late dowager, had given her authority over Madame as dame de compagnie, and that she did not consider it etiquette to visit after so recent a bereavement, thus decidedly hitting at me.

However, I had made up my mind. I entreated my poor weeping Cecile to hold out yet a little longer in hope; and then I returned home to lay the whole situation before the Marquis, and to beg him to assert his authority as uncle, and formally request that she might reside under his protection while her husband was with the army—a demand which could hardly fail to be granted.

I wrote also to M. d'Aubepine, over whom I thought I had some influence, and added likewise a letter to my half-brother De Solivet, explaining the situation, and entreating him to get the young gentleman into his lodgings, and not let him out till he had written his letters, signed and sealed them!

The plan answered. In due time our courier returned, and with all we wanted in the way of letters, with one great exception, alas! any true sign of tenderness for the young wife. There was a formal letter for her, telling her to put herself and her children under the charge of her uncle and her brother's widow, leaving the charge of the chateau and the servants to the intendant and to Mademoiselle de Gringrimeau. The poor child had to imbibe what her yearning heart could extract from the conventional opening and close. I have my share of the budget still, and her it is:—

'MADAME—You still love to play your part of beneficent angel, and wish to take on your shoulder my impedimenta. Well, be it so then; though I have no hope that you will make thereof (en) anything like yourself. Kissing your hands.

'LE COMTE D'AUBEPINE.'

His whole family was thus disposed of in two letters of the alphabet (en).

M. de Nidemerle received a polite request to undertake the charge of his niece, and Mademoiselle had likewise her orders, and I heard from my brother how he had smiled at my

commands, but had found them necessary, for Armand d'Aubepine had been exactly like a naughty boy forced to do a task. Not that he had the smallest objection to his wife and children being with me—in fact, he rather preferred it; he only hated being troubled about the matter, wanted to go to a match at tennis, and thought it good taste to imitate the Duke of Enghien in contempt for the whole subject. Would he ever improve? My brother did not give much present hope of it, saying that on returning to winter quarters he had found the lad plunged all the deeper in dissipation for want of the check that my dear husband had been able to impose on him; but neither M. de Solivet nor the Marquis took it seriously, thinking it only what every youth in the army went through, unless he were such a wonderful exception as my dear Philippe had been.

Cecile could hardly believe that such peace and comfort were in store for her, and her tyrant looked as gloomy as Erebus at losing her slave, but we did not care for that; we brought her home in triumph, and a fortnight's notice was given to the foster-mother in which to wean Mademoiselle d'Aubepine and bring her to Nid de Merle.

That fortnight was spent by our guest in bed. As if to justify Mademoiselle de Gringrimeau, she was no sooner under my care than she had a sharp illness; but Tryphena, who had been so instructed by my grandmother, Lady Walwyn, as to be more skilful than any doctor, declared that it was in consequence of the long disregard of health and strain of spirits, and so managed her that, though never strong, she improved much in health, and therewith in looks. Beautiful she could hardly be, as the world counts beauty, but to me her sweet, tender, wistful expression made her countenance most lovable, and so did her gentle uncomplaining humility. She sincerely believed that all the cruel slights she underwent were the result of her own ugliness, stupidity, and ignorance, and instead of blaming her husband, she merely pitied him for being tied to her. As to grating that her brother had been a better man than her husband, she would have thought that high treason—the difference was only that her dear Marguerite was so pretty, so clever, amiable, and well taught, that she had won his heart.

In truth, I had outgrown the ungainliness of my girlhood, and, now that it did not matter to any one, had become rather a handsome woman, and it was of no use to tell her that I had been worse than she, because there was so much more of me, when my dear young husband gave me the whole of his honest heart.

To make herself, at least, less dull was her next desire. One reason why she had so seldom written was that she knew she could not spell, and Mademoiselle insisted on looking over her letters that they might not be a disgrace. I doubted whether M. le Comte would have discovered the errors, but when the Marquis praised some letters that I had written to amuse him from Nancy and Mezieres, she was fired with ambition to write such clever letters as might bewitch her husband. Besides, if she could teach her daughter, the child need not be banished to a convent.

I began to give her a few lessons in the morning, and to read to her. And just then there came to Nid de Merle, to see me, the good Abbe Bonchamp, the excellent tutor to whom my dear Philippe always said he owed so much. The good man had since had another employment, and on quitting it, could not help gratifying his desire to me and see the wife and child of his dear pupil, as indeed I had begged him to do, if ever it were in his power, when I fulfilled my husband's wishes by writing his last greeting and final thanks to the good man.

I remember the dear quaint form riding up on a little hired mule, which he almost concealed with his cassock. Above, his big hat looked so strange that Gaspard, who was wonderfully forward for his age, ran up to me crying: 'A droll beast, mamma! it had four legs and a great hat!' while little Armantine fled crying from the monster.

All the servants were, however, coming out eagerly to receive the blessing of the good man, who had made himself much beloved in the household. The Marquis embraced him with tears, and presented him to me, when he fell on his knee, took my hand, pressed it to his lips and bathed it with his tears, and then held Gaspard to his breast with fervent love.

It was necessary to be cheerful before M. de Nidemerle. He had truly loved his nephew, and mourned for him, but the aged do not like a recurrence to sorrow, so the abbe amused him with the news brought from Saumur, and our party at cards was a complete one that evening.

But the next day, the Abbe, who had loved his pupil like a son, could talk of him to me, and it was a comfort I cannot express to my aching heart to converse with him. Everything had settled into an ordinary course. People fancied me consoled; I had attended to other things, and I could not obtrude my grief on the Marquis or on Cecile; but on! My sick yearning for my Philippe only grew the more because I might not mention him or hear his name. However, the Abbe only longed to listen to all I could tell him of the last three years, and in return to tell me much that I should never otherwise have known of the boyhood and youth of my dear one.

I felt as if the good man must never leave us, and I entreated M. de Nidemerle to retain him at once as governor to little Gaspard. The Marquis laughed at securing a tutor for a child not yet three years old; but he allowed that the boy could not be in better hands, and, moreover, he was used to the Abbe, and liked to take his arm and to have him to make up the party at cards, which he played better than the cure.

So the Abbe remained as chaplain and as tutor, and, until Gaspard should be old enough to profit by his instructions, Cecile and I entreated him to accept us as pupils. I had begun to feel the need of some hard and engrossing work to take off my thoughts alike from my great sorrow and my pressing anxieties about my English home, so that I wished to return to my Latin studies again, and the Abbe helped me to read Cicero de Officiis again, and likewise some of the writings of St. Gregory the Great. He also read to both of us the Gospels and Mezeray's HISTORY OF FRANCE, which I did not know as an adopted Frenchwoman ought to know it, and Cecile knew not at all; nay, the nuns had scarcely taught her anything, even about religion, nor the foundations of the faith.

No, I can never explain what we, both of us, owe to the Abbe Bonchamp. You, my eldest grandchild, can just recollect the good old man as he sat in his chair and blessed us ere he passed to his rest and the reward of his labours.

CHAPTER IX. – THE FIREBRAND OF THE BOCAGE

Yes, the life at Nid de Merle was very peaceful. Just as exquisitely happy it was in spite of alarms, anxieties, perplexities, and discomforts, so when I contemplate my three years in Anjou I see that they were full of peace, though the sunshine of my life was over and Cecile had never come.

We had our children about us, for we took little Maurice d'Aubepine home as soon as possible; we followed the course of devotion and study traced for us by the Abbe; we attended to the wants of the poor, and taught their children the Catechism; we worked and lived like sisters, and I thought all that was life to me was over. I forgot that at twenty-two there is much life yet to come, and that one may go through many a vicissitude of feeling even though one's heart be in a grave.

The old Marquis did not long remain with us. He caught a severe cold in the winter, and had no strength to rally. Tryphena would have it that he sank from taking nothing but tisanes made of herbs; and that if she might only have given him a good hot sack posset, he would have recovered; but he shuddered at the thought, and when a doctor came from Saumur, he bled the poor old gentleman, faintings came on, and he died the next day. I was glad Tryphena's opinion was only expressed in English.

The poor old man had been very kind to me, and had made me love him better than I should have supposed to be possible when we crossed from Dover. The very last thing he had done was to write to my mother, placing his hotel at Paris at her disposal in case she and her son should find it expedient to leave England; and when his will was opened it proved that he had left me personal guardian and manager of the estates of his heir, my little Gaspard, now M. de Nidemerle, joining no one with me in the charge but my half-brother the Baron de Solivet.

I had helped him, read letters to him, and written them for him, and overlooked his accounts enough for the work not to be altogether new and strange to me, and I took it up eagerly. I had never forgotten the sermon by the holy Father Vincent, whom the Church has since acknowledged as a saint, and our excellent Abbe had heightened the impression that a good work lay prepared for me; but he warned me to be prudent, and I am afraid I was hot-headed and eager.

Much had grieved me in the six months I had spent in the country, in the state of the peasantry. I believe that in the Bocage they are better off than in many parts of France, but even there they seemed to me much oppressed and weighed down. Their huts were wretched—they had no chimneys, no glass in the windows, no garden, not even anything comfortable for the old to sit in; and when I wanted to give a poor rheumatic old man a warm cushion, I found it was carefully hidden away lest M. l'Intendant should suppose the family too well off.

Those seigniorial rights then seemed to me terrible. The poor people stood in continual fear either of the intendant of the king or of the Marquis, or of the collector of the dues of the Church. At harvest time, a bough was seen sticking in half the sheaves. In every ten, one sheaf is marked for the tithe, tow for the seigneur, two for the king; and the officer of each takes the best, so that only the worst are left for the peasant.

Nay, the only wonder seemed to me that there were any to be had at all, for our intendant thought it his duty to call off the men from their own fields for the days due from them whenever he wanted anything to be done to our land (or his own, or his son's-in-law), without the slightest regard to the damage their crops suffered from neglect.

I was sure these things ought not to be. I thought infinitely more good might be done by helping the peasants to make the most of what they had, and by preventing them from being robbed in my son's name, than by dealing out gallons of soup and piles of bread at the castle gates to relieve the misery we had brought on them, or by dressing the horrible sores that were caused by dirt and bad food. I told the Abbe, and he said it was a noble inspiration in itself, but that he feared that one lady, and she a foreigner, could not change the customs of centuries, and that innovations were dangerous.

I also tried to fire with the same zeal for reformation the Abbess of Bellaise, who was a young and spirited woman, open to conviction; but she was cloistered, and could not go to investigate matters as I did, with the Abbe for my escort, and often with my son. He was enchanted to present any little gift, and it was delightful that the peasants should learn to connect all benefits with Monsieur le Marquis, as they already called the little fellow.

I think they loved me the better when they found that I was the grandchild of the Madame Eustace who had been hidden in their cottages. I found two or three old people who still remembered her wanderings when she kept the cows and knitted like a peasant girl among them. I was even shown the ruinous chamber where my aunt Thistlewood was born, and the people were enchanted to hear how much the dear old lady had told me of them, and of their ways, and their kindness to her.

I encouraged the people to make their cottages clean and not to be afraid of comforts, promising that our intendant at least should not interfere with them. I likewise let him know that I would not have men forced to leave their fields when it would ruin their crops, and that it was better that ours should suffer than theirs. He was obsequious in manner and then disobeyed me, till one day I sent three labourers back again to secure their own hay before they touched ours. And when the harvest was gathered in the Abbe and I went round the fields of the poor, and I pointed out the sheaves that might be marked, and they were not the best.

I taught the girls to knit as they watched their cows, and promised to buy some of their stockings, so that they might obtain sabots for themselves with the price. They distrusted me at first, but before long, they began to perceive that I was their friend, and I began to experience a nice kind of happiness.

Alas! even this was too sweet to last, or perhaps, as the good Abbe warned me, I was pleasing myself too much with success, and with going my own way. The first murmur of the storm came thus: I had been out all the afternoon with the Abbe, Armantine's bonne, and the two children, looking at the vineyards, which always interested me much because we have none like them in England. In one, where they were already treading the grapes, the good woman begged that M. le Marquis and Mademoiselle would for once tread the grapes to bring good luck. They were frantic with joy; we took off their little shoes and silk stockings, rolled them up in thick cloths, and let them get into the trough and dance on the grapes with their little white feet. That wine was always called 'the Vintage of le Marquis.' We could hardly get them away, they were so joyous, and each carried a great bunch of grapes as a present to the little boy at home and his mother.

We thought we saw a coachman's head and the top of a carriage passing through the lanes, and when we came home I was surprised to find my sister-in-law in tears, thoroughly shaken and agitated.

Mademoiselle de Gringrimeau had been to see her, she said, and had told her the Count was in Paris, but had not sent for her; and I thought that enough to account for her state; but when the children began to tell their eager story, and hold up their grapes to her, she burst again into tears, and cried: 'Oh, my dear sister, if you would be warned. It is making a scandal, indeed it is! They call you a plebeian.'

I grew hot and angry, and demanded what could be making a scandal, and what business Mademoiselle de Gringrimeau had to meddle with me or my affairs.

'Ah! but she will write to my husband, and he will take me from you, and that would be dreadful. Give it up. Oh, Marguerite, give it up for MY sake!'

What was I to give up? I demanded. Running about the country, it appeared, like a farmer's wife rather than a lady of quality, and stirring up the poor against their lords. It was well known that all the English were seditious. See what they had done to their king; and here was I, beginning the same work. Had not the Count's intendant at Chateau d'Aubepine thrown in his teeth what Madame de Bellaise did and permitted? He was going to write to Monseigneur, ay, and the king's own intendant would hear of it, so I had better take care, and Mademoiselle had come out of pure benevolence to advise Madame la Comtesse to come and take refuge at her husband's own castle before the thunderbolt should fall upon me, and involve her in my ruin.

I laughed. I was sure that I was neither doing nor intending any harm; I thought the whole a mere ebullition of spite on the duenna's part to torment and frighten her emancipated victim, and I treated all as a joke to reassure Cecile, and even laughed at the Abbe for treating the matter more seriously, and saying it was always perilous to go out of a beaten track.

'I thought the beaten track and wide road were the dangerous ones,' I said, with more lightness, perhaps, than suited the subject.

'Ah, Madame,' he returned gravely, 'you have there the truth; but there may be danger in this world in the narrow path.'

The most effectual consolation that I could invent for Cecile was that if her husband thought me bad company for her, he could not but fetch her to her proper home with him, as soon as peace was made. Did I really think so? The little thing grew radiant with the hope.

Days went on, we heard nothing, and I was persuaded that the whole had been, as I told Cecile, a mere figment of Mademoiselle de Gringrimeau's.

I had written to beg my mother, with my brother and sister, to come and join us, and I as already beginning to arrange a suite of rooms for them, my heart bounding as it only can do at the thought of meeting those nearest and dearest of one's own blood.

I remember that I was busy giving orders that the linen should be aired, and overlooking the store of sheets, when Gaspard and Armantine from the window called out: 'Horses, horses, mamma! fine cavaliers!'

I rushed to the window and recognized the Solivet colours. No doubt the baron had come to announce the arrival of my mother and the rest, and I hastened down to meet him at the door, full of delight, with my son holding my hand.

My first exclamation after the greeting was to ask where they were, and how soon they would arrive, and I was terribly disappointed when I found that he had come alone, and that my mother, with Eustace and Annora, were at the Hotel de Nidemerle, at Paris, without any intention of leaving it. He himself had come down on business, as indeed was only natural since he was joined with me in the guardianship of my little Marquis, and he would likewise be in time to enjoy the chase over the estates.

He said no more of his purpose then, so I was not alarmed; and he seemed much struck with the growth and improvement of Gaspard. I had much to hear of the three who were left to me of my own family. M. de Solivet had never seen them before, and could hardly remember his mother, so he could not compare them with what they were before their troubles; but I gathered that my mother was well in health, and little the worse for her troubles, and that my little Nan was as tall as myself, a true White Ribaumont, with an exquisite complexion, who would be all the rage if she were not so extremely English, more English even than I had been when I had arrived.

'And my brother, my Eustace. Oh, why did he not come with you?' I asked.

And M. de Solivet gravely answered that our brother was detained by a suit with the Poligny family respecting the estate of Ribaumont, and, besides, that the rapidity of the journey would not have agreed with his state of health. I only then fully understood the matter, for our letter had been few, and had to be carefully written and made short; and though I knew that, at the battle of Naseby, Eustace had been wounded and made prisoner, he had written to me that his hurt was not severe, and that he had been kindly treated, through the intervention of our cousin Harry Merrycourt, who, to our great regret, was among the rebels, but who had become surety for Eustace and procured his release.

I now heard that my brother had been kept with the other prisoners in a miserable damp barn, letting in the weather on all sides, and with no bedding or other comforts, so that when Harry Merrycourt sought him out, he had taken a violent chill, and had nearly died, not from the wound, but from pleurisy. He had never entirely recovered, though my mother thought him much stronger and better since he had been in France, out of sight of all that was so sad and grievous to a loyal cavalier in England.

‘They must come to me,’ I cried. ‘He will soon be well in this beautiful air; I will feed him with goat’s mild and whey, and Tryphena shall nurse him well.’

M. de Solivet made no answer to this, but told me how delighted the Queen of England had to welcome my mother, whom she had at once appointed as one of her ladies of the bedchamber; and then we spoke of King Charles, who was at Hampton Court, trying to make terms with the Parliament, and my brother spoke with regret and alarm of the like spirit of resistance in our own Parliament of Paris, backed by the mob. I remember it was on that evening that I first heard the name *Frondeurs*, or *Slingers*, applied to the speechifiers on either side who started forward, made their hit, and retreated, like the little street boys with their slings. I was to hear a great deal more of that name.

It was not till after supper that I heard the cause of M. de Solivet’s visit. Cecile, who always retired early, went away sooner than usual to leave us together, so did the Abbe, and then the baron turned to me and said: ‘Sister, how soon can you be prepared to come with me to Paris?’

I was astounded, thinking at first that Eustace’s illness must be more serious than he had led me to suppose, but he smiled and said *notre frere de Volvent*, which was the nearest he could get to *Walwyn*, had nothing do with it; it was by express command of the Queen Regent, and that I might thank my mother and the Queen of England that it was no worse. ‘This is better than a *lettre de cache*,’ he added, producing a magnificent looking envelope with a huge seal of the royal French arms, that made me laugh rather nervously to brave my dismay, and asked what he called *THAT*. He responded gravely that it was no laughing matter, and I opened it. It was an official order that Gaspard Philippe Beranger de Bellaise, Marquis de Nidemerle, should be brought to the Louvre to be presented to the King.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I must go to Paris. Ought I to have brought my boy before? I did not know that he ought to pay his homage till he was older. Was it really such a breach of respect?’

‘You are a child yourself, my sister,’ he said, much injuring my dignity. ‘What have you not been doing here?’

Then it came on me. The intendant of the King had actually written complaints of me to the Government. I was sewing disaffection among the peasants by the favours I granted my own, teaching them for rebellion like that which raged in England, and bringing up my son in the same sentiments. Nay, I was called the Firebrand of the Bocage! If these had been the days of the great Cardinal de Richelieu, my brother assured me, I should probably have been by this time in the Bastille, and my son would have been taken from me for ever!

However, my half-brother heard of it in time, and my mother had flown to Queen Henrietta, who took her to the Queen-Regent, and together they had made such representations of my youth, folly, and inexperience that the Queen-Mother, who had a fellow-feeling for a young widow and her son, and at last consented to do nothing worse than summon me and my child to Paris, where my mother and her Queen answered for me that I should live quietly, and give no more umbrage to the authorities; and my brother De Solivet had been sent off to fetch me!

I am afraid I was much more angry than grateful, and I said such hot things about tyranny, cruelty, and oppression that Solivet looked about in alarm, lest walls should have ears, and told me he feared he had done wrong in answering for me. He was really a good man, but he could not in the least understand why I should weep hot tears for my poor people whom I was just hoping to benefit. He could not enter into feeling for Jacques Bonhomme so much as for his horse or his dog; and I might have argued for years without making him see anything but childish folly in my wishing for any mode of relief better than doles of soup, dressing wounds, and dowries for maidens.

However, there was no choice; I was helpless, and resistance would have done my people no good, but rather harm, and would only have led to my son being separated from me. Indeed, I cherished a hope that when the good Queen Anne heard the facts she might understand better than my half-brother did, and that I might become an example and public benefactor. My brother must have smiled at me in secret, but he did not contradict me.

My poor mother and the rest would not have been flattered by my reluctance to come to Paris; but in truth the thought of them was my drop of comfort, and if Eustace could not come to me I must have gone to him. And Cecile—what was to become of Cecile?

To come with me of course. Here at least Solivet agreed with me, for he had as great a horror of Mademoiselle de Gringrimeau as I had, and knew, moreover, that she wrote spiteful letters to the Count d'Aubepine about his poor little wife, which happily were treated with the young gentleman's usual insouciance. Solivet was of my opinion that the old demoiselle had instigated this attack. He thought so all the more when he heard that she was actually condescending to wed the intendant of Chateau d'Aubepine. But he said he had no doubt that my proceedings would have been stopped sooner or later, and that it was well that it should be done before I committed myself unpardonably.

Madame d'Aubepine had been placed in my charge by her husband, so that I was justified in taking her with me. Her husband had spent the last winter at Paris, but was now with the army in the Low Countries, and the compliments Solivet paid me on my dear friend's improvement in appearance and manner inspired us with strong hopes that she might not attract her husband; for though still small, pale, and timid, she was very unlike the frightened sickly child he had left.

I believe she was the one truly happy person when we left the Chateau de Nid de Merle. She was all radiant with hope and joy, and my brother could not but confess she was almost beautiful, and a creature whom any man with a heart must love.

CHAPTER X. – OLD THREADS TAKEN UP

I think M. de Solivet realised a little better what the sacrifice was to me, or rather how cruel the parting was to my poor people, when we set forth on our journey. We had tried to keep the time of our departure a secret, but it had not been possible to do so, and the whole court was filled with people weeping and crying out to their young lord and their good lady, as they called me, not to abandon them, kissing our dresses as we walked along, and crowding so that we could hardly pass.

Indeed, a lame man, whom I had taught to make mats, threw himself before the horses of our carriage, crying out that we might as well drive over him and kill him at once; and an old woman stood up almost like a witch or prophetess, crying out: 'Ah! that is the way with you all. You are like all the rest! You gave us hope once, and now you are gone to your pleasure which you squeeze out of our heart's blood.'

'Ah, good mother,' I said; 'believe me, it is not by my own will that I leave you; I will never forget you.'

'I trust,' muttered Solivet, 'that no one is here to report all this to that intendant de Roi,' and he hurried me into the carriage; but there were tears running down his cheeks, and I believe he emptied his purse among them, though not without being told by some of the poor warm-hearted creatures that no money could repay them for the loss of Madame la Comtesse.

'I did not know how sweet it is to be beloved,' he said to me. 'It is almost enough to tempt one to play the role de bon seigneur.'

'Ah! brother, if you would. You are no foreigner, you are wiser and would not make yourself suspected like me.'

He only laughed and shrugged his shoulders; but he was as good to our poor as it is possible to be as we live here in France, where we are often absolutely compelled to live at court, and our expenses there force us to press heavily on our already hard-driven peasants. I sometimes wonder whether a better time will come, when our good Duke of Burgundy tries to carry out the maxims of Monseigneur the Archbishop of Cambray; but I shall not live to see that day. [Footnote: No wonder Madame de Bellaise's descendants must not publish these writings while the ancien regime continued!]

In due time we arrived in Paris. It was pouring with rain, so no one came to meet us, though I looked out at every turn, feeling that Eustace must indeed be unwell, or no weather would have kept him from flying to meet his Meg. Or had he in these six long years ceased to care for me, and should I find him a politician and a soldier, with his heart given to somebody else and no room for me?

My heart beat so fast that I could hardly attend to the cries of wonder and questions of the two children, and indeed of Cecile, to whom everything was as new and wonderful as to them, though in the wet, with our windows splashed all over, the first view of Paris was not too promising. However, at last we drove beneath our own porte cochere, and upon the steps there were all the servants. And Eustace, my own dear brother, was at the coach-door to meet us and hand me out.

I passed from his arms to those of my mother, and then to my sister's. Whatever might come and go, I could not but feel that there was an indefinable bliss and bien-etre in their very presence! It was home—coming home—more true content and rest than I had felt since that fatal day at Nancy.

My mother was enchanted with her grandson, and knew how to welcome Madame d'Aubepine as one of the family, since she was of course to reside with us. The Abbe also was most welcome to my mother.

How we all looked at one another, to find the old beings we had loved, and to learn the new ones we had become! My mother was of course the least altered; indeed, to my surprise, she was more embonpoint than before, instead of having the haggard worn air that I had expected, and though she wept at first, she was soon again smiling.

Eustace, Baron Walwyn and Ribaumont, as he now unfortunately had become, sat by me. He was much taller than when we had parted, for had not then reached his full height, and he looked the taller from being very thin. His moustache and pointed beard had likewise changed him, but there was clear bright colour on his cheek, and his dear brown eyes shone upon me with their old sweetness; so that it was not till we had been together some little time that I found that the gay merry lad whom I had left had become not only a man, but a very grave and thoughtful man.

Annora was a fine creature, well grown, and with the clearest, freshest complexion, of the most perfect health, yet so pure and delicate, that one looked at her like a beautiful flower; but it somehow struck me that she had a discontented and almost defiant expression. She seemed to look at me with a sort of distrust, and to be with difficulty polite to Madame d'Aubepine, while she was almost rude to the Abbe. She scarcely uttered a word of French, and made a little cry and gesture of disgust, when Gaspard replied to her in his native tongue, poor child.

She was the chief disappointment to me. I had expected to find, not indeed my little playfellow, but my own loving sister Nan; and this young lady was like a stranger. I thought, too, my mother would have been less lively, she seemed to me to have forgotten everything in the satisfaction of being at Paris. At first I feared she was looking at me with displeasure, but presently I observed that she had discarded her widow's veil, and looked annoyed that I still wore mine. Otherwise she was agreeable surprised in me, and turned to M. de Solivet, saying:

'Yes, my son, you are right, she is belle, assez belle; and when she is dressed and has no more that provincial air, she will do very well.'

It was Eustace, my brother, who gave me unmixed delight that evening, unmixed save for his look of delicate health, for that he should be graver was only suitable to my feelings, and we knew that we were in perfect sympathy with one another whenever our eyes met, as of old, while we had hardly exchanged a word. And then, how gracious and gentle he was with poor little Madame d'Aubepine, who looked up to him like a little violet at the foot of a poplar tree!

Supper passed in inquires after kinsfolk and old friends. Alas! of how many the answer was—slain, missing since such a battle. In prison, ruined, and brought to poverty, seemed to be the best I could hear of any one I inquired after. That Walwyn was not yet utterly lost seemed to be owing to Harry Merrycourt.

'He on the wrong side!' I exclaimed.

'He looks on the question as a lawyer,' said my brother; 'holding the duty of the nation to be rather to the law than to the sovereign.'

'Base! Unworthy of a gentleman!' cried my mother. 'Who would believe him the kinsman of the gallant Duc de Mericour?'

'He would be ashamed to count kindred with that effeminate petit maitre!' cried Annora.

'I think,' said Eustace, 'that the wrong and persecution that his Huguenot grandfather suffered at the hands of his French family have had much power in inspiring him with that which he declares is as much loyalty as what I call by that honoured name.'

'You can speak of him with patience!' cried my mother.

'In common gratitude he is bound to do so,' said Annora.

For not only had Colonel Merrycourt preserved our brother's life after Naseby, but he had found a plea of service to the King which availed at the trial that followed at Westminster. Harry had managed to secure part of the estate, as he had likewise done for our other kindred the Thistlewoods, by getting appointed their guardian when their father was killed Chalgrove. But soldiers had been quartered on both families; there had been a skirmish at Walwyn with Sir Ralph Hopton, much damage had been done to the house and grounds, and there was no means of repairing it; all the plate had been melted up, there was nothing to show for it but a little oval token, with the King's head on one side, and the Queen's on the other; and as to the chaplet of pearls—

There was a moment's silence as I inquired for them. Annora said:

‘Gone, of course; more hatefully than all the rest.’

My brother added, with a smile that evidently cost him an effort:

‘You are the only pearl of Ribaumont left, Meg, except this one,’ showing me his ring of thin silver with one pearl set in it; ‘I kept back this one in memory of my grandmother. So Nan will have to go to her first ball without them.’

And had little Nan never been to a ball? No; she had never danced except that Christmas when a troop of cavaliers had been quartered at Walwyn—a merry young captain and his lieutenant, who had sent for the fiddles, and made them have a dance in the hall, Berenger, and Nan, and all. And not a week after, the young captain, ay, and our dear Berry, were lying in their blood at Alresford. Had Nan’s heart been left there? I wondered, when I saw how little she brightened at the mention of the Court ball where she was to appear next week, and to which it seemed my mother trusted that I should be invited in token of my being forgiven.

I tried to say that I had never meant to return to the world, and that I still kept to my mourning; but my mother said with authority that I had better be grateful for any token of favour that was vouchsafed to me. She took me into her apartment after supper, and talked to me very seriously; telling me that I must be very careful, for that I had been so imprudent, that I should certainly have been deprived of the custody of my son, if not imprisoned, unless my good godmother, Queen Henrietta, and herself had made themselves responsible for me.

I told my mother that I had done nothing, absolutely nothing, but attend to the wants of my son’s people, just as I had been used to see my grandmother, and my aunt Thistlewood, or any English lady, do at home.

‘And to what had that brought England?’ cried my mother. ‘No, child, those creatures have no gratitude nor proper feeling. There is nothing to do but to keep them down. See how they are hampering and impeding the Queen and the Cardinal here, refusing the registry of the taxes forsooth, as if it were not honour enough to maintain the King’s wars and the splendour of his Court, and enable the nobility to shine!’

‘Surely it is our duty to do something for them in return,’ I said; but I was silenced with assurances that if I wished to preserve the wardship of my child, I must conform in everything; nay, that my own liberty was in danger.

Solivet had hinted as much, and the protection of my child was a powerful engine; but—shall I confess it?—it galled and chafed me terribly to feel myself taken once more into leading-strings. I, who had for three years governed my house as a happy honoured wife, and for three more had been a chatelaine, complimented by the old uncle, and after his death, the sole ruler of my son’s domain; I was not at all inclined to return into tutelage, and I could not look on my mother after these six years, as quite the same conclusive authority as I thought her when I left her. The spirit of self-assertion and self-justification was strong within me, and though I hope I did not reply with ingratitude or disrespect, I would make no absolute promise till I had heard what my brother Walwyn said of my position in its secular aspect, and the Abbe Bonchamps in its religious point of view. So I bade my mother good-night, and went to see how Cecile fared in her new quarters, which, to her grief, were in a wing separated from mine by a long corridor.

My mother had arranged everything, ruling naturally as if she were the mistress of the house. Thus she installed me in the great room where I had seen the old Marquis, though I would rather she had retained it, and given me that which I had occupied when I was there with my husband. However, I made no objection, for I felt so much vexed that I was extremely afraid of saying something to show that I thought she ought to remember that this was my house, and that she was my guest. I would not for the world have uttered anything so ungenerous and unfilial; and all I could do that night was to pray that she might not drive me to lose my self-command, and that I might both do right and keep my child.

I was too restless and unhappy to sleep much, for I knew my feelings were wrong, and yet I was sure I was in the right in my wish to do good to the poor; and the sense of being bridled, and put into leading-strings, poisoned the pleasure I had at first felt in my return to my own family. I cannot describe the weary tumult of thought and doubt that tossed me, till, after a brief sleep, I heard the church-bells. I rose and dressed for early mass, taking my boy, who always awoke betimes, leaving the house quietly, and only calling my trusty lackey Nicolas to take me to the nearest Church, which was not many steps off. I do not think I found peace there: there was too much SELF in me to reach that as yet; but at any rate I found the resolution to try to bend my will in what might be indifferent, and to own it to be wholesome for me to learn submission once more.

As I was about to enter our court, I heard a little cough, and looking round I saw a gentleman and lady coming towards the house. They were my brother and sister, who had been to the daily prayers at the house of Sir Richard Browne, the English ambassador. I was struck at my first glance with the lightsome free look of Annora's face but it clouded and grew constrained in an instant when I spoke to her.

They said my mother would not be awake nor admit us for an hour or two, and in the meantime Eustace was ready to come to my apartments, for indeed we had hardly seen one another. Annora anxiously reminded him that he must take his chocolate, and orders were given that this should be served in my cabinet for us both.

There is no describing what that interview was to us. We, who had been one throughout our childhood, but had been parted all through the change to man and woman, now found ourselves united again, understanding one another as no other being could do, and almost without words, entering into full sympathy with one another. Yes, without words, for I was as certain as if he had told me that Eustace had undergone some sorrow deeper than even loss of health, home, and country. I felt it in the chastened and sobered tone in which he talked to me of my cares, as if he likewise had crossed the stream of tears that divides us from the sunshine of our lives.

He did not think what I had attempted in Anjou foolish and chimerical—he could look at the matter with the eyes of an English lord of the manor, accustomed not to view the peasant as a sponge to be squeezed for the benefit of the master, but to regard the landlord as accountable for the welfare, bodily and spiritual, of his people. He thought I had done right, though it might be ignorantly and imprudently in the present state of things; but his heart had likewise burned within him at the oppression of the peasantry, and, loyal cavalier as he was, he declared that he should have doubted on which side to draw his sword had things thus in England. He had striven to make my mother and Queen Henrietta understand the meaning of what I had been doing, and he said the complaints sent up had evidently been much exaggerated, and envenomed by spite and distrust of me as a foreigner. He could well enter into my grief at the desertion of my poor people, for how was it with those at Walwyn, deprived of the family to whom they had been used to look, with many widows and orphans made by the war, and the Church invaded by a loud-voiced empty-headed fanatic, who had swept away all that had been carefully preserved and honoured! Should he ever see the old home more?

However, he took thought for my predicament. I had no choice, he said, but to give way. To resist would only make me be treated as a suspected person, and be relegated to a convent, out of reach of influencing my son, whom I might bring up to be a real power for good.

Then my dear brother smiled his sweetest smile, the sweeter for the sadness that had come into it, and kissed my fingers chivalrously, as he said that after all he could not but be grateful to the edict that had brought back to him the greatest delight that was left to him. 'Ah,' I said, 'if it had only been in Anjou!'

'If it had only been in Dorset, let us say at once,' he answered.

Then came the other question whether I might not stay at home with the children, and give myself to devotion and good works, instead of throwing off my mourning and following my mother to all the gaieties of the court.

‘My poor mother!’ said Eustace. ‘You would not wish to make your example a standing condemnation of her?’

‘I cannot understand how she can find pleasure in these things,’ I cried.

‘There is much in her that we find it hard to understand,’ Eustace said; ‘but you must remember that this is her own country, and that though she gave it up for my father’s sake, England has always been a land of exile to her, and we cannot wonder at her being glad to return to the society of her old friends.’

‘She has Annora to be with her. Is not that enough?’

‘Ah, Meg, I trusted to you to soothe poor Annora and make her more comfortable.’

‘She seems to have no intention of putting herself under my influence,’ I said, rather hurt.

‘She soon will, when she finds out your English heart,’ said Eustace. ‘The poor child is a most unwilling exile, and is acting like our old friends the urchins, opposing the prickles to all. But if my mother has Annora to watch over, you also have a charge. A boy of this little man’s rank,’ he said, stroking the glossy curls of Gaspard, who was leaning on my lap, staring up in wonder at the unknown tongue spoken by his uncle, ‘and so near the age of the king, will certainly be summoned to attend at court, and if you shut yourself up, you will be unable to follow him and guide him by your counsel.’

That was the chief of what my dear brother said to me on that morning. I wrote it down at the moment because, though I trusted his wisdom and goodness with all my heart, I thought his being a Protestant might bias his view in some degree, and I wanted to know whether the Abbe thought me bound by my plans of devotion, which happily had not been vows.

And he fully thought my brother in the right, and that it was my duty to remain in the world, so long as my son needed me there; while, as to any galling from coming under authority again, that was probably exactly what my character wanted, and it would lessen the danger of dissipation. Perhaps I might have been in more real danger in queening it at Nid de Merle than in submitting at Paris.

CHAPTER XI. – THE TWO QUEENS

After all, I was put to shame by finding that I had done my poor mother an injustice in supposing that she intended to assume the government of the house, for no sooner was I admitted to her room than she gave me up the keys, and indeed I believe she was not sorry to resign them, for she had not loved housewifery in her prosperous days, and there had been a hard struggle with absolute poverty during the last years in England.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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