

capable of doing the same for her? In her anguish she cried: "Oh! what shall I do? Shall I renounce our love and fly from him, or shall I fight the battle to the end?"

Who can tell what decision Nora would have come to, had no fresh obstacle arisen in her path. The sun was already gilding the heavens with its glorious evening tints, as on that day when Nora had been summoned before the mother-superior. As on that day, the distant mountain-tops were tipped in roscate hues, and Nora sat on, motionless and wrapt in thought. At last a knock was heard at the door—indeed there had been more than one knock since the morning announcing her meals to her, but she had given a headache as a plea for remaining in her room. The superior, she knew, could only come to her in the evening. This time it was a letter which had been sent to her. She took it with a beating heart, and a thousand suppositions flashed across her mind. The hand-writing was a strange one to her, but the envelope bore the coronet of a count. She guessed at once that the missive must come from Cart's mother; and so it did. The countess was one of those women to whom sorrow is only rendered bearable by immediate action.

Sitting alone in the comfortless room of her hotel, the mother, knowing whither her son had directed his steps, was on the brink of despair. Less than any one else could she patiently sit down under contradiction and suffer her plans to be crossed. Circumstances had given her an independence to which she had accustomed herself, and of which she had always made a wise and temperate use. Now, again, she was convinced of the good sense of her opinions. "Something must be done," were always the first words which rose to her lips, and in this case she added: "What is to be done?" She knew that her son would listen to no advice for the present. Her friend's description of Nora had made her think more highly of her. "Well, if she really is so noble-minded, so well brought up, so incapable of any intrigue, she cannot wish to force herself upon a family which does not want her. If it were really true that she had wished to avoid him, she could say aloud that the matter should be at an end, and she would sacrifice her love to his happiness." On the strength of this reasoning, the countess had made up her mind to write to Nora, and to appeal to her heart, to her understanding, and last, not least, to her pride.

Nora read the letter, her cheeks burning with indignation.

"Do not rob me of my son," the countess concluded, after alleging all the reasons against the marriage. "Do not step between mother and son and divide them. This you would do by marrying him, for he would do it in defiance of my will. You would divide us, even if I had power enough to prevent the marriage, as then he would never forgive his mother. I am told that you are noble and generous—then give up that, which, under existing circumstances, can never be conducive to his happiness. We women know so well how to make complete sacrifices. His heart will become calm once more, and he will be freed from the feeling of honor which binds him to you, when he

hears from your own mouth that your love refuses to set at nought all the serious reasons which divide you. You may judge of the strength of mind and of heart I think you capable of, by my addressing this prayer to you; and both my esteem and my gratitude will be boundless should you act in so noble a way," etc., etc.

The conclusion was an able one; but even boundless esteem and gratitude fall rather short in the balance against love. It would perhaps, have been difficult for the countess to explain the reason why she thought it so natural to wish her own heart not to be robbed, exacting all the while that another heart should rob itself of its love and happiness for her sake. Nora read the letter more than once. Perhaps, because she did not quite understand what the countess wanted, or, perhaps, because an affectionate beginning had led her to hope for something better.

But suddenly she drew herself up. She now understood what was required of her. This woman wanted her to be the murderess of her own happiness—she wanted her to show herself fickle, weak, and untrue to her love. Her father's passionate nature seemed to awake in her at the thought.

"It would be a lie, a horrible lie," she said, "for, like him, I find nothing too difficult so long as we love each other. I know that I shall not bring disgrace upon him," she added with trembling lips. "I know we think and feel alike. I will do nothing to keep him, but I will renounce our love no longer. He shall, at all events, not say of me that I am weak and faithless."

All her former doubts were gone; and, her cheeks still burning, she took up her pen to frame an answer.

"Your son is as free to-day as he was yesterday," she wrote firmly and proudly; "for it was my father who refused his consent; and I shall never go against his will. I shall not try to retain him either by a word or by any step of mine—indeed, I had avoided him until to-day. But I can speak no untruth and it would be one to take back the promise he gained from me as the only means of furthering his happiness; if I were untrue to the feelings I entertain for him, and which I believe will last my life long, I will not part from him through a lie—for a lie has never soothed a sorrow or wrought any good; but my love is strong enough to wait and to endure."

The letter was no sooner finished than Nora sealed it, and rang for it to be sent off.

Nora stood long at the window, and the words she had just written sounded in her ears, now serious and earnest, now mocking and derisive.

Had she been right to enter upon this combat? Would it have been better to accept the sacrifice which would have put an end to all struggling?

This question was gnawing at her heart, when at last her trusty friend entered the room.

Madame Sybille was tired by the day's exertions, exhausted by the morning's excitement. Her thoughts had been so long away from human passions that she found it difficult to encounter them again. But

there are hearts which never become strangers to the earth and to its petty sorrows, however near heaven they may be themselves.

Madame Sybille took the burning head in her hands, and looking tenderly into the innocent, bright eyes, she listened to the tale which revealed all the storms raging within that young soul.

"Right or wrong?" she said gently. "Child, earthly love is no virtue and it is no fault: you have acted according to its dictates. You were not bound to accept the sacrifice imposed upon you. You have not asked for advice, and perhaps no one could advise you better than your own heart in the matter. But remember this, my child—it is nothing great, nothing uncommon, to suffer and to struggle for earthly love; the weakest of human creatures have done so ere this. Before God it is very insignificant, for such love is only the product of our own heart, the most beautiful of God's gifts, the most fragrant flower He has strewn upon our path. But those who wish to enjoy its fragrance must consent to be pricked by its thorns—the sharpest thorns that can prick a human heart. If you feel that your love is worth all the sufferings that it will bring with it—well then! . . . You might have conquered it by this one sacrifice, and who knows whether you will not have to retain it by a thousand sacrifices more painful. But true and pure love makes up for a great deal. Perhaps God has placed it in your heart to protect you from other dangers," she added, placing her hand upon the youthful head, as if with a blessing. "For the second time you have chosen strife instead of peace. . . . May the Lord guide you, my child!"

CHAPTER X.

The countess smiled when she had read Nora's letter. "I thought so," she said somewhat complacently to herself; and once more she was convinced that the mistake about Nora's character had not been made by her: she had written to Nora under the influence of the nun's words. She also had remained alone many a dreary hour that day; Cart had not returned till late, and the chaplain had gone to fetch Lily, and to show her some of the curiosities of the town; for after all that had happened the countess did not feel up to the task of amusing the girl. She had, however, turned these hours of solitude to account, by endeavoring to take in clearly how matters stood. Before even the answer to her letter—a measure *in extremis*—had come, she had determined upon what line of conduct she would pursue. She would apparently consent, but would insist upon certain conditions. That would be wiser than to lose all influence over her son by pushing things too far.

"Children must be left their toy, or else they get obstinate in longing after it." That was about the sum of her reflections; and then, her mind being made up, she frowned no longer, but employed herself busily in jotting down notes upon a stray piece of paper.

At dinner-time the chaplain and Lily put in an appearance. The Countess looked scrutinisingly at the young girl, who had

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