

MAGDALEN;

OR,

THE PENITENT OF GODSTOW.

VOL. I.

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THE PENITENT OF GODSTOW.

AN HISTORICAL NOVEL.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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ST. MARGARET'S CAVE, OR THE NUN'S STORY,
THE PILGRIM OF THE CROSS, &c. &c.

VOL. I.

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THE
PENITENT OF GODSTOW.

CHAPTER I.

ON the banks of the river Garonne, near a league from the sea, in the province of Guyenne, in France, about the year 1170, there stood a Convent of the Benedictine order, dedicated to St. Bertrand.—It was founded near a century before the above-mentioned period. The establishment was ample, and its inmates select, but the rules were so rigid and severe that few chose it for an asylum; except, indeed, such as were forced thither by parental authority, or those who were disgusted with the world, and sought in affected severities, to efface the enormity of those sins, which sincere repentance and the practice of active virtue might sooner have obliterated.

The interior of the convent was spacious, and the grounds extensive, the whole forming a dreary melancholy picture, being at a considerable distance from any town or even habitation. The abbess was a woman of high rank, and descended from Gualter de Evereaux, Earl of Rosmar, a Norman, who attending William the Conqueror to England, gave first rise to the noble family of Salisbury, by grants from his royal master in the county of Wiltshire; which he bequeathed to his second son, Edward de Salisburie, leaving to his eldest son, Walter, with the title of Earl of Rosmar, his extensive possessions in Normandy.

The nuns of St. Bertrand were most of them in years, the boarders being only received in their infancy, and in general such as were expected hereafter to take the veil; which if they declined, they were never after admitted within the walls.

Vespers had just concluded in the convent chapel—the abbess had retired to enjoy the comforts of a good supper,—the novices were walking solitarily in the garden by moon-light, lamenting the past, and, with melancholy, anticipating the future;—the devotees were shut up in their cells,—and a few old nuns, whom even years had not cured of gossiping, were seated on a bench at the entrance of the chapel, descanting on the merits and narrow politics contained within the convent walls.

This party was augmented by two boarders named Esther and Mary, of the age of fifteen, and who, weary of the monotonous life of the convent, sought alternately in the different groups to vary the scene.

“Heigh-ho!” sighed sister Martha, an old nun, who was lean, yellow, withered, and dry as an Egyptian mummy,—“what a savoury smell issues from the kitchen!” at the same time distending her nostrils and snuffing the air with peculiar satisfaction.

“Yes,” replied another of the antiquated group, “the lady abbess has a duck for supper; the abbot has granted her a plenary indulgence, so *she* eats and drinks what she pleases.—There is not a nun in the whole convent looks half so hearty; why, she is as fat as a sucking pig, and her cheeks are as red and as extended as those of a trumpeter.”

“No matter for that,” rejoined another venerable vestal, “her fat, she says, arises from her sedentary life, and passing so much time upon her knees. Flatulency also

deprives her of her appetite, for though she has every delicacy in season prepared for her table, she constantly avers that she never touches any thing but dry bread and a few raisins.”

“What wonderful forbearance amidst a well furnished table,” answered sister Josephine. “But one thing I am at a loss to account for; what becomes of the food? as I can swear the dishes always come out empty, having constantly made that remark.”

“Oh,” said Martha, “what a simpleton you must be; do not you know that she has four favourite dogs and two cats—they eat up all, to be sure.”

“And drink up all, mayhap,” answered Josephine; “for I am sure the store room is frequently replenished with wine. Well, much good may it do her; but I hate hypocrisy. Do you remember the day I was so troubled with the cholic, and only sent to her for a cup of cordial, how she sighed, and turned up the whites of her eyes, and bade me remember the sin of drinking strong waters in my next confession.”

“Hist! I thought I heard steps,” said sister Anne, interrupting her in a low tone of voice. “I hope no one has been listening, and overheard our discourse.”

A pause of a few moments ensued.—“It is only fancy, I believe,” answered Josephine. “Yet, after the imperious order which was given a fortnight since, for us all to retire to our cells immediately after vespers, it is good to be cautious.”

“It is,” added Martha, “for though I believe we all think alike, yet our Lady Abbess has great power. What all the changes that have taken place bode I cannot conjecture; four nuns removed to other convents, and what is still more extraordinary, without any fault assigned, and you know our Lady Abbess is seldom at a loss in this particular of accusation and penance.—Well, I will say no more, for the least said is the soonest mended, and a still tongue betokens a wise head. I have heard the nuns are sent to England; but I would not have it reported that I said so, for I do not like defending and proving, and Martha said this, and Martha said that, when it is well known, there is not a more taciturn nun in the whole convent than I am; and if they are sent to England”——

“Let them be sent where they may,” said the youthful Esther, “they cannot be sent to a more disagreeable place than this is; for though I have been here almost as long as I can remember, so far from use making me reconciled to the spot, I hate and detest it, and consider myself as buried alive. For my part, I think convents ought only to be allowed for such as are too deformed and ugly to appear in the world.”

“That is good indeed,” answered, Martha, “and shews your ignorance, child, but even if that was the case, need you exult on a supposition of being excluded on the score of beauty; for my part, if I was his Holiness the Pope, beauties alone should become nuns, as they cause the greatest mischief in the world. Lord, I remember when I was a girl”——

“Do you, indeed,” interrupted Mary, the second boarder, “that must have been a long time ago. I wonder that your memory does not fail you; what a blessing!”

“A long time ago,” retorted the enraged Martha, with a face reddening with rage, “not so long, neither, and, as to my *memory* it is indeed a blessing; for it reminds me of the difference between young people, in this babbling impertinent age, and in those days that are past;—maids were then seldom seen, and never heard, now they are continually exposing their unveiled unblushing faces, and chattering like so many magpies, for fear their boldness should not sufficiently bring them into notice.”

“I think I can answer for Mary, that she did not wilfully mean to offend you. It must, indeed, appear to you a long time since you were a girl, as the years of your youth were passed in a convent,”—answered Esther, sighing.

This apology somewhat modified the wrath of the time-stricken Martha, whose loud vociferous tones now softened into a sanctified whine.

“Why, aye,” said she, “the time has indeed sometimes appeared long; but we are all prone to sin, and apt to repine after the pomps and vanities of this wicked world. But, thank Heaven, I have now, in a great measure, subdued all worldly desires, and am ready to acknowledge that youth and beauty are most safe in a convent.”

Esther and Mary both stifled a laugh—“I think I have heard you say, Martha,” said the former, “that you were placed in a convent merely to increase your brother’s revenues.”

“It is most true,” replied Martha, “he used to say my pretty face would be best concealed in a nunnery. I remember I was once at a masque, which followed a tournament, where a certain knight laid his sword and spear at my feet, gallantly observing, that though he could not see my face, he had no doubt it was equal to my shape.”

“And la, how could he be so rude,” interrupted Mary.—

“Rude—rude,” echoed Martha, half choaked with rage.

“Yes,” answered Mary, “for you know no one can help being ill made.”

“Ill made, indeed; and pray who told you I was ill made?” interrogated Martha.

“No one,” replied Mary. “I *sometimes* require no other evidence than—my own senses.”

“And *sometimes* you call in a little envy; do you not?”

“Never, where your beauty is concerned.”

Esther, who delighted more in peace than in raillery, and who saw a tempest was brewing in Martha’s bosom, now endeavoured to allay the storm, by saying, “Mary, this is all nonsense. Dear Martha, I want to ask you a question; pray, why did the knight lay his sword and spear at your feet? Was he going to kill you?”

“Kill me, no, silly girl; he meant to—to undermine my virtue, by fascinating my understanding. Oh, if I had leisure, I could tell you of a thousand schemes made use of by those wicked men, to delude us poor girls.—Yes, yes, *I know all their tricks*, but thanks to my own chastity, and the vigilance of the blessed saints, I sat them all at defiance.”

“I think,” replied Mary, “your parents acted very wisely, in putting a stop to your studies of the arts of those wicked men you speak of, by sending you to a convent; for, by your own account, you appear to have attained a considerable stock of knowledge for so young a maiden, as you say you was. What a mercy you escaped pure and uncontaminated!”

“You forget, Mary,” replied one of the sisterhood, “that Martha’s guardian saints were upon the alert.”

“True Bertha; their vigilance caught her up in time, and conveyed her into this convent, where, Heaven knows, there is no temptation, but plenty of mortification. I wish my guardian saints would convey me out of it;—Monks and nuns may preach till doomsday, but they never can persuade me but that human creatures, endowed with health and understanding, were meant for active agents in life.—I call Heaven to be my witness, that I had rather possess a clean cottage, and live under the protection of a good

husband, as I have read of them, than be the most renowned devotee in the whole world; nay even if I was sure they would do me the favour to canonize my old bones after my death.”

“And I am perfectly of the same mind,” replied Bertha, “a light heart and a rosy cheek for me. None of your hypocritical voluntary mortification—no sunken eyes and sallow complexion, if I can avoid them.”

Esther was too mild and timid to express a similar sentiment in any other manner, than by a heavy sigh, which was profoundly re-echoed by all the sisterhood present; though the more old and professed nuns devoutly crossed their bosoms, as it were to preserve themselves from the contagion of evil example.

“You, Mary and Bertha,” said Martha, “are enough to corrupt the whole convent, and ought to be reported to our Lady Abbess; who, by enjoining penance and abstinence, might, in time, overcome these wicked propensities of light talking, and railing against sacred institutions, and I shall take the earliest opportunity to acquaint her of it.”

“Not forgetting the duck, and the wine, and the four dogs and two cats, that kindly lent the abbess their assistance,” interrupted Mary; “for should these anecdotes escape your memory, I shall then also come forward, and, like your knight in days of yore, lay my weapons at your feet.”

An old nun, by the name of Ursula, now took up the contest by saying, “Well, well, how times are altered! formerly there used to be some subordination within these walls; the seniors were wont to be treated with respect.—Lack-a-day, lack-a-day! Ten or fifteen years ago, when you and I were girls, Martha.”—

Mary now, in spite of every effort, laughed outright, saying, “Why I thought you and Martha had been forty years at least in this convent.”

Martha, stretching out her meagre neck, with the crimson of anger overcoming the saffron of her complexion, scowling a look of stifled rage upon her, replied only by the word “Impertinent!”

The peaceful Esther endeavoured to soothe her, by observing to Mary, “That the wan complexion and spare form of Martha, only arose from ill health and austere habits, which made her appear older than she really was.”

“That is truly observed, child,” answered the old nun; “delicate and fragile forms, like mine, like the gay and sweet-scented flowers of the garden, fade the soonest.”

“Your’s then must have been delicate, indeed,” replied Mary.

Martha construed this into a compliment, for she replied, “You say truly; indeed I did not enter this convent at the very infantile age that is now required, but such has been the purity of my life, even in the world, that it may put guilt to the blush.”

“Perhaps you never met temptation,” said Mary.

“What do you mean?” returned Martha, bridling. “Are you ever upon the watch to affront me? I never met temptations! Do you take me for a stick or a stone? Pray, what young woman with a good person can be in the public haunts of men, and not be exposed to temptation? Were even you, Mary, to quit these hallowed walls, though you are not handsome, I should tremble for your danger.”

“And that is more than I should for my own,” said Mary aside to Esther; then turning to the old nun she added, “But do not you think the greater the allurements the more virtue is required to resist it; for example, in this convent we have nothing to excite temptation, and therefore we have few sins to confess, except those of envy, malice, and

uncharitableness, and Heaven knows they are heinous enough of all conscience; but amidst the dissipation of the world, my books tell me, we have to pass a kind of fiery ordeal, from which, if we escape unsullied and pure, our virtue deserves more commendation than it can possibly deserve, in the inactive and unassailed routine of monastic seclusion.”

The nuns having nothing to answer, at least to the purpose, had again recourse to their usual silent rhetoric, that of crossing themselves; only Martha, whose volubility was seldom exhausted, entered into a long dissertation of the hair-breadth escapes which *she might have encountered*, had not the saints kindly interfered and snatched her from those embryo trials that doubtless were hatching into perfection in the womb of time. Having partly exhausted the topic of what might have been, she began comparing herself to the young women of that period, losing nothing by her own praise, except the attention of her auditors, who were universally beginning to yawn, when suddenly they were aroused by a loud ringing at the convent gate. Fearful of being discovered and punished for a disobedience of orders, the nuns hastened to their cells, while Esther and Mary, more bold, or more curious, retreated behind some pillars, in a dark aisle of the chapel, where they considered themselves secure from detection, should any one pass through to the interior of the convent.

CHAPTER II.

A FEW minutes elapsed, when the portress hastily crossed the chapel, and speedily returned with the abbess and an old nun named Bridget, who was reputed to be admitted into her most secret councils.

“Are you sure,” interrogated the abbess, “that all are retired to their apartments?”—Being answered in the affirmative—“Then close the door that enters the convent, and let the portress unbar the outward portal, that the strangers may enter,” continued she.

A silence now ensued, which continued for the space of ten minutes, when the sound of distant footsteps were heard, which slowly and gradually seemed to approach near to the spot where Mary and Esther endeavoured to conceal themselves. Presently they observed a man of a lofty demeanor enter the chapel, followed by four others, wrapped in long cloaks, and bearing between them, what, to the inexpressible terror of Esther and Mary, they conceived to be a dead body, wrapped in a large mantle, which they deposited on the steps leading to the altar, and at no great distance from the lamp, which burnt before the image of the virgin.

Having thus far performed their part, they retreated some paces, and appeared to await, in respectful silence, the further commands of him, whose outward form denoted a personage of more than common rank.

The abbess now approached, and with her arms crossed on her bosom, stood on one side of the body, absorbed in profound contemplation.

On the other side, with folded arms, and with an aspect of severity, was placed the stranger. An awful pause ensued; a deep sigh, which seemed to issue from the apparently lifeless body, at length broke in upon the death-like solemnity of the scene, and which, in some measure, recalled the almost fleeting spirits of the appalled Mary and Esther, who, by this time, were near fainting, and mentally bewailing their ill-timed curiosity.

“A cup of wine,” said the stranger, in a deep commanding tone of voice, turning to Bridget. The old nun instantly obeyed the command; the hitherto inanimate body was then raised, when the mantle falling off, discovered a woman clothed in a white flowing dress—the stranger supported her head with his arm, and with great difficulty at length succeeded in forcing some wine within her lips. In a short space some heavy moans, and a few inarticulate words, seemed to announce returning animation.

The stranger now addressed her in a language unknown to either Mary or Esther; she, however, appeared not as yet sufficiently recovered to reply, or even to support herself. Being immediately within the beams of the lamp, her person was, in a great measure, discernible to them. Her arms hung lifeless to her sides; the pallid hue of death was spread over her countenance, which to them, nevertheless, appeared beautiful, and as youthful as their own. Her eyes were half closed, and a profusion of amber-coloured ringlets, in wild confusion, shaded her face and bosom.

“I did not expect you so soon,” said the abbess to the principal stranger, addressing him in French.—“Though I have all prepared, and you may depend on the exact performance of my duty.”

“I doubt it not,” replied he; “we have letters for you from your noble lady.”—As he spoke, he made a sign to one of his attendants, who immediately presented a large packet, which the abbess, approaching the lamp, opened and read.

Esther and Mary, at the distance where they were placed, could only discover a piece of parchment, to which a large seal appeared to be affixed. Having perused it, she said to the principal—

“Religion, as well as duty, command obedience to this mandate. The lady shall be secure from danger; and I make no doubt will, hereafter, bless the time when she was snatched from the commission of the most deadly and heinous sin, and placed in the road of repentance.”

“We hope so,” answered the stranger, in French.—“But say, holy mother, are these ancient sisters, whom you have entrusted with our secret, to be depended upon?”

“I answer for them; myself, and the Abbot of Pau, have witnessed their solemn oaths, sworn and registered at the foot of the altar.”

“It is well—it is only necessary, then, for me to inform them, that rewards attend their secrecy, and death, should they divulge the trust reposed in them; and now my task, I think, is nearly done.—Good sister,” addressing one of the nuns, “take my place in supporting this weak woman, who sinks under the fatigues of a long and perilous voyage, and sickens, even to death, to return to those sins that have proved her destruction; but hope it not,” added he, turning to her, and still speaking in French, “your scene of power and wickedness is fled, never to return.—Your whole family think you dead; and so you would have been, but for the mercy of her you have most injured. Your paramour will mourn his minion, till his fickle heart fixes upon a new one, when you will be forgotten, as though you had never been. What I would advise, is to repent, take the oaths required of you, receive the veil, and renounce not only the vanities of the world, but also endeavour to forget them; so shall you be at liberty in this convent, as the other nuns—if you refuse, you are still a prisoner, and will be confined and treated with rigour.”

Thus speaking, he left his pale and trembling victim, and drawing aside, held a long and apparently earnest discourse with the abbess; after which, bidding her farewell, he, with his companions, left the chapel, and soon after, Esther and Mary heard the heavy gates of the convent close after them.

On the return of the portress, the abbess commanded her and the old nun, sister Bridget, to raise the stranger, and bear her into the interior of her own apartments, where all was prepared for her reception. They obeyed, and, in a few minutes, Esther and Mary were left alone in the chapel.

They viewed each other with dread, fearful even of breaking silence, lest they should be overheard. At length, grasping Mary’s hand, Esther said, in a low voice,—“Are we awake? Good gracious! is it possible such atrocities can be acted, even at the altar, and in the presence of Heaven! Were this poor sufferer guilty, there would be no need of so much secrecy. Did you hear the tall stranger threaten death, in case the secret was divulged?”

“I did, with horror,” answered Mary.—“I would we had been in our apartments; for Heaven’s sake, let us steal away as softly as possible, lest we be discovered—and for your life, Esther, do not utter a word relative to any thing that has passed to night in the chapel.”

“Be you equally as careful; let us separate in the cloisters.—Good night.”

CHAPTER III.

ON the ensuing morning, Esther and Mary were early stirring, and silently attentive to all that passed; but no circumstance transpired to announce publicly that a stranger was in the convent. Some days after, the Abbot of Pau was admitted, and remained for several hours in the apartment of the abbess; but still the subject was enveloped in secrecy and mystery. Weeks and even months elapsed, without any change taking place; and Esther and Mary, when, with dread, they conversed cautiously in the most retired parts of the garden, on the events which they had witnessed, were inclined to think that the stranger had been removed in the dead of night, or yet, more probably, had been released by death.—Time, however, could never efface from their memory the discourse which had passed, the features of the lady, nor of those of the person who brought her. The remembrance redoubled their aversion to a monastic life, and with tears they frequently deplored the cruelty of their fate, which made it impossible for them to avoid it.

Six months had thus passed, when one morning, about the hour of vespers, two visitors were announced to the abbess, and were conducted through the aisle of the chapel to her audience chamber. The one was in pontifical robes, and the other a man in mourning weeds, and in whom, to the horror of Esther and Mary, they recognized the tall stranger, who had conducted the unhappy woman, who had given them so much concern.—Vespers were no sooner concluded, than the abbess retired, while Esther and Mary, curious to see the strangers return, entered into a vague conversation with some of the nuns. They had thus been engaged about half an hour, when a loud and piercing scream reached their ears. The nuns looked at each other with amazement; and, after a short pause, some retired to enquire from whence the alarm had proceeded.—Esther and Mary, however, attributed it to a cause, secret to all but themselves, except the parties concerned; they judged the young female, whom they had seen brought into the chapel, was still alive, and concealed in the abbess's apartment, and dreaded she was enduring some fresh persecution, in consequence of the tall stranger's arrival.

They instinctively grasped each other's hands, and fearful of betraying their emotion, walked into the cloisters. A few moments after, they heard the voice of the old portress, by the command of the abbess, ordering all to retire to their cells.

Esther and Mary, however their curiosity was excited, found no means to satisfy it for near three months, when one morning the abbess, with apparent carelessness, informed some of the elder nuns, that she had, some short time before, admitted a young novice on her probation, but who, from ill health, she had been induced to keep entirely within her own chamber, that she might superintend the instructions bestowed upon her. Nuns, as well as those more actively situated in life, understood that flattery was a ready road to favour, they therefore did not fail to extol their superior's humanity and devotion, offering their assistance in the pious undertaking; she however declined their proffered aid, and the conversation ceased.

Some few days after, the portress and sister Bridget, led from the apartment of the abbess, the stranger, whom she had announced as a new comer; but in whom Esther and Mary both immediately recognized the unhappy victim, whose secret arrival they had witnessed, while concealed behind the pillars of the chapel. The nuns supported her to the

foot of the altar, where, after remaining some time, they led her into the outward cloisters for air, for she was too weak to conduct herself.

Esther and Mary both considered with pity, the change which had taken place in her person. Her face was wan, and much reduced—her eyes wild and sunken—her lips livid, and her whole form of such shadowy thinness, that had any of the inhabitants of the convent seen her unexpectedly, and unsupported, they would have deemed her to have been a wandering spirit. She was passive and silent; and, after having remained some time in the air, they reconducted her to the apartments she had left.

From this period she was seen daily, but never unattended; though, by slow degrees, her person appeared to gain strength.—She entered into no conversation, not even observing the accustomed salutations, when passing any of the inmates of the convent, being strictly enjoined silence; and the nuns and novices were forbidden, on pain of punishment, to address her. She passed much time at the altar of the Virgin, apparently in fervent prayer, and deep depression; for her tears were observed to flow abundantly, and her sighs were so heavy, that they appeared to shake her fragile form almost to dissolution.

The Abbot of Pau frequently visited her, but his counsels, if he bestowed them, appeared to afford her no comfort, for she was usually more depressed after his visits.

The comments respecting her were various, according to the different tempers and dispositions of the inmates of the convent—the younger members pitied her, and insisted that she was a paragon of beauty, and not more than sixteen, and, at the most, seventeen years old; that they had no doubt she was in love, by her melancholy, but that innocence was depicted in every feature.—Some of the elders, on the contrary, at the head of which was old Martha, insisted she was nineteen or twenty, at the least; that to be sure, she had a fair complexion, tolerable features, and good eyes, considering they were blue, but, upon the whole, her person wanted dignity, and could not, by any means, claim pretensions to beauty.—“For my part,” continued Martha, “I say nothing, for comparisons are odious; and swans have no right to set themselves in competition with geese. But this I will say,—I have known those that would have put her out of countenance.”

“Of that I make no doubt,” replied Mary; “for Heaven knows, there are *shameless women* enough in the world, who are ever on the watch to depreciate beauty, and put innocence to the blush.”

“Shameless women!” echoed Martha; “you are a pert chattering baggage, and would provoke a saint, but I am not to be moved.”

“Is that because you are only a sinner?” returned Mary.

“There, there, do you hear,” spluttered Martha, almost choaked with passion.—“She calls me sinner! the abbess shall be told that I am a sinner; and——”

“Why, did not you acknowledge just now,” answered Mary, calmly, “that you knew those that would put our young novice out of countenance? and, if you are acquainted with such miscreants, who would attempt to insult a broken spirit like her’s? You must, at least, allow that they are the worst of sinners.”

“I did not mean any such thing, I only spoke in regard to beauty; and I still maintain, that I have seen (one at least) that, according to the old saying, your beautiful novice is not worthy to be compared to.”

“And that one, I suppose,” replied Mary, “was either yourself, in days of yore, or else Queen Guineaur, wife of the renowned King Arthur.—Though, on second thoughts, I do not think you can be quite so ancient as to remember her.”

“You have nothing to do with my age; but if I am old, good manners, at least, should teach you to pay me some respect.”

“Where wisdom keeps pace with declining years, our reverence is justly excited; not so when envy, malice, and detraction, deform the hoary brow, even more than the wrinkles of a thousand ages.”

“I think Mary much to blame,” said Ursula. “Sister Martha did not give her opinion; and, for my own part, I must own, I think the young novices’ features are too regular to be striking,” continued she.—“In my mind, prominent features are necessary, for they give an expression and grandeur to the countenance.”

“A long nose and chin are the characteristics of beauty,” replied Mary, significantly, fixing her eyes on Ursula.

“I understand your impertinent insinuation, child,” answered Ursula, angrily, “but you are too insignificant to vex me; my thoughts are not placed on such transitory toys as my beauty or person.”

“I am glad to hear that,” replied Mary, “with all my heart.”

“You are glad; and why so, I pray?”

“Why, because then you will not grieve at your homeliness.”

“Notwithstanding your insolence,” resumed Ursula, “and though I have done with the vanities of the world, there are many who can remember what I was.”

“They, doubtless, must be very wise people then; for I have been told, that wisdom increaseth with years,” answered Mary.

“I cannot say any thing about wisdom,” replied Ursula, “for I was never vain of Heaven’s gifts; indeed I always thought my chin too prominent for perfect beauty, though I can remember a handsome knight once telling me, a full chin was a mark of wisdom.—However, of that I do not pretend to judge, but then my nose was of the perfect shape was allowed by painters.”

“Lord! Lord!” exclaimed Mary—“how it must have grown since that time; perhaps it has increased so for a punishment of your sins.”

Ursula’s passion to hear this favorite feature spoken thus lightly of, exceeded all bounds; she raised her hand to strike Mary, but, probably reflecting that this might bring on a disagreeable discussion, she contented herself with stamping with her foot, grinning horribly in her face, and, in a rage, hobbling away from the place of contention.

A silence for some minutes succeeded her departure, the elder sisterhood, who formed the majority, being doubtless not more pleased, at the sarcastic ebullitions of the young novice, in regard to Ursula. Not that either their respect, or affection, operated in her favour, for, as an individual, they did not care a whit what vexation she received; but it was a common cause—out of the dull routine of the conventual life, they had no other mode of filling up the intervening hours, than by recounting to each other what their persons *had* been, before the austerities of the order, and not their age, had marred their charms. These agreeable conversations, intermingled with a portion of scandal, for the moment, appeared to unknit even the gloomy rigid brow of age, and gave to the antiquated sisterhood the only degree of complacency towards each other, that their contracted minds were capable of feeling; but thus to be broken upon, by a few young

novices, in the flower of youth and beauty, was an intolerance much to be dreaded, as it left them no resource—no relaxation.

While the elders were ruminating on this new grievance, their meditations were interrupted by Esther, saying, “I considered the young stranger’s face attentively this morning, and compared it with the paintings round the chapel, but not one of them is half so beautiful—the expression of her countenance is most like that of St. Catharine, but the painting is far inferior, in point of beauty, to the reality.”

The nuns appeared shocked at Esther’s comparing the stranger to St. Catharine, and, after a general concert of sighing and groaning, they retired to their cells.

CHAPTER IV.

THE stranger had assumed the dress of a novice, and though youth and strength appeared to struggle against a fixed and deadly grief, she still continued silent; and, as at first, never appeared out of her chamber, unless accompanied by either the abbess, the portress, or Bridget.—Thus passed a year from her first admission, when the abbess informed the nuns that the Abbot of Pau had, for weighty and powerful, though private reasons, ordered that the young novice should enter immediately the holy pale,—that henceforward they would know her by the name of sister Magdalen,—and that the sacred ceremony of her renouncing the world would take place in a few days.

The old nuns highly applauded the goodness of the abbot who had kindly shortened the probation of the novice, while the young boarders sighed at the prospect of a sacrifice which might soon be their own lot.

At length the day arrived, but the ceremony, contrary to general custom, was private; no one being present but the inmates of the convent, the Abbot of Pau, and some monks devoted to his service.—All prepared, the victim was led forth, but had refused the ornaments usual on such occasions.—The solemn music resounded, high mass was performed, and the agitation of the pale and trembling victim made it requisite to support her till the moment approached for her to take the vows which separated her for ever from the world.

As the ceremony proceeded she seemed to gain strength, and raising her eyes to Heaven she approached the altar;—the abbot attended to administer the vows, and with indecent celerity appeared in haste to conclude the sacrifice.

No one but those immediately attending the abbess had yet heard the young stranger speak, and all felt a lively interest to hear her voice.—On the abbot asking her whether she willingly renounced the vanities of the world, she replied, in a soft but firm accent,—“Aye, the vanities I willingly relinquish, but I dare not lie at the foot of the altar and in the face of Heaven.—There are objects in the world which can never cease to be dear to me;—if the vows I take are sinful, Heaven remove the weight from my soul, fatal necessity compels, and I obey.”

The abbot affected to take her words in a sense which were evidently not their true meaning.—“Daughter,” replied he, “while we are enveloped in frail mortality, our hearts, in spite of our firmest resolutions, will partake in worldly things.—In renouncing the allurements and temptations to err, you take the first step towards repentance; and I commend the candour which prompts you boldly to confess your sins.”

“Purity alone, father, should be offered to Heaven, and the unhappy woman before you, as you well know, hath not purity to offer.”

“Alas! daughter, none are pure!—your sins are indeed great, but not, I trust, beyond the reach of mercy.”—Then, as if fearful she should reply, he turned hastily, and requested the nuns to sing *Misericordia*; which performed, he hurried through the remainder of the ceremony like a man who was in haste to conclude a business at once disagreeable and disgraceful to him, but which he was obliged to accomplish.

On her beautiful ringlets being cut off, according to the custom of assuming the veil, both Esther and Mary, in spite of their utmost endeavours, burst into tears, and were severely reprimanded by the abbess.

Their emotion was not lost upon the votary,—“Alas!” said she, “is pity then a crime within these walls dedicated to Heaven?—Humanity and mercy are the attributes of Holy Spirits,—crush not, therefore, the divine emanation in these young maids.”

The high swollen spirit of the abbess could ill bear this public reproof, but it was no time to resent it; and the ceremony being concluded, the priests returned to their monastery, and the nuns to their cells.

Though Magdalen, as she was now called, had taken the veil, and was for ever secluded from the world, yet sister Bridget, or the old portress, as usual, attended her steps for several months; when, finding that she formed no particular acquaintance, nor held much conversation with any one, their cares began to relax, and she was suffered to walk in the garden alone, from whence, however, it was next to impossible to escape.

In one of these melancholy recreations she was met by Esther and Mary, who seeing her alone, ran to her, and each taking one of her hands, with the warmth of youthful feeling, pressed it to their lips,—“Dear, dear sister,” said Mary, “we have long wished to tell you that we love you, that we commiserate your misfortunes, and, though we never before dared avow it, witnessed the cruel and unjust manner in which you were brought into the convent.”

Magdalen started, trembled, turned pale, and appeared oppressed almost to fainting,—“For Heaven’s sake, peace!” said she,—at length looking round and being convinced no one was near, she added,—“Come with me into the more retired part of the garden, where we may speak with greater freedom,—here we are in momentary danger.”

So saying, Magdalen led the way in silence to a part of the ground particularly shunned by the inhabitants of the convent. It was a deep dell, at the extremity of the enclosed land, thickly planted with trees; and which, from the underwood, and neglect, were almost in some parts impenetrable. A brook separated it from the cultivated part of the garden, to which it only was united by a rustic bridge, in so decayed and neglected a state, that a short time only appeared to be requisite to cut off all communication.

Though Esther and Mary had resided in the convent from their infancy, they never had ventured to cross this bridge, at the foot of which stood the image of St. Bertrand; being placed there as a kind of centinel, to prevent the evil spirit, which was reported to haunt the wood, from straying beyond its precincts. The story handed down by tradition, and firmly believed in the convent, was, that near a century before, one of the Dukes of Guienne, having seduced a maid of inferior degree, named Agatha, his wife, in his absence, caused her to be seized and forced into St. Bertrand’s, where she was delivered of a son, who was immediately taken from her, and placed she knew not where,—or perhaps destroyed.—The latter supposition preyed upon her spirits, until her intellects gave way, and she became raving mad.—After a time her malady settled into a desponding melancholy, notwithstanding which, she was suffered to stray by herself to any part of the extensive inclosure. The wood, though gloomy, was then cultivated, and was her almost constant retreat; in the deepest recess she constructed, with her own hands, a kind of cell, or rather hut, by first interweaving the branches of the trees, upon which she spread clay, until she rendered it proof against the weather. This employment she was suffered to enjoy, as it injured no one, and to keep her in a quiet state was far more desirable than to venture a relapse into the furious ravings that had before afflicted her. She even passed her nights in this retreat, and frequently, had not food been brought her, would have remained till too weak to come forth to seek it. After one of these

absences, two of the sisters, as was their usual custom, carrying her a basket of food, to their great terror found her dead, and lying upon the earth with a dagger in her side. This act was, by the then superior of the convent and her partizans, denominated suicide; and the effects of her crime first madness, then self-murder, which last they seemed to have no doubt would plunge her into everlasting perdition, their charity making no allowance for insanity.

Some of the inmates of the convent, however, dared to think otherwise, though they were fearful to express their thoughts;—nay, some few thought it might even be possible, that her own hands did not direct the fatal blow.

The Duke of Guienne was just returned from Constantinople, where he had been for two years, and it appeared not impossible but that the jealousy of the duchess might have impelled her to remove for ever a dreaded rival, who was already dead to the world, and to effect which was no difficult matter, as Agatha was often at such a distance from the convent, that no alarm could reach them. The walls that enclosed the grounds were indeed high, yet not to that degree, as not to be scaled on the outside by determined ruffians.

To corroborate this opinion, one of the nuns had, on the first discovery of the unfortunate Agatha, started a very formidable objection against the act of suicide, namely,—“how she could obtain a dagger?” such a weapon not being within the sacred walls.

The vindictive spirit of the superior, however, soon crushed this kind of argument, upon pain of the most rigid penance being inflicted upon those who should dare to be contumacious, where the honour and profit of her house were so intimately concerned.—She likewise recapitulated and exaggerated the errors of the simple Agatha, whose madness she affirmed was nothing more nor less than an actual possession of her sinful frame by the evil spirit, who first tempted her to sin, and then, doubtless, furnished her with the means to accomplish her dreadful purpose.

“This opinion, though as before mentioned, not implicitly believed by all, at least, came from too high an authority to be disputed. Consecrated ground was, therefore, out of the question, and a hole was dug in poor Agatha’s cell, where her body was deposited; the act, sanctified by no holy rite, nor hallowed by one friendly tear!

The murderous dagger was cast into the Garonne, and the nuns prohibited from frequenting the wood where so foul a deed had taken place, and where there was no doubt the perturbed spirit of the frail Agatha would wander and hover, in painful penance for her earthly crimes, until time should be no more.

As tales of horror seldom lose by frequent repetition, it was soon reported that Agatha, with a dagger in her hand, had been in reality seen; and caused such terror, that the superior found it necessary to place the image of St. Bertrand at the foot of the bridge, holding a crucifix, to prevent the wandering spirit passing into the garden.

It was at first in contemplation, to destroy the bridge, but as it was composed of timber, that had grown on consecrated ground, it was suffered to remain; leaving to time to interrupt the communication between the garden and the wood.

Magdalen, fearlessly, passed the bridge—Esther started and drew back—but the strong mind of Mary needed no more than example; and, taking Esther’s hand, she said, “Come on, we have never injured any one; and if the spirit does not molest Magdalen, it will surely not hurt us.”—

Esther, thus encouraged, crossed the brook, and entered the wood, where Magdalen, turning round, said,—“Fear nothing, this is my daily haunt, I have forced a rude path, with great difficulty, through the underwood, and visited poor Agatha’s grave; all there is quiet, and I trust her guilty, but persecuted spirit, rests from its labours in the bosom of peace and infinite mercy.”

Esther and Mary acquired fresh courage as they advanced; when Magdalen addressing them, with great emotion, said,—“We are now, I think, safe, tell me therefore, I conjure you, by my soul’s peace, and in the name of the Holy Virgin, tell me all you know respecting me.”

“Sweet lady,” answered Esther, “we would not injure you for worlds, for well do we know that you have been cruelly oppressed.”

“I believe you, but again conjure you to disclose all you know, and relieve my anxiety—never will I betray your confidence.”

Mary then related their concealment in the chapel,—the bringing in of what they thought, at first, a dead body—the tall stranger, speaking to Magdalen in a language unknown to them—his addressing the abbess, in French, and the same afterwards to Magdalen,—his giving the abbess a letter, with a large seal—his caution respecting secrecy—and his threats in case of the secret’s being developed.

Magdalen listened to the relation with trembling anxiety, which, when concluded, she said,—“Tell me, I pray you, for my memory retains few of the occurrences which then passed. What did the tall stranger name me? From whence did he say he brought me? And what said he were my connexions?”

“He did not name you, lady; it was evident that the abbess had, for some days, expected your arrival, by her orders for all to retire early to their cells.—Other changes had also taken place in the convent, but whether on your account, we know not.—The brutal stranger, who came with you, said to the abbess, that he brought her letters from her noble mistress, and she respectfully replied, that she would be careful to execute her commands with the greatest punctuality. He also spoke of you, lady, in a manner which I am convinced you do not deserve; for, if virtue and goodness dwell not in so sweet a form, where shall we seek them?”

“My good girls, your innocence misleads you; the fairest bodies do not always contain the purest minds—this unhappy form hath wrought my destruction. Mark me well! so shall ye save me from renewed sorrow,—those dearer to me than life, from ruin, and yourselves from bodily danger; nay, perhaps, from death.”

Esther and Martha were much affected, trembled exceedingly, and requested an explanation of her words.

“Should you ever reveal what you have witnessed, my kind girls, my death, or perpetual imprisonment, and, in all probability, yours’ would be the consequence. Not only so, but the innocent, who never injured human soul, would bleed, and for whose safety, behold me buried in this living grave.—Swear, then, my young friends, here, in the face of Heaven, unseen but by the saints, never to disclose, to any one, what you saw or heard on that eventful night; and, in return, I swear to you an inviolable love and friendship, if you will accept it from one so lost as I am.”

Shocked and alarmed, they both knelt, and called upon the Holy Virgin to witness the oath of secrecy which Magdalen required; after which, kneeling by their side, she took a hand of each, and, raising her beautiful eyes to Heaven, exclaimed with fervour,—

“Ye holy saints, who are never deaf to the supplications of the sorrowful, hear and witness the friendship I vow to these young maids.—Oh, guard them with a watchful eye, direct their youth, protect them from the beguiling snares of greatness; deliver them from this prison where chastity is the punishment, not the glory of woman—if single, make them examples of purity in a corrupt world—or, if wedded, make them virtuous wives and happy mothers.”

The young maids hung round her, and, with youthful enthusiasm said, they would share her fate.—“Heaven forbid,” replied she. “My oaths, though in some measure constrained, are sacred, and bind me ever in oblivion. For you I will not despair, but let us now separate; for should our intercourse be discovered, it would ruin all, and redouble the rigour of my situation—we can occasionally meet here, and communicate our thoughts.”

The party now separated and retired to the convent, where their trepidation insensibly subsided, and in a little time their meetings, though cautiously conducted, became frequent; as from a similarity of situation and disposition they were soon warmly attached to each other.

Mary, in the course of one of their conversations ventured to ask Magdalen the events of her life, but received an answer which precluded all further inquiry.—“Mary,” replied she, “repeat that question no more, or we must separate for ever.—A sacred and everlasting silence closes my lips; nor can even the hour of death release me from my vow of making no verbal disclosure.”

Thus passed above a year after Magdalen had taken the veil;—her health gradually returned, but the depression of her spirits remained the same.—She seldom conversed with any one except Esther and Mary, and then only in their secret meetings; for it was evident she was careful to give no rise to suspicion.

At one of those meetings, observing that Magdalen was even more heavily depressed than usual, and that her eyes were swollen with weeping, Esther and Mary pressed her to disclose the cause.

“My kind girls,” replied she, “this is my unhappy birth day,—this morn I completed my nineteenth year. Alas! what complicated miseries have darkened the morning of my days!—the retrospect is dreadful!—my heart sickens, and my head grows giddy at the remembrance!—Oh! my sainted mother, if you be permitted to witness the sorrows of your wretched daughter, supplicate that her earthly miseries may be shortened!—Ah! no,” continued she, after a pause, “rather entreat that her corporeal anguish may be prolonged, until her spirit, purified by suffering, may be more worthy to join with your’s in bliss!”

Esther and Mary wept with her.—“Alas!” said the former, “Mary and I, confined to this convent from the age of seven years, have drawn nothing but flattering presages, and formed perhaps false pictures of the world;—I much fear our imaginations have beguiled us.”

“A certain portion of suffering is attached to all human creatures,” replied Magdalen, “but virtue is a shield against which the arrows of shame, malice, slander, and disgrace strike harmless;—their barbed points fix and rankle only in the guilty breast, and leave wounds no earthly medicine can cure.”

Fearful of causing suspicion by too long an absence, they soon after crossed the bridge, and by different ways returned to the convent.

CHAPTER V.

ESTHER was of the family of the Count de Maltravers, not particularly rich, but honorable; and who, anxious to increase the revenues of an elder son, doomed his young and unoffending daughter to perpetual celibacy in a convent. He was, however, saved from the atrocity of this act by an accident which human knowledge could not foresee, nor paternal prudence prevent.

The darling son, who was to transmit his boasted honours to posterity, and for whom Esther was to be sacrificed, was himself slain in a licentious quarrel respecting a courtesan.

Secluded from the world, this news was unknown to Esther, who seldom saw her parents above once in two years, and then only in the presence of the abbess, and at the grate of the convent. The death of the son left Esther sole heiress of their possessions, and as they had no inclination to enrich the convent, at the expence of the extinction of their boasted pedigree, they now became as anxious to see her married, as they had been before to doom her to a single life.

They therefore informed the abbess of their intention of removing her, which however she divulged to no one till the moment the count came to claim his daughter; and even then she did not suffer her to leave her presence till she quitted the convent.

Esther, at the first intelligence, appeared wild with joy; but looking round, and fixing her eyes on Mary and sister Magdalen, she burst into tears. Mary threw her arms round her for a last embrace, while Magdalen, viewing her at once with a smile of congratulation and a starting tear, hastily left the chapel where they were assembled, lest either their feelings or her own should betray them.

“Away with this folly!” said the abbess, haughtily;—“your parents wait, Esther.—I pity their delusion, which snatches you from peace and safety, to plunge you into the allurements of the world.—Look round for the last time, for no more will you be permitted to defile these walls by your presence.”

Esther made no reply, but pressing Mary once more to her bosom, followed the portress who waited to conduct her to the gates.

Mary de Vavasour was not so highly born as Esther, but her father, the Sieur de Vavasour, was immensely rich;—he had three sons and only one daughter, whose maternal aunt had left her a considerable property. To enrich his sons with this wealth, and to ennoble his family, he resolved to provide for her in a convent; and for that purpose had carefully confined her, from her early youth, in St. Bertrand’s.

An old nun, who had been a particular friend of her aunt’s, insensibly became attached to her, and Mary returning her affection, her infancy scarcely missed the attention of a parent. When she was thirteen, sister Adeline, as she was called, died, and Mary having ever decidedly shewn a dislike to a conventual life, being of a cheerful and giddy temper, sister Adeline, at once impelled by rectitude and affection, considered it a point of duty to inform her of every particular respecting herself and family; at the same time advising her to conceal what she had thus divulged, till necessity obliged her to reveal it, as it might make her situation yet more disagreeable in the convent, and, she feared, would not be able to preserve her from taking the vows, should her father persist in forcing her to make the sacrifice.—“Three or four years,” continued the old nun, “may,

my dear child, give you more serious thoughts, and a life of retirement may lose its horrors;—for, believe me, the world is full of sorrows.—Your father was in England when your aunt died, and as they had not been on terms of friendship for many years, he did not even know of our acquaintance. She died when you were only two years old, and that same year I retired to this convent, and candidly confess, that when I saw you here, and learned your family, I judged the reason was the enriching of your brother.—I, however, kept my suspicions to myself, for a disclosure would only have procured me ill-will, and you, to whom I have ever been warmly attached, would have been separated from me, for the abbess doubtless knows every circumstance; and though she would willingly have the whole of your wealth settled upon the convent, yet she had rather take a part than lose all.”

Three days after this communication the sister died, and Mary first experienced sorrow. The words of her friend she treasured in her memory, and to no one but Esther had ever mentioned the circumstance.—Days and nights did she pass, as her years increased, in devising means for her release, but all appeared vague and uncertain; she resolved, however, to make the trial before she entered upon her noviciate, and was strengthened in her resolution by the departure of Esther, since when the convent had become detestable to her, the private meetings she had with Magdalen being her only consolation.

In the mean time the abbess, vexed at losing Esther, whose seclusion would have brought money to her coffers, resolved that no delay should take place in Mary’s entering upon her noviciate, lest some unlucky chance should deprive the convent of her also. She, therefore, sent the Sieur de Vavasour word of her intentions, and in return received his entire consent and approbation.

Ordering Mary to be sent into her apartment, she informed her of her father’s resolution, and desired her to enter on her noviciate immediately. Well aware of her temper, she expected tears and resistance, but to her great surprise observed she received the information with apparent calmness, and without any marked reluctance.—“I have long expected this command, Madam,” replied she, “and rejoice at it, as it enables me to disclose a secret which has been very painful to me.—All I request is, to see my parents, and in their presence to make the necessary communication, after which I am at their command and your’s.”

The abbess would fain have persuaded her to give up this request, saying, that if she thought to persuade her parents from their determined purpose,—a plan which had been settled on the most mature deliberation, it would be vain. Mary replied, that she had no such intention, and not only requested the presence of her parents, but that also of some of the elders of the convent; as what she had to say was of the utmost moment to the whole house.

“To whom does it relate?” demanded the abbess, in a quick tone of voice,—“the affairs of this community have no right to be discussed with any one but myself.”

“It relates only to *myself*, Lady, and the enriching this establishment,” answered Mary, “which a minor, like me, has no power to do, however I may have the inclination.”

The abbess viewed her with some surprise, then replied,—“True, child, and you gain my good will by the remark.—Your parents, though not rich, will give a respectable sum on your entering our holy community, and the pious intention must be received as it merits.”

“Yet, Lady, could I make it more——”

“It would be most praise-worthy; but it is impossible, you are dependant on your parents.”

“Undoubtedly, you will therefore please to grant my request of seeing them, when I shall relieve my conscience, and all will be arranged, I hope, for the best.”

So saying, she left the abbess, who had hitherto regarded her only as a giddy girl, and now felt extreme surprise at her serious and determined conduct.—She well knew that Mary was heiress to some estates, but was not aware of their great value; and, convinced that no one in the convent knew ought on the subject, had no suspicion that she, who had been an inmate since the age of seven years, could have gained any information. She, however, resolved to write to her parents, and request their presence as a preliminary step to her entering on her noviciate. At the first moment of Mary’s demand, a suspicion of Magdalen’s being concerned pressed her thoughts; but the improbability of the surmise, and the subsequent behaviour of Mary, completely banished the idea.

On the other hand, when the abbess’s letter was received by the Vavasours, Mary’s request was far from affording them any satisfaction.—Not that they feared being moved from their determined purpose by natural affection, or by her tears and entreaties, but knowing they were acting wrong, their consciences, for the first time, presented a fear of they knew not what.—However, being unable to form any plausible excuse for their non-attendance, they appointed a day, and in the presence of the abbess, two priests, sister Bridget, the portress, and two other nuns greatly devoted to the abbess, prepared to take a final farewell of their devoted child.

Mary threw herself at the feet of her parents, but the contracted brow of her father repelled tenderness; while her mother, in spite of her efforts, burst into tears and pressed her to her bosom.—Mary’s heart beat too high to admit of words, but her eyes plainly spoke to her maternal feelings, and accused her of cruelty.—“And was it for this I was summoned here?” said the Sieur de Vavasour, sternly.—“You, holy mother,” addressing the abbess,—“I think said, Mary had something her conscience required her to disclose, previous to her taking the veil.”

The harshness of the Sieur de Vavasour, at once recalled Mary’s courage.—“It is most true, Sir,” replied she. “The business on which I requested your presence should not be a secondary consideration; for I well perceive, that sordid interests hold a primary place, and unnaturally banish that affection, which even brutes, *instinctively*, feel towards their progeny.—You have chosen St. Bertrand for my patron, and are determined to seclude me for ever from the world. I appeal to your own conscience, whether your motive is dictated by piety; for, in that case, justice must also influence your conduct. At the age of eighteen, I might naturally expect to enter the world, or, at least, to see my parents entertain some compunction at sacrificing a child to their ambition.—Say, holy mother, and you reverend fathers, had I been suffered to wed a mortal husband, would he not have been entitled to those estates, which at twenty-one I inherit in Normandy.”

The Sieur de Vavasour startled, turned pale, and endeavoured to interrupt her, as did also the abbess; but, regardless of their efforts, she continued with increased energy.—

“Peace, I pray you, this time I will speak, whatever may befall.—If I relinquish the world, and devote myself to Heaven, St. Bertrand then becomes my spouse, nor shall he

be defrauded of my patrimony. My resolution is not sudden; it is the effect of reflection, nor shall death itself force me to retract it. Three years will I remain on my noviciate, and when I attain the age of twenty-one, settle my whole wealth on the convent, and take the vows. This is my demand, and the business for which I required your presence.”

The Sieur de Vavasour was enraged beyond his patience; he almost cursed his daughter, and accused the abbess of filling her mind with vain thoughts of enriching her convent.—The abbess, in her turn, not being gifted with the most patient disposition, replied with acrimony to his unjust charge, till the spirit of discord made one party forget prudence, and the other almost the assumed appearance of sanctity.—Hypocrisy, however, was too habitual to be easily overcome; and, with a face crimsoned with rage, and eyes sparkling with malignity, the abbess replied—“Your accusation is unjust; wicked man that you are, to dare insult the peace and holiness of this retreat. I had indeed heard that Mary had some estates, but neither knew their extent, nor where they are situated; to wish to give what is justly her’s to the convent, can be no sin, but is doubtless the inspiration of the holy saint, and in which I will support her to the utmost of my power.”

Mary, charmed to find her plan succeed beyond her hopes, was sufficiently shrewd to lose no advantage.—“My aunt,” said she, “possessed a diamond cross of great value, it was attached to her neck at the hour of death; that cross, I pray you, on the first opportunity, good father, present to my guardian saint, it may incline him to be propitious to me.”

“The maid speaks nobly,” said one of the fathers, “and her piety merits praise; such a daughter is a treasure to a family, for how efficacious must be her prayers in their behalf.”

“My aunt had many jewels,” resumed Mary, “those, please to present to my mother; and the large bag of broad gold pieces, preserved in her ebony cabinet, I beg you to accept yourself. But for the estates at Rouen, and in Poictou, together with their accumulating revenues, if I espouse a holy life, they belong to my convent.”

“Impudent wench! You are well tutored,” said the Sieur de Vavasour, almost inarticulate with passion—“but you have no claim, till you attain the age of twenty-one.”

“I know it well, and therefore defer my vows till that period. Had you, Sir, possessed more nature, I might have shewn more affection; as it is, if my will is not granted, through these fathers will I appeal to the Pope, and he will do me justice.”

Awed by her courage, and the lure she held out to the convent of inheriting her wealth, the abbess and the priests both took her part, and threatened her father with the anathema of the church, should he endeavour to use force or cruelty to so exemplary a child, who was, doubtless, inspired by St. Bertrand himself; or how could she be informed of particulars totally unknown to any one else in the convent, as where her aunt’s estates were situated, the knowledge of her jewels, the diamond cross, so nobly offered to the saint, and particularly the broad pieces of gold in the cabinet.

The mention of these valuables had astonished Vavasour himself, for he thought them secure from all mortal knowledge; as indeed they were, except to sister Adeline, who, soon after her friend’s death, left that part of the country where Mary’s aunt resided, and retired to St. Bertrand’s.—In the conversation previous to her death, she had mentioned these effects to Mary, which now served to strengthen her claim.

“I will remove you from this convent,” said Vavasour, “and place you in one where you will learn your duty.”

“She shall not quit our house,” replied the abbess, “unless with her own consent; you yourself placed her under the patronage of St. Bertand, and as I have every reason to think your motives are not for the maid’s benefit, you must assign a better reason for her removal than that of her great devotion to our holy patron.”

Mary, who was now convinced she should gain nothing by a removal, but, on the contrary, expected to experience redoubled severity in another convent, or, perhaps, be at the mercy of a parent devoid of natural affection, espoused the opinion of the abbess, and insisted on staying where she was. Much time was spent in contention, neither party being inclined to give way. At length the Sieur de Vavasour, finding that he had those to contend with, who were to the full as obstinate and as interested as himself, with the addition of being more powerful, quitted the convent; muttering curses on a child whose only crime was wishing not to be sacrificed to unnatural avarice.

Though the abbess was deeply skilled in hypocrisy and art, yet, unable to account for Mary’s conduct, she suffered her own interested motives to blind her judgment; and hoping to grasp all, however unwillingly, resolved to wait the full time when Mary could, legally, endow the convent with her wealth, and, if possible, to detain her within the walls, until that event should take place.

Mary had, in some measure, attained her end. At first she had hoped to interest her parents, and to induce her father to relax his intentions; his severity undeceived her, and, emboldened by despair, she put in practice a scheme of revenge which she had frequently meditated, namely, that of making the whole of her wealth accompany the sacrifice of herself.

By this line of conduct there was also some hopes of superior advantages ultimately accruing. In the first place, she gained a respite of three years; and, secondly, a probability, at least, that in that space of time something might occur, by the means of which she might be totally freed from a thralldom so repugnant to her wishes.

On the departure of Vavasour, Mary received the congratulations of the fathers, and the abbess; the latter of whom remarked, that she had, for some time past, observed a great change in the character of Mary, which afforded her peculiar pleasure, as she judged it proceeded from pious motives, by which she had been latterly influenced, under the particular care and protection of St. Bertrand.

Mary did not attempt to undeceive her, and made no reflections on what had passed, for the cruelty of her father wrung her heart;—besides, she was conscious that the change of her temper from liveliness to gravity, arose from the deprivation of Esther’s company only, and not from any miraculous interposition of holy St. Bertrand in her favour.

CHAPTER VI.

THE conduct and resolution of Mary, for some time afforded conversation for the whole convent;—some applauded and others condemned her spirit. The abbess's party affirmed it proceeded from inspiration, while the opposite faction, at the head of whom was Martha, heard of her boldness with dismay and wonder.—“Well, Heaven bless me,” cried the old nun, turning up the whites of her eyes, “how different are the girls of these days to what they were in mine!—all then was retiring modesty, submission, delicacy, and acquiescence!—Now they stand forth with unblushing effrontery, and plead like lawyers!—I should not wonder, if, hereafter, they were to run wild about the world, usurp the rights of men, and claim the same independence!—When I took the veil, my father's word was law,—though I had, I must confess, a *stronger* cause for reluctance than Mary can possibly have,—for there was a knight.——But such thoughts are now vanity,—yet he was as fine a man as ever wore armour; and though his modesty never suffered him to disclose his passion for me, yet his eyes have declared it a thousand times. But I was never vain, nor given to boast of my attractions.—You, sister Ursula, remember my coming into the convent;—you had taken the vows some years, and had overcome those tumultuous feelings so hard to be suppressed when young people first leave the world.”

“I thank you for that,” replied Ursula, with evident pique, “I had not professed two months when you entered the convent,—though, I thank Heaven, *I* had no vicious propensities to overcome; and for knights or 'squires, I was too young for any such filthy trash to enter my thoughts. I can just remember, for as I said before, I was very young,—you looked old enough to be my mother.—But age is no sin, however vanity may be one.”

“Old enough to be your mother,” exclaimed Martha, “that's good indeed;—why I could not be more than——”

“Thirty, at least,” interrupted Ursula, “and that is now thirty-one years ago.”

“It is a spiteful falsehood,” vociferated Martha, scarcely articulate from anger,—“I was nearer thirteen than thirty, though it is now of no consequence.—But I am sorry to see, at *your* age, Ursula, and in spite of your holy calling, that you are given to envy, and addicted to depreciate the merits of others.”

“Holy St. Bertrand be my witness, that I never *envied you*,” answered Ursula,—“nay, I believe all the good sisters can vouch for me, that I had no occasion in regard to person; and then, as to depreciating your *virtues*, I fancy you are not overstocked, any more than your neighbours.”

“Why surely you will not dare to call my virtue in question in this holy place.—To be sure, in the world I *was* surrounded with temptation that required the prudence——”

“Of thirteen years of age to protect it,” interrupted Ursula, “but you have now a trustier safeguard, Martha,—Time, from whose withered clutches no one will attempt to assail it.”

This reply increased Martha's anger,—“I defy your malice,” exclaimed she, “my virtue——”

“Is very secure,” again interrupted Ursula, “so let it rest in quiet, as doubtless it will;—for beauty being its greatest bane, that, *you* may thank Heaven, you never possessed.”

“Not beauty!” hastily replied Martha, struggling to overcome her passion.—“Age, Ursula, strangely impairs the memory.”

“So it appears,” returned Ursula, “for me, my memory is as good as ever it was in my life;—for example, I remember your person on the day you took the veil, as well as if it was but yesterday,—I perfectly recollect that your hair——”

“Ah, those raven locks, as a young knight used to call them,” interrupted Martha, with great self complacency.

“Were as grizzled as those of a badger,” exclaimed Ursula, “your skin was as yellow as a kite’s foot, and your teeth as black as ebony.—Marry, it was no great sacrifice to devote you to St. Bertrand.”

Martha stamped with passion, and for a few moments was unable to reply;—she then hastily shook sister Anne, whom even the violence of the altercation could not keep waking, and by whose auxiliary aid she hoped to combat with more success.—But here too Martha was unsuccessful, for Anne was so cross at being disturbed, that she absolutely refused even to be umpire; and Martha was therefore obliged to defer the vindication of her beauty until a more favourable opportunity presented itself.

“I surely heard the voice of discord,” said Magdalen, entering from one of the outward cloisters;—what is amiss, I pray ye, good sisters?”

Fearful of injuring their reputation for sanctity before a young sister, the old nuns immediately resumed their accustomed hypocrisy.—“Nay, nothing was amiss, kind Magdalen,” replied Ursula, “Martha and I were only discoursing on the dangers of beauty, and the difficulty of forgetting those allurements which were most dear to us in life.”

“Difficult, indeed,” replied Magdalen; “to pluck up pleasures by the root, to throw down the self-built castle of worldly happiness, and to forego those affections on which the heart was fixed, require, alas! time, reason, reflection, and prayer.”

“Aye, and mortification,” interrupted Martha, “fast, and punish your pampered body, sister.—That fair face, roseate cheek, and bright eye, are ill tokens of a contrite heart.”

“Is it by outward tokens, Martha,” replied Magdalen, “that you judge your fellow sinners?—Is there, then, no feeling that passeth shew, and that like a vulture preys upon the heart instead of the countenance.”

“None without injuring the complexion, that ever I saw or heard of,” answered Martha.—“Look at me, and behold a change which penitence hath wrought for only venial errors; for, I thank God, that I never was prone to sin.”

“Aye, aye, age and convent discipline are sad enemies to the complexion,” said Ursula.

“To judge, indeed, by your countenance,” replied Magdalen, without noticing Ursula’s remark, “your sufferings must have been severe, nay, dreadful;—and they may serve as a beacon to terrify the young and unwary from sin, if such be its direful effects in the hour of repentance.—But Heaven is gracious, good Martha, therefore, I pray you, be merciful to yourself, for you have already more the aspect of a spectre than of a human

being; and should you die from the severity of your mortification it would surely be sinful.”

“A spectre, quotha!” retorted Martha, forgetting her usual hypocrisy, and grinning horribly in her face,—“no more a spectre than yourself.—I wonder at your matchless insolence;—you have affected silence and meekness a long time, but I thought such prudent conduct could not last for ever.—No, no, I am seldom deceived, I thought the mild lamb would turn out a very tyger.—Mercy on me, I wonder the world stands, when even the retreat of holy St. Bertrand is a cloak for hypocrisy, affected meekness, boasting, and vanity.”

“I grieve to see it,” answered Magdalen, mildly, “but be patient, good sister, if my countenance offends you, could you look into my heart you would be amply revenged.”

So saying, Magdalen left them, and repaired to the garden, in hopes of meeting Mary, of whose conduct she had heard both from the abbess and Bridget, mixed with great encomiums on her devotion and love to St. Bertrand. Magdalen heard the account with surprise, well knowing her young friend’s detestation to a convent, and could attribute the change to no cause but some sinister motive which impelled her to assume an appearance of hypocrisy which was totally opposite to her real character.

Not far from the accustomed spot they encountered each other, and after, as usual, looking round to see if any one was within hearing, Magdalen asked for an explanation of what she had heard.—“I cannot injure you, even for a moment, to suppose you a hypocrite,” said she, “but surely, dear girl, it is sinful to jest on sacred subjects.”

“Then on their heads be the sin who forced me to assume a character so opposite to my natural disposition,” replied Mary. “I will acknowledge that a parent who acts from real affection, is the best judge of what is befitting a child, and in its nonage has a right to its disposal;—but neither reason nor duty can sanction an acquiescence to an act influenced by motives so cruel and unjust as those by which my father is governed.—Heaven pardon him,” continued she, after a short pause, “and inspire him with sentiments of affection and pity to a child that never offended him willingly.—Dear Magdalen, how I could love my parents would they permit me!—I want not wealth, let them dispose of that as they please, but let me not be immured for life in a gloomy sepulchre, haunted by mortal fiends.—Hypocrisy, no my dear Magdalen, I detest the very name, for within these walls we see nothing else;—my conduct is the offspring of fatal necessity, by which I have gained at least time, and if at last I am obliged to take the vows, I will endeavour to insure myself some privileges superior to those possessed by the sordid grovelling phantoms of this convent,—creatures who think snuffing through their Ave Marias an expiation for every crime—and with the sacred name of religion in their mouths, wear a diabolical mask, under the cover of which they defile the holy altars with falsehood, vanity, slander, and every degenerate passion that can disgrace the human heart.”

“For Heaven’s sake be prudent, dear Mary;—consider the consequence should your real motive be discovered.”

“I could but die, Magdalen; I have long considered this subject, and my resolution is fixed. I have a bold spirit, and am rendered desperate by tyranny.—Say, my dear Magdalen, should I find the means to accomplish my escape, would you accompany my flight?”

“Never! The most sacred vows bind me to this spot; nothing but force, or the most fatal necessity, shall ever remove me. Here must I live, and here must I die.”

“Then here, alas! must I die too, for I cannot call it living. I had thought of a scheme, a desperate one perhaps, but liberty is worth a hazard—it was to steal the keys while the portress was asleep.”

“A desperate one, indeed; I tremble at the bare idea of the danger, and am unable to counsel you. But, never, Mary, shall you repent your confidence in me.”

“I know it well, dear Magdalen; but what resource can I now have; or to what spot can I direct my steps alone? A stranger in the world, without money, unacquainted with the manners and customs of mankind—alas! alas! if you are fixed here, then so must I—doomed never to escape these detested walls—never to range at large in those delightful plains; for, even from my childhood, whensoever I could find an opportunity, I have stolen up to the turrets of the convent, and gazed with wonder and admiration at the open country, where I have seen numbers walking free and unrestrained. Oh, how delightful did the fertile fields, and the majestic trees of the forest appear? Then the great and boundless ocean! I once beheld a storm, and saw the ships, for such I judged them to be from what I had read, tossed to the clouds, and the next moment lost to my view. Tears insensibly stole from my eyes, and my heart grew sick at their danger. Yet then, even then, Magdalen, I wished I was in one of them; for I considered I should either be buried in the fathomless deep, or reach some happy land of peace and freedom.”

Magdalen endeavoured to soothe the strong emotion that accompanied her words, though, at the same time, she was grieved to see that she had imbibed so decided a hatred to a conventual life, as not a shadow of an alternative presented itself.—“My dear girl,” said she, “your ardent fancy paints the world in more fascinating colours than it merits; should you tempt its dangers, never may it beguile you.”

“Often have I wished that I had been the daughter of the meanest hind,” resumed Mary, “so that I had enjoyed the affections of my parents; I then would have laboured for them, and endeavoured to soften the infirmities of declining age, seeking no other recompense than parental love. How have I watched and envied the tender attention of the birds to their young brood! Oh would I had been formed like them, for then could I have flown away from this hateful prison, and far distant from this detested country!”

“You would encounter the same degree of intolerance in the spiritual government of all countries that are denominated Christian; and, behold the hearts of parents, and ghostly directors, equally steeled to natural affection, and as prone to self interest as in this,” answered Magdalen. “Believe me, Mary, you would often meet danger where you least expected it; and find treachery cloaked under the specious guise of probity and honour. Young, fair, and innocent as you are in the world, you would meet with many enemies.”

“Enemies, dear Magdalen, I would injure no one; but love all who would let me. Why, therefore, should they be my enemies?”

“It is under the semblance of love that maids are most beguiled, Mary. Men are arrant deceivers, and consider it no violation of their honour to falsify the oaths they make us, and plunge us into destruction.”

“Yet, Magdalen, they look noble and honest.”

“Trust not too implicitly to the countenance, Mary; you have seen few, except those in the convent, and religion has, or ought to have, tempered their passions into peace.”

“Dear Magdalen, I once saw such a gallant troop of soldiers, I have thought of them ever since; nay, I have even dreamed of them, particularly of the horseman who led them. He, I judge, was the master or captain, for the rest appeared to imitate his actions; and when he spoke, though I could not hear what he said, yet his followers rent the air with shouts of applause. He did not appear to be young, but his carriage was noble, and his features bespoke command.”

“How was it possible you could witness such a sight,” demanded Magdalen.

“I will tell you. Esther and myself, accustomed to the convent from our early childhood, had, in our playful hours, explored every corner; and, in one of our researches, had mounted the turrets, which, from that time, became our favourite retreat, though we carefully concealed it from all the inmates of the house, fearful of not only meeting reproof, but being restrained from those excursions in future. As our years increased, the view it afforded made it doubly pleasant to us; and, in one of these visits, we saw the sight I mentioned. At first, the sound of loud and strange music, such as we had never heard before, struck our ears; for unlike the soft music in the chapel, this appeared to bespeak discord, wrath, and defiance—and though we could not but admire it, we both trembled, gazing with wonder from whence it came. We saw a numberless multitude of men, whose armour glittered in the sun, and dazzled our sight; the noble horseman, whom I mentioned, unsheathed his sword, and by his action appeared to breathe defiance, his men followed his example, and at once, scared, alarmed, yet delighted. I know not when our admiration would have ceased, had not the great bell of the convent rang hastily, as a summons for every one to attend. We reluctantly obeyed the call, and found all assembled in the chapel, appearing much alarmed. The priests said mass, and the greater part of the afternoon was passed in prayer. After the service, I heard one of the fathers inform the abbess that the army of England had passed forward towards Bourdeaux.”

“When was this, dear Mary?” demanded Magdalen, hastily.

“About three months before you came to the convent,” replied Mary.

“Dreadful, never to be forgotten period!” said Magdalen, in a low voice, but with an agitation which attracted Mary’s attention.

“You are not well,—your face has the appearance of death,” cried she, supporting her.

“I am faint.—I pray you let us part, a few moments will restore me.”

“Nay, not so, be seated,—I will run and fetch you water from the fountain.”

“I pray you take no notice of this, I shall speedily recover.”

A silence of some minutes ensued, when Magdalen, shedding a flood of tears which appeared to recal her scattered senses, affectionately embraced Mary, and said,—“What you have witnessed, my young friend, is a tribute which sin demands.—Your mind is pure, long, long may it continue so; for then, neither the malice of men, nor of devils, can inflict the torments which I endure. Oh! how have my trespasses bowed my soul to the earth, and marred every happy prospect!”

Mary attempted to soothe her sorrows, but finding the effort did but increase them, ceased; and, after some short conversation, fearing their longer absence might be noticed, they returned to the house; in their way to which, Magdalen endeavoured, and in some measure regained her accustomed serenity.

CHAPTER VII.

THAT cunning people often outwit themselves, and that avarice frequently defeats its own purpose, was most truly verified in the abbess, who, allured by grasping all Mary's wealth in three years, readily yielded to her not taking the vows till that period; and, to render all secure, resolved to call in the power of the church, should her parents attempt to remove her during that interval. In the mean time, she determined to treat her with distinguished kindness, and, as an honour rarely granted to any one, frequently invited her to her table.

Mary had too much discernment to be so easily deceived, but willing to take advantage of the present disposition in her favour, frequently lamented the loss of Esther; and one day that the superior was in a more than usual good humour, ventured to ask permission to cultivate the acquaintance of Magdalen, whom, she observed, was peculiarly reserved and melancholy,—that she had taken a particular fancy to her,—and as all the other nuns were in years, should be happy to have a companion more suited to her own age.

The abbess paused, and for some moments appeared irresolute, but aware of Mary's warm and determined temper, and fearful of exasperating or disgusting her at so critical a juncture, at length replied,—“Well may Magdalen be sorrowful,—she has many sins to answer for. However, as she appears penitent, you have my permission to converse with her; but, I charge you, let no idle vain discourse, relating to the allurements of the world, pass between you.—I shall give her the same caution, and be sure, as you value my favour, and wish to have this indulgence continued, be strictly obedient to my commands.”

Mary, on her part did not scruple to promise a due observance, and on the following day the superior was a considerable time shut up in her apartment with Magdalen, from whence, when she came forth, she introduced the young nun to Mary, who cautiously received her as a new acquaintance,—simply (and without letting her great satisfaction be too apparent) returning the abbess thanks for her compliance with her request. Magdalen, on her part, was wholly silent until the abbess had withdrawn; she then hastily demanded of Mary how it was possible she could bring her to agree to such a concession in her favour?

“By that which governs every thing in this house,” replied Mary.

“I do not understand you.”

“Why, Lord how dull you are, dear Magdalen, you must have made but little observation for the time you have been doing penance in this earthly purgatory;—do not you see that every thing is carried on here by art and hypocrisy, so in this instance I have turned my lady abbess's weapons against herself.”

“I am truly sorry that such things are practised within the precincts of a place set apart for pious meditation and holy worship.”

“And I am sorry, on my part, to use such deception;—but in this case, I trust, it is pardonable, for it has been carried on for no ill purpose.—In your bosom I can now, without fear, pour out my sorrows; and though you will not, or cannot have equal confidence in me, yet will I be your true and sincere friend.”

From this time they conversed publicly, but were careful of appearing intimate beyond the common conversation of the convent; an intercourse which in some measure soothed the melancholy of Magdalen, and rendered Mary's aversion to a life of seclusion less painful.

While Mary was arranging her plans within the walls of the convent, the Sieur de Vavasour was no less busy to defeat them from without, for which purpose he had recourse to the law, by the potent aid of which, he was for some time flattered by its professors, that he would be able to rescue his daughter's fortune from the strong gripe of St. Bertrand, who, they nothing doubted, would then willingly relinquish her person.—The latter, it is true, would not have operated violently on his parental feelings, otherwise than that he knew it was essentially necessary to place her in some other mansion of security; in default of which, the ultimate object of his wishes would be as difficult to be achieved as ever. This, however, could he but once get her out of the hands of the abbess, did not appear to him an insurmountable bar to the completion of the business; for he was sure that a sum of money would at any time influence other superiors, as well as the abbess of St. Bertrand's, and make them glad to receive a refractory daughter.

But this happened to be a more troublesome business than he was aware of; for though mandate after mandate was issued by the secular courts, which enjoined the abbess to deliver up her charge to parental authority, she was too strict a disciple of Thomas a Becket to acknowledge any other than an ecclesiastical order; the citations, therefore, of the law, which summoned her personally to answer for her disobedience, were totally disregarded. To enforce an appearance was out of the question, for no officer would be found hardy enough to encounter the dreadful anathemas of holy mother church.

To such a man as the Sieur de Vavasour, this fatal termination of his long fostered schemes appeared worse than death;—already had large sums been expended for his daughter's pension, and in law expences, the reflection of which preyed on his vitals like a vulture, and he secretly cursed both law and church.—What could be done?—To lose the estates,—to pay up their arrears,—to give up the diamond cross, was not to be borne;—the very idea drove him to madness.

In this wild perturbation of mind a sudden thought spread an instantaneous gleam of hope through all his frame.—The abbess, no doubt, was as interested as himself,—“Yes,” cried he, starting up in a transport of joy,—“I will offer her a bribe that shall do the business at once—not for St. Bertrand but for herself!”

Elate with this idea, he sent a trusty messenger to demand a private audience, which being granted, he with very little ceremony proposed to present to the abbess three thousand marks, provided she delivered up his daughter to his custody, and relinquished all claims on the part of St. Bertrand to her property.

The Sieur de Vavasour was not out in his conjecture when he supposed the superior of St. Bertrand to be as interested as himself; but his sagacity had not yet learnt, that she was far beyond him in cunning, and would therefore prefer a large fortune to a small part. She was well aware, that though St. Bertrand's name would stand forward in the title deeds, yet that in fact he would be a mere nonentity—a kind of *sleeping* partner, while she alone would be his active agent, and receive and disburse at pleasure, without any apprehension of St. Bertrand's appearing to call her to an account. This being the case, no wonder that the Sieur de Vavasour's proposal was received with every visible

mark of pious horror and astonishment;—thrice were her eyes raised upwards, as if imploring vengeance on the wicked wretch who could sacrilegiously dare to bribe her to cheat holy St. Bertrand—thrice did she reverently cross herself, by way of exorcism, while her lips moved with inarticulate and, no doubt, pious ejaculation.

“Begone,” at length vociferated the abbess, “thou unnatural father, and monster of impiety!—Begone, nor longer pollute this sacred retreat with thy unhallowed presence and demon like temptations; lest holy St. Bertrand should annihilate thy body, and plunge thy sinful soul into endless torment!”

So saying, the abbess, with more haste, and consequently less dignity than became the superior of St. Bertrand’s, quitted the grate that interposed between her and the Sieur de Vavasour; closing in her retreat the massy door of the interior with such violence, that the whole cloister shook and trembled in unison with the appalled heart of Vavasour, who now retired, in no very pleasant frame of mind,—for he would almost have compounded for the threatened annihilation of his body, so that he could have escaped his own feelings.

Mary, though the principal person in the contest, was entrusted by neither party, and therefore remained ignorant of all that passed; it being deemed politic by the abbess to keep her mind easy, and prevent her, if possible, from having any communication with her parents, till she was effectually beyond their power, and it was also impossible for her to retract.

Thus the time passed insensibly away, until Magdalen had entered the twenty-third year of her age, at which period she had been near five years in the convent. Mary was now in her twentieth year, and began to look forward with horror, when she reflected that another year would determine her fate, and forever fix her within those hated walls.—Sometimes giving way to anger, when alone with Magdalen, she would severely deprecate the avarice of her parents; at other times she would only weep and deplore their cruelty, that could banish an unoffending child from their sight, and bury her alive in a cloister.

At the period above mentioned, an infant of between four and five years old became an inmate of the convent; her name was Ela, she was daughter of William, second Earl of Salisbury, her mother was lately dead, and the earl being engaged in the wars which at that time involved both England and Normandy in the unnatural contentions raised by Queen Eleanor between King Henry and his sons, he resolved to place his infant daughter with his great aunt, Sibella de Rosmar, the Abbess of St. Bertrand’s.

The Earldom of Rosmar had been long extinct, and the Norman possessions, in consequence, devolved to the younger branch of the family resident in England, where the earldom was first bestowed upon Patrick; who, being slain by Guy de Lusignan, on his return from a pilgrimage to St. James of Compostela, in Spain, in the year 1169, left his son William to succeed him, and who was father to the infant Ela.

Though so nearly allied to the abbess, the Earl of Salisbury was not admitted further than the grate, when he came to deliver his child to her care.—“To your tenderness, holy mother,” said he, “I commit my Ela. Devoted to the service of my country, my absence from England may be long, I therefore consider my little treasure safer in your care than left behind me; for sole heiress to our family, I dread that her

wealth may tempt the avarice of those that might profit by her death, and her childhood and innocence render her an easy prey to their designs.”

The abbess promised that her young charge should want no care nor attention, but would not suffer any attendant to accompany her; at the same time she did not fail to remind the Earl of the concession she made in his favour of admitting an inmate, whose residence was only temporary.

The Earl gratefully acknowledged the sense he had of her condescension, and took an affectionate leave of little Ela, and a most respectful one of the abbess; while the former did not appear at all sensible of the obligation she had incurred, by being permitted to be a resident of St. Bertrand's,—for she continued to weep bitterly when separated from her father and her nurse, until she passed with the abbess from the grate to the chapel, where all were assembled to evening prayers. Here the little Ela's curiosity was so much attracted, that she gave over crying; and suddenly fixing her eyes on Magdalen, snatched her hand from the abbess, and running towards her, exclaimed, in her infantile accents,—“Are you an angel? if you are, I know you; you are my mother!”

Magdalen clasped the infant to her bosom, and, overpowered by stifled feelings, and bitter remembrances, sunk down senseless on the steps before the altar. Mary and some of the nuns hastened to raise her, while Ela, bursting into a flood of tears, again exclaimed,—“Oh, now I know you are my mother, and you are again going to Heaven, to leave me. Ah, dear mother, take your own Ela with you.”

Tears at length relieved the suffering nun; Ela hung round her neck and repeatedly kissed her, still calling her by the name of mother, and tenderly chiding her for remaining so long absent from her.—Magdalen returned her caresses, while Mary turned aside and wept, as she considered what satisfaction she herself should feel in being mother to such a lovely child,—a blessing that, in all human probability, she must never experience.—Tears now filled her eyes, and her overcharged heart swelled near unto bursting.

“Alas!” said she, mentally repining, “how hard is my fate; never have I experienced the transports of maternal affection! never shall I communicate them, but, like a tree blighted in the bud, wither, unnoticed and unlamented.”

The abbess viewed the scene with a frown; her bosom was unacquainted with those tender ties which mothers only can properly estimate. Some of the nuns beheld the child with grinning malignity; while the novices, like Mary, plainly shewed by their sighs, and starting tears, that their virgin hearts were formed by nature to have entered warmly into the sympathies and duties of the matron.

Ela was at length restored to silence, but still holding Magdalen's hand. The evening duty was performed, after which, when the abbess attempted to give her to the care of Bridget, the chapel resounded with her cries. Magdalen, with great gentleness, soothed her, and at length prevailed on the superior to let her have the care of her for a few days, till she was accustomed to the convent.

The liberal stipend allowed by the Earl of Salisbury, for his daughter, was a circumstance strongly in favour of the little Ela, as the abbess by no means wished to render the convent hateful to her. She flattered herself with being able to keep her some years under her care; and should the Earl at any time visit the house, and find her disgusted with the society, he might, from his extreme fondness, remove her.

Magdalen, at a proper hour, put her young charge to rest, placing her own head on her pillow till she was asleep. She would fain have taken her for her companion during

the night, but that indulgence the abbess refused, saying, that when once asleep, sister Bridget would, if she awoke, pay her all proper attention.

Magdalen, on retiring from the presence of the abbess, walked into the outward cloisters, and meeting Mary, proceeded to the garden, where they entered into a more particular conversation, than the publicity of the house would allow.

“Magdalen,” said Mary, “I never saw you appear so interesting, as while you caressed that infant to day; your arm was placed so tenderly round her, and your eyes gazed so fondly on her. Ah, how I envy children who enjoy such comforts, and how I pity those who know not the tenderness of a mother!”

“Alas, alas!” exclaimed Magdalen, in an agony of grief, wringing her hands, “My punishment is greater than I can bear.”

“Holy Virgin!” cried Mary, “how have I unintentionally distressed you.—Your parents, I now know, were cruel; but behold me, dear Magdalen, your sister in affliction, we will comfort each other.”

“Ah, Mary, there the barbed dart sticks fast in my heart. I dare not turn my eyes inward; my punishment, though severe, is just.—I was an ingrate to the best of mothers, and at my great and final account, her mild and suffering spirit will doom me to perdition.”

“Say not so, Magdalen; though you should be faulty, a good mother will plead for mercy for her child, and at the judgment seat of Heaven, the prayers of the virtuous find place.”

“Then, indeed, Mary, will her’s be heard, and once more may we meet.—Oh, in mercy, if that be granted, I am content to suffer here. But I pray you, dear Mary, let us change the subject; for, though I feel confident in my own resolutions never wilfully to falsify the vows which confine my sorrows to my own breast, yet in a moment of unguarded agonized feeling, I may utter some expressions not strictly according with their solemn purport.”

The affectionate Mary immediately began a conversation on her own affairs.—She expressed her wonder that she had received no news of her parents, and speaking of her fate as fixed, said,—that now she was grieved she had endeavoured to protract it.—That in truth her brothers, though she had never seen them, were more dear to her than St. Bertrand, and therefore she wished they had possessed her wealth;—that she pitied her parents for not knowing how sincerely she was capable of loving them,—and finally, condemned herself for her hasty resolution of revenging herself on their want of affection.

Thus conversing they returned to the convent, and in heaviness of heart retired to rest,—or rather to reflect, during the solitary hours of night, on the bitterness of their fate.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHILE Magdalen and Mary were commiserating each other's misfortunes, the usual group of scandal retailers, with Martha at their head, had assembled in a corner of the chapel; where Ursula began by very significantly inquiring whose child it was that had been admitted into the convent that afternoon?

"The abbess," said Anne, "announced her as the only child of the Earl of Salisbury, an orphan, and committed to her care, as the earl was about being engaged in the wars."

"That is likely enough," replied Martha, "but can you tell me who is the mother?"

"That I did not hear," answered Anne.

"You did not *hear*," replied Martha,—“well but though you did *not hear*, could not you *see*—or at least understand?—But mayhap you wilfully shut the eyes and ears of your senses.—*I did not hear* neither, but though I did not hear it is as *plain*——”

"Aye, aye, Martha," interrupted Ursula, "it is as plain as the nose on your face."

"I do not know what my nose has to do in the business," replied Martha, pettishly.

"Nor I neither," said Anne, "for it appears to be a scandalous one, and therefore unbecoming an aged devotee."

"Aged!—Marry come up;—and scandal too!—and pray where can there be any scandal in truth?—I say the mystery is now solved."

"Mystery," replied Anne, "what mystery?"

"Why Magdalen's silence and sickness, and weeping and wailing.—The abbess too, I suppose, did not wish to expose the errors of her nephew, and so kept her within the purlieu of her own apartments until——well, for my part, I say it is a shame that we chaste virgins should be constrained to mix with such impure women.—Heaven preserve me from the effects of evil example, for poor human nature, without its protection, is never infallible."

"Amen!" replied Anne, "though I hope *your* danger, Martha, from the passions you allude to, is pretty well over.—But," continued she, after a pause, "Magdalen's child it cannot be, for by its age it must have been born since she was in the convent."

"Some children appear younger than they really are,—as for Magdalen, I dare say she is older than she looks;—to be sure, there are many girls that are very forward.—I must own, from her first coming into the convent I always suspected *something*, and now my suspicions are fully verified;—indeed, for that matter, no one can be mistaken, for the child is the very picture of her,—and did not you note how she ran to her and called her mother,—and how Magdalen pressed her to her bosom, and wept over her!"

"What a wise child she must be to know her mother by instinct!" replied Anne, "for we are all well assured it can be by no personal communication; as no child has passed the grate of the convent into the interior part for many years, until the day that little Ela was introduced by the abbess."

Sister Josephine, who at times took a particular pleasure in thwarting the old nun, under an appearance of being on her side of the question, now remarked, that she had likewise taken notice of the child's behaviour, and should not hesitate a moment in being of the same opinion with Martha,—“only, perhaps,” continued she, “Magdalen might resemble Ela's mother, and that will account for the child's behaviour.”

“Resemble a fiddlestick,” replied the disappointed nun, who at first was flattered into an assurance that she had made Josephine a proselyte to her opinion,—“I say, and will maintain it, that it was sympathy;—the power of sympathy is great, as I myself have experienced.”

“What then have *you* had a child?” demanded Josephine.

Martha apparently started with horror, and with a voice broken and almost inarticulate through rage, exclaimed,—“A child!—I a child!—I defy your malice.—Satan himself could not tempt me to—to have a child.—No, were even his Holiness the Pope to release me from my vows, no man should tempt me to sin,—even though kings and princes knelt at my feet.”

“You may as well withhold your protestations till you find them there,” replied Josephine; “though I think it would be truly laughable to see all that are left out of the grave, of the kings and princes of your youth, come hobbling on their crutches, swathed in flannels, kneeling at your feet.”

“Malignant wicked woman,” exclaimed Martha, passionately, “were it not that St. Bertrand himself has gifted me with more than common patience, you would make me guilty of the sin of anger.”

“There is no cause for anger,” said sister Anne, “I thought you were speaking of Magdalen, but you have strangely varied from the subject.”

“Josephine ever does so,” replied Martha, “her greatest delight is to affront and insult me, and cast reflections on my chastity.”

“Not I, in truth, for I am well assured your chastity is very secure. ’Tis your own vanity beguiles you.—Had you been young and beautiful, and left to the temptations of the great world, I know not what might have happened;—but as it was providentially settled otherwise, the danger has been prevented.—To be sure, I have heard poor old sister Joanna say, that when you were both girls together, *you* was dreadfully forward; and that your greatest delight was in romping with your father’s lackeys, who were in continual disgrace on your account.”

“It is false, and all a vile lie from beginning to end,” exclaimed Martha; “and as for that wicked slanderer, Joanna, who, I make no doubt, is now in purgatory for propagating such scandal, she was a woman when I was a child—a mere infant.”

“Good lack! good lack! how wonderfully you both must have changed situations,” replied Josephine, “for in the register of your births, you have somehow or other contrived to hop full three years before her.—Ah, I doubt not but sister Joanna was right, as you appear, even from your nativity, to have been a very forward chicken.”

“Your slander, Josephine,” returned Martha, assuming a look of composure, “moves no other passion than pity.—Indeed I do not wonder much—but you should endeavour to overcome that unfortunate propensity which ever betrays itself, and makes even the novices say,—‘Sister Josephine looks pure and rosy to-day, it is not for nothing that Bridget and she are so intimate.’—‘No, no,’ replies another, ‘she keeps the key of the abbess’s store room.’”

Martha had now touched a key that was not likely to produce harmony in the mind of Josephine.—Conscious of her own failing, like a galled jade, she became peculiarly sore and restive, till one vindictive word producing another their mutual rage knew no bounds; every thing that malicious spirits could invent, or narrow minds could utter, was repeated.

Sister Anne, and the other nuns, now thought it high time to interfere, and to make peace between them, or at least to endeavour to restore quiet, on their own accounts; being fearful of the disturbance reaching the abbess's ear, in which case, the least they had to expect would be a curtailment of their meetings in future, a punishment, in their sequestered state, much to be dreaded. After some little time their efforts proved successful, the angry nuns retiring to their cells vowing never more to hold intercourse or conversation with each other.

This vow they had made at least a hundred times before, and had as often broken, notwithstanding they had jointly called upon St. Bertrand to ratify the agreement; for it frequently happened, that some fresh news, or some secret scandal occurred, and as no congenial mind at the moment presented, they were per force obliged, like the great politicians of the world, to wave their rancour, and form a close alliance.

Such were the women who professed to lead a life of holiness!—who had foresworn the vanities of these earthly regions, but who impiously insulted Heaven with a specious hypocrisy, under the mask of what they termed religion.

Ela on the ensuing day ran again to Magdalen, and threw herself into her arms; from the time she awoke, she had not ceased crying until she saw her. As before, she clung about her, as if fearful of being removed;—again she called her, her dear, dear mother, nor could the anger or persuasion of the abbess cause her to desist.—“Sister Magdalen is not your mother,” said the abbess, “and I will not have you call her so.”

“She is my own dear, dear mother, and I will call her so,” replied Ela, with the petulant spirit of a spoiled child;—“though it is so long since I saw her,” continued she, her eyes filling with tears, “ah! she was then so ill, and so pale, and as she kissed me her face was so cold!—and then they forced me away, and would not let me see her again, but told me she was gone to Heaven, to be an angel.—Oh! I am glad I have found her again!—and though you call her sister Magdalen, I am sure her name is not sister Magdalen, and you shall not call her so, for I will tell my father if you do.”

“You are an obstinate perverse child,” replied the abbess; “I am your mother now.”

“You *my mother*,” repeated Ela, with a saucy toss of her head, and a smile dimpling her cheek, still wet with tears,—“*You*, no, I know better than that; you are too big, too fat, too old, and too ugly, to be my mother.”

The holy abbess of the pious sisterhood of St. Bertrand forgot herself so far, as to give the young Ela a violent shake, at the same time threatening her with being severely punished.

For a minute, Ela could not speak; but when she did, sobbing with passion, she replied,—“See, naughty woman, how you have made my dear mother cry?” then kissing Magdalen, she added,—“Do not cry, I do not mind her, my father promised to come and see me soon, and then I will tell him all, and that you are here, and that he shall see you, and take you home again; for I do not believe this is Heaven.”

The words of Ela, childish as they were, appeared to confuse the abbess; her ruby cheeks, for a moment, became pale, and she remained silent. Magdalen, in some measure, appeared to share her embarrassment, and addressing the child, said,—“Indeed I am not your mother; but if you are good, I will love you dearly.”

The entrance of the priest, who performed the morning duties, put a stop to the conversation; and prayers being concluded, the abbess, after a long and particular private

discourse with Magdalen, either from some secret cause, or that she relaxed in her first intentions respecting Ela, consented that the child should be placed under her care during the day, but that she should still sleep within her own apartment during the night.

The first part of this arrangement was highly gratifying to little Ela, and not otherwise to Magdalen, whose melancholy was frequently beguiled by her innocent conversation, and infantile caresses. Ela was equally a favourite with Mary; and between both these friends, she speedily became reconciled to the convent, night only operating as a drawback on her daily happiness, as she then was obliged to sleep in the same apartment (to use her own words) “with the old ill-natured Bridget.”

The petulant effervescence of Ela’s temper was never checked by Mary, whose active spirit and firm character appeared more formed to support her through the cares and turmoils of the world, than suited to the dull, inactive, and monotonous routine of a conventual life. Magdalen, on the contrary, never failed to reprove her young charge, when she found her giving way to the natural warmth of her temper, which had still been increased by excessive indulgence.

To these gentle lectures, which bore the marks of maternal solicitude, more than of chiding, Ela would listen with attentive silence; and when Magdalen had concluded, she would throw her arms about her neck, and promise obedience, provided her dear mother, (for so she ever called her,) would not be angry, nor look sad.

Thus passed several months, and the time fast approached that was to fix Mary’s fate for ever.

CHAPTER IX.

WITHIN a month of Mary's completing the age of twenty-one, which was the time specified for her inheriting her estates, the abbess informed her, it was expected she should be professed as speedily as possible, after her minority had passed.

Mary replied,—“That she first required to see her mother, as she had considered on the sin of disobedience, and wished to entreat her pardon.”

The abbess appeared much provoked at this request, which she said was nothing but a subterfuge, and peremptorily gave her a denial; at the same time palliating her refusal, by saying it was impossible, after what had passed. That, in regard to herself, she had met with every indulgence the convent could afford, and it was now full time to prove her sincerity to St. Bertrand, and her devotion to Heaven; in which, if she failed, her duplicity would not be overlooked, but would draw down upon her the severest punishment in this world, as well as eternal condemnation hereafter.

The high spirit of Mary rose contemptuously at this threat.—“I have done nothing to deserve punishment,” said she; “it rather belongs to those, who, in defiance of all laws, human and divine, attempt to violate and subvert the dearest ties of nature. But if I am to suffer, I will meet it not like a criminal, but with that fortitude which my oppressors may, probably, want, when the hour of retribution comes;—kindness may influence me, restraint I will repel by firmness. But why, Madam, need there be any dispute on account of so trivial a request? I only entreat to see my mother; there surely can be no guilt in this. You will perhaps say, to what purpose can it lead? Simply, then, for no other, than *for once* to indulge the painful feelings of nature and filial love; those tender ties which, alas! I have never been allowed to experience. Perhaps, too, I might be enabled to awaken dormant affection in her heart, and make her acquainted with the child she relinquishes for ever.”

“Away with these earthly weaknesses,” interrupted the abbess, “which enervate and corrupt the mind—prepare to embrace another and a better mother, holy religion, who rejects none that truly seek her; in her fostering arms you will learn to forget your worldly parents, and those things which now bow your soul to dust.”

“Stern rugged nurse!” emphatically replied Mary. “Yet not so—surely religion doth not destroy all the social affections of the mind, for it strictly enjoins us to love, honour, and succour our parents; and never will I forget or cease to pray for mine, though, cruel reflection! they have abandoned their poor unoffending child.”

“Were you as truly devoted to a religious life, as I had flattered myself,” answered the abbess, “this request had never been made, and which now convinces me, that you have for near three years been deceiving not only me, but also the holy devotees of our house; but I warn you not to urge my kindness too far, for not even the Sieur de Vavasour himself, were he now so disposed, could remove you. His Holiness the Pope has been informed of your first resolve; and should you retract, will give me full authority to act as I think proper.”

“At your pleasure, Madam,” replied Mary. “I have already informed you, that threats will not influence me; bind my body with fetters of iron, my mind will still be free,—force cannot compel me to *assign* my property.—You will please also to

remember, that were *even* my life to be the sacrifice to a non-compliance, *my family alone* would be the gainers.”

“Deceitful, abominable hypocrite,” exclaimed the abbess, “would you be impious enough to falsify the offer you formerly made?—would you defraud holy St. Bertrand of what is now his just right?—and do you not tremble at the vengeance which he will doubtless, by the hands of his ministers, inflict, if you continue thus obstinate? But I will not longer contaminate myself by holding conversation with one so lost and depraved, lest your sinful breath should prove infectious.—I shall forthwith summon the holy fathers of this diocese, who, unless you speedily repent, will deliver you over to that awful tribunal from whose sentence there is no appeal. Once more I warn you,—repent, I say, or tremble at the fate which awaits you, if you persist, and once incur the anathema of holy mother church.”

With these words the abbess left her, and overwhelmed with melancholy at the dangers which were now drawing to a crisis, her wonted spirits almost forsook her. Willingly would she have retired from her own painful reflections to seek consolation from Magdalen, but that she feared involving that tender hearted friend in her own disgrace.—Painful retrospection was alone in her power,—bitterly did she regret the step she had taken, and sincerely did she repent her thwarting her father’s views; for the mild affections of her heart severely accused her, when she reflected, that had she acquiesced in his desires, by taking the vows, her fortune would have made her family happy, which now would only be expended in pampering the pride of the fat abbess, and assist her in extending her hypocrisy. Though, as before observed, Mary was totally unacquainted with what had passed between the *Sieur de Vavasour* and the abbess, yet the latter, in order to make every thing as secure as possible, had spared no pains to render all the endeavours of the father to remove his daughter ineffectual; and for that purpose she had sufficient interest to procure an extraordinary convocation of the priesthood of the diocese, who had recourse to their accustomed fulminating doctrine of threatening the father of Mary, if he dared to persist in her removal, to lay him under the pains and penalties of excommunication,—a threat which obliged him to desist, and left him only to deplore his own cruelty and avarice, from the fruits of which he was now so justly deprived.

Mary had not continued alone more than an hour, when she was joined by sister Bridget and the portress;—they brought the commands of the abbess for her to retire to a cell in the penitentiary, where, as they expressed, the abbess hoped St. Bertrand would inspire her with better thoughts, and expel the evil spirit which had so fatally wrought on her youth and weakness.

Mary with determined courage concealed the horror with which this command inspired her, and followed the nuns, without reply, to the place appointed. It was a cell in the outward cloisters, of about six feet square, faintly enlightened by a small grated window at a considerable height from the ground. The whole furniture of this gloomy apartment consisted of an old table, the feet of which were fixed in the ground; it stood before a recess in the wall, near six feet in length and two in breadth, in this a straw mattress had been deposited. As the wretched hole was raised a convenient height from the ground, it served a double purpose of both chair and bed.—On the table a large crucifix was erected, and underneath was placed a skull upon some crossed bones; and for fear these solemn insignias should not render the mind sufficiently gloomy, a large

book lay open at a particular passage, which set forth the heavy punishments, both in this world and that to come, attending different crimes, particularly that of offending the saints by speaking evil of them, or attempting to deceive them by protestations or false promises,—which crime, without exemplary repentance, and a life of severe mortification, was doomed to be expiated by fire in this world, and the offender's ashes scattered by the wind.

Mary glanced her eye over the dreadful page, and shuddered with wild dismay.—In a few minutes she collected her almost fleeting senses, and said mournfully,—“Am I then in truth such a sinner as is here pourtrayed?—Oh, righteous Power, if such be the punishments threatened to those who unintentionally offend the saints, what will be their lot who wilfully sin against *thee* by vile hypocrisy, and for the sake of filthy lucre. I have indeed acted deceitfully, for which may I obtain forgiveness; but my unhappy situation will, I trust, in some measure plead in my behalf. Gross as I feel my error, would it not yet be more deadly to pollute the altar with false vows?—else why should I feel a moment's repugnance in quitting a world in which I have no particular interest,—no tender parents,—no affectionate brothers or sisters,—no friends.—Gracious Heaven! to what purpose was I born, forlorn and deserted as I am?—*My very prosperity becomes my bane*, and serves but for an instrument of persecution.—I love Magdalen, and her company would soothe the horrors of this living grave;—but should she die, to be for ever confined within these hated walls, without a friend, and surrounded by vile moping hypocrites—my heart revolts at the thought, and my constant murmurings and discontent would increase my first error, which repentance may obliterate, into the most deadly and fearful trespass.—How to determine I know not.—Heaven protect and direct me!—Could I but once more see my dear Magdalen, she should be the arbitress of my fate, and her voice at once direct and fix my irresolute mind.”

Mary passed several hours, after this soliloquy in sad and dreary silence, which was at length interrupted by the door of her prison being unbarred, unbolted, and unlocked, and in a few moments old Bridget entered, bearing a pitcher of water in one hand and a small loaf in the other. Having placed these sparing aliments on the table in gloomy silence, she solemnly stalked forth, and the same harsh noise of fastening the huge portal occurred as grated the ear upon its opening.

Mary surveyed what had been brought her with silent anguish, but her heart was too full to take any nourishment, except a little water; after which, having commended herself to that Being whose eye can pierce even into the deepest recess of a dungeon, she threw herself upon the humble couch, and soon sunk to rest, if perturbed and broken slumbers can be so called,—for the events of the day had made too strong an impression to be easily erased from her mind, though sleep had closed her eyelids. At one time, fancy pourtrayed the abbess, furious and swollen with rage, threatening all the pains and penalties that human art could inflict; and denouncing eternal vengeance, if she longer refused to take the vows. Mary thought she was reduced to the most hopeless despair, and was for a short space wavering and undetermined how to act, when suddenly a soft voice whispered,—“Persevere!” Her spirits now appeared raised to an uncommon degree of resolution, insomuch that she gave the abbess a firm denial.—“Die then, wicked irreligious dissembler,” pronounced the enraged phantom, suddenly darting a poniard at the breast of the trembling sleeper. Horror struck, and anticipating instantaneous death, already she conceived she felt the dagger's point, when lo, a radiant form, with a motion

quick as the lightning's flash, arrested the stroke, and the murderous weapon fell from her nerveless arm.—“Die *thou*, wicked irreligious dissembler,” pronounced the areal being, in a voice that appeared to shake the building, a bright flame of fire at the same time issuing from his mouth, expanding and spreading, until it completely encircled the now terrified superior, whose loud scream betokened horror and dismay.—“Oh! save me, Mary!” she seemed to say, “save me from the avenging flame!—I sink—I die!—Mercy!—mercy!—mercy!”

The terrific sounds struck so fearfully on the ear of Mary that they dissolved the bands of sleep and she awoke under all the influence of a disturbed imagination. Starting from her humble couch, she gazed wildly around, nor could she for a while persuade herself that it was only an illusion proceeding from perturbed spirits, and a more than usual abstinence.

After some little time she became calm enough to reflect on the particular circumstances of her dream, with which her mind was much impressed.—“The deeds of the wicked,” said she, “are a consuming fire.—Persevere.—Yes, I will persevere, for surely it was the voice of my guardian angel who pronounced that consolatory word.”—Mary's mind now felt more calm than it had been since her confinement, and she resolved to await the event with a firm and patient resignation.

CHAPTER X.

WE shall leave Mary for a short space, and return to the superior, whose soft and luxurious couch had by no means been a place of calm ease and quiet rest, for her slumbers had also been broken and disturbed.—Numberless horrid forms appeared flitting before her disturbed imagination, some reproaching and severely censuring her hypocrisy,—others exhorting her to repentance; amongst the latter, her disordered fancy distinguished two figures in winding sheets, who, though pale and emaciated, yet bore the perfect resemblance of Magdalen and Mary.—Rising, as she thought, to correct their bold intrusion, their forms suddenly were lost in air,—loud thunder shook the walls,—vivid lightning encircled her on every side.—Her mental agitation now burst the bonds of sleep, and in an indescribable agony of terror and dismay, she shrieked so loud as to alarm old Martha, who, rushing into the apartment, demanded the cause? Bereft of her usual cunning by the fright, Martha heard the dreadful vision recounted.—Having crossed herself, in due form she then comforted and soothed the abbess, and finally, that no efforts on *her* part might be wanting, in order to strengthen the relaxed nerves of the superior, she filled up and presented her a large cup of aqua vitæ; and as tales of terror sometimes make a strong impression on sympathetic and feeling minds, Martha, to avoid all bad consequences, followed the good example.

The cordial was truly reviving to both parties, the tremulous nerves of the Lady Abbess soon regained their former tone, and Martha was emboldened, partly by the liquor, and partly by the confidence her superior had just reposed in her, to offer gratuitously, what she called a bit of advice.—“My good Lady,” said the antiquated nun, “why will you discomfort and terrify yourself about two sinful ungrateful creatures, when you have the power to make them act as you see best befitting your own will and pleasure.—If Mary’s perverseness blinds her to the interest you have, that is to say, which you take for her soul’s health, let her pampered body be daily scourged, and reduced by fasting and solitary meditation, and, my life upon it, she will soon be brought to compliance; and as for her mincing demure friend Magdalen, who, by the bye, I take to be more hypocrite than saint, it is my firm belief that she advises and upholds her in her stubbornness.—Were I in your place, I would separate them entirely, for they only corrupt each other with vain and idle discourse.”

“Good Martha,” returned the abbess, “your counsel I partly approve, and if Mary does not speedily retract her perverseness, she shall feel all the vengeance that our holy religion empowers its ministers to inflict on obstinate and incorrigible offenders;—but first of all I mean to try milder methods. After matins send Magdalen to me, I will see how she is disposed to assist in this affair, for I know that her power with the weak girl is great. She shall be commanded to visit Mary in her cell, and to advise her to a speedy compliance;—if she refuses, she shall partake of her punishment,—and that there may not be any deception, prepare yourself to hear, unseen by them, what passes.—But hark! there is the matin bell—let devotion alone now be our care.”

With demure and solemn steps, the arch hypocrites then repaired to the chapel, raising, with apparent sanctity, their hands and eyes to Heaven; while their sordid and grovelling souls were absorbed and chained to earth.

Matins being ended, these habitual devotees, who changed according to time and place, put off the outward garb of sanctity, and cloathed themselves with their usual mammon of unrighteousness.

Martha was dispatched for Magdalen; while the superior, seating herself in state, debated within herself whether she should receive her with all the awful dignity of an arbitrary cloistered tyrant, or whether she should unbend the accustomed severity of her features, and dress her face with the smiles of mildness and benevolence.

The latter was just concluded upon, and she had only time to adjust the proper muscles, as Magdalen entered and kneeled at her feet.

The requested benediction was given with much apparent sweetness and complacency. Magdalen then arose, and the Lady Abbess having made a sign to her with her hand, to take a seat, she addressed her in this manner:—"I am greatly pleased, daughter, to see, for some time past, that melancholy which formerly clouded your brow, give way to a calm serenity;—believe me, my dear child, the vain and gaudy pleasures of sinful life, are not to be regretted, and will ever, on reflection, sink as nothing, when brought in competition with holy retirement.—We here pass our days unenvying and unenvied, and peaceably await that great change which insures our eternal happiness."

"Heaven grant, holy mother, that we may be truly prepared," replied Magdalen.—"I humbly trust that I am at length weaned from all worldly allurements; and begin, indeed, to find that inward peace which none can enjoy whose minds are divided from their Creator by coveting precarious honours, fading riches, or fleeting pleasures."

"You talk this well," interrupted the abbess, dropping her assumed complacency, and reddening all over;—for the latter part of Magdalen's speech was, from innate guilt, self applied.—"But are you sure," continued she, "that—that you *truly* feel as you speak,—that you do not deceive yourself,—or what is still more heinous, by attempting to deceive me, you are false to——"

"My God!" wildly articulated Magdalen, rising and dropping on her knees.—"Oh, never,—never dare I lie against the Holy Spirit!—Should I not then be another Saphira?—and might I not expect the awful thunder of Almighty vengeance hurled at my guilty head, pronouncing—*Die, wretch!*"

"Hold!—Hold!" shrieked out the abbess, "nor longer wound my ears, I charge you, with your shocking impieties!—Begone instantly!" waving her hand towards the entrance of the portal. Magdalen obeyed the peremptory command, and the conscience stricken abbess, in the utmost perturbation of spirit, sunk upon her soft cushions gasping for breath; for Magdalen's words had awakened and renewed with redoubled horror the terrors of her dream.

Leaving the abbess to her own reflections for a small space, we will return to Magdalen, who, in her retreat, was accosted by Martha, with,—"So you have your lesson, I suppose,—but i' faith it has been but a short one.—Why what is to do now! you look as if you had seen the evil one."

"Evil enough, indeed, I fear," returned Magdalen, with a sigh.

"Oh! oh! then it seems you do not approve the part you are to take in the business;—but you had better comply, or it will be worse for you."

"What business, good Martha, and why am I thus threatened?—Surely there is some strange insanity abroad!"

“Insanity, quotha!—Come, leave this fooling, and haste to obey the abbess’s commands.”

“I have obeyed them.”

“You have obeyed them!—why this is downright madness.—Which way did you get in and out then—through the latticed bars?”

“I noticed no latticed bars; you introduced me through the portal yourself, and I returned by the same way that I entered.”

“Indeed!—Well—well, my jeering companion,—we shall soon see who is to be the laughing stock.—I go to acquaint the abbess that you *have* obeyed her commands, though, to my certain knowledge you have not been near Mary.—Never fear but she shall be told in what manner—for do not think that I will be laughed at with impunity.” So saying, with an hysteric grin, which was truly diabolical, from her countenance being distorted by passion, she hastily quitted Magdalen to put her threats in execution.

The old nun’s rage threw her off her guard, so that the usual ceremony of humbly tapping at the haughty superior’s retired apartment door was omitted; in lieu of which she forced it open with such a sudden jerk, that it rebounded with a noise that occasioned the abbess to start and stand aghast,—doubly increasing the disorder in which Magdalen had left her.

For some moments each gazed wildly on the other; at length the abbess broke silence, and with her lips quivering with passion, exclaimed,—“What want ye, old fiend?—How dare you, thus unceremoniously to break on my privacy?”

“Pardon me, good Lady, I was so provoked that I scarce knew what I did, for Magdalen——”

“Well, what of her?”

“Why she says she *has* obeyed your command.”

“True.”

“But she has not visited Mary,—so how can that be?”

“Because she knew nothing of the matter—She obeyed my command of quitting my presence.—Her impertinence—but no matter,—in short she displeased me, and—and I dismissed her somewhat hastily; but summon her again, and hold yourself in readiness to give her access to Mary, and to heed their conversation.”

Martha instantly obeyed, and in a few minutes returned with Magdalen, in which time the abbess had again brought her features to their former composure, and she received the fair nun with a gracious nod, accompanied by a smile of complacency.—“I am scrupulous, child,” said she, “perhaps I am *over* scrupulous, when sacred subjects are the theme of conversation;—but I trust you did not mean to speak irreverently, though your expressions were certainly not sufficiently guarded.—But enough of this for the present,—for I wish to hold some conversation with you of the utmost import, on which, perhaps, the salvation of an immortal soul depends;—say, if through your means a wayward spirit could be reclaimed, would it not be a glorious triumph over sin and Satan?—and would it not, think you, plead in mitigation, when your offences are brought before the great tribunal?”

“Oh, teach me, dear Lady,” interrupted Magdalen, with great energy, “teach me how I may become the humble instrument in such a cause, and you shall find my whole soul devoted to your pious wishes.”

“Why that is well,—and no doubt conduct like this, and an implicit submission to your spiritual directors, will, in time, obliterate your past misdeeds. Since I find you so disposed, I shall instruct you in the way you can promote this holy work.—The perverseness of the novice, Mary, is not unknown to you, and, mark me well, I am perfectly aware of the power you have over her;—I expect, then, that you exert this power, for her’s and your own soul’s salvation. This business completed, you may both, through life, expect from me every mark of favour and indulgence.”

The abbess paused, and Magdalen was about to reply, but the superior, possibly auguring no ready acquiescence to her will, from the nun’s countenance, immediately rose up and led her to the portal, saying,—“Retire, I want no reply,—Martha waits to conduct you.—Act in obedience to my commands, or dread the vengeance of the holy fathers.”

Confused and astonished at what had passed, Magdalen was too much agitated to form any resolution.—Indeed she had no time for deliberation, for Martha immediately accosted her with,—“Well, I suppose we are not at cross purposes this time, so if you will condescend to tread in my footsteps, I shall lead you where you are to go.”

So saying, she sullenly led the way through a chain of dark and winding passages, at the termination of which their course was interrupted by a ponderous door, secured on the outside by an iron bar, a lock, and three bolts; the sonorous noise of which, while they were separately removed, and the surrounding gloom, impressed an unusual terror on the already alarmed mind of Magdalen. A cold dew stood on her forehead, her lips opened to expostulate, but her tongue refused its office.—Immediately the harsh grating of the hinges vibrated on her ear, the portal was thrown wide, and Magdalen found herself within the space it enclosed. Before she could collect her disordered thoughts, she heard the dissonant fastenings again replaced, and the next minute she found herself in the arms of the persecuted novice. For some time their overcharged hearts would not permit any other communication than by their mingled tears, and the reiterated exclamations of—“Dear Mary!”—“Dear, dear Magdalen!”

At length, being more composed, they seated themselves on the humble couch, and Mary recounted all she had felt since her confinement,—not forgetting to relate her dream, the impression it had made on her mind, and her resolution to persist in refusing to take the veil.

“Alas! dear Mary,” said Magdalen, “if that is your determination, I dread the event;—what cannot cruel power inflict within these walls, where peace and comfort never enter? Do not think that I am permitted to visit you out of kindness,—I am sent for the express purpose of persuading you to accord with their desires; nor would I fail to do so, were this indeed a sanctuary in which the unhappy might find rest, in holy meditation and calm retirement,—for you have no tender parent,—no affectionate brother,—no sympathizing friend!—The whole world, to you, presents a blank,—one vast and dreary void!”

“Oh, my God!” exclaimed Mary, “for what purpose was I born?—was it only to be rendered miserable?—Even the offspring of wolves and tigers experience some affection from the creatures that gave them being,—is it just that Providence should be more bountiful to them than to me!”

“Forbear, my dear Mary, it is sinful to repine,—but much more so, to arraign the wisdom of that Being, who, for a time, permits injustice and oppression to flourish, in

order that his own power and might may be more clearly evinced to short sighted mortals, and that their future happiness may be more complete. Did you not tell me, that in your dream, when reduced to despair, your spirits were suddenly raised?—and again, that when a form, like the abbess, raised the fatal poniard, a celestial Being arrested the impending stroke? Believe me, my dear girl, I augur much from your dream.—Put your whole trust in the Almighty, and humble yourself in lowly reverence before him,—he alone can aid you in your distress;—for I will not impose upon your understanding to say any help can be attained from mortals.”

“To him humbly will I submit, and implore pardon for my fretful impatience,” said Mary.—“But, dear Magdalen, what account mean you to render of your mission—for I know your soul too well to think you will advance a falsehood, when the superior demands in what manner you have obeyed her?—Will it not be best to say, you did not care to urge me too much in the first visit; that you are not without *hopes* of my compliance, for that I have no hold on which I can ground an affection, without the walls of this dismal seclusion. This, alas! is a sad truth, and, to enjoy your company, my dear friend, I would willingly submit, in any other *real* religious house;—but to be continually surrounded by a parcel of wicked hypocrites, with that spiteful ugly old harridan, Martha, at their head, is too much for human patience to bear.”

“I grieve, Mary, to say, that I fear there is too much justice in your remarks of the pretended sanctity of many within these walls;—nor are you deceived in supposing, that I will not submit, whatever may be the consequence to myself, to say that I have implicitly obeyed the abbess’s arbitrary commands.—I however think it right, more on your account than on my own, to soften the report, and it may be as well to do it in the manner you have proposed; for without a miracle being wrought in your favour, I at present can see no alternative to your taking the vows, or falling a sacrifice to your non-compliance.”

“Act as you see best befitting the circumstances that may occur, my dear Magdalen,” said Mary, “and those, to my sorrow, will doubtless speedily be called into action, for that abominable hag, Martha, will soon be here, and she——”

The door was now heard to unlock, unbar, and unbolt, and with a spiteful rigidity of countenance, in stalked the much affronted old nun.—“Yes,” re-echoed Martha, “She,—the abominable old hag and harridan is here, and will most faithfully recount every syllable of your pious conversation.—Reviling your superiors,—accusing them of hypocrisy,—casting an odium on holy religion,—if this does not bring down punishment, impiety may rest secure.—But, thank Heaven, we do not live in an age of paganism, and if the holy tribunal doth not take cognizance of such misdeeds, Heaven itself would avenge them. Old hag!—we shall see what a figure beauty will cut, when smoking at a stake!”

“I know not what either have done to deserve such a fate,” replied Magdalen, “if you allude to us.”

“And, however good your will may be to bring us thither,” continued Mary, “thank Heaven that power does not rest with you.—It appears that you have been meanly endeavouring to overhear our conversation, for what purpose is obvious; in doing this, the adage has been verified,—‘Listeners never hear any good of themselves.’—Yet let me conjure you, for your soul’s sake, not to aggravate what you have heard;—if you do not choose to soften, let there be no malicious additions. I may, perhaps, be blamable for

speaking of you in not the most respectful manner;—but be assured, were it in my power, I would not do you the least prejudice.”

“Oh, ho!—oh, ho!” horribly grinned the old nun, at the same time sticking her arms a kimbo, and waddling up to Mary, “what, you want to wheedle and soften the old hag, do you;—but you may spare yourself the trouble, for——”

“Away with such mean derogatory suppositions,” interrupted Mary, “nor dare to think my soul on a level with thine!—Make concession to one like thee!—Sooner will I brave the utmost rigour my unjust enemies can inflict!—Farewel, my dear Magdalen,” throwing herself into her arms, and bursting into tears, “you shall be remembered in my prayers. Possibly this may be our last embrace,—yet we shall one day meet in happier regions.—Farewel—Oh, farewell!”

The afflicted friends now tore themselves from each other’s arms.—Mary threw herself upon her wretched couch, covering her face with her hand and sobbing aloud; while Magdalen, equally moved, slowly quitted the cell, followed by Martha, who failed not to replace the massy fastenings which secured the hapless prisoner.—“My presence, I suppose, can be dispensed with until you have made your report, I shall therefore, for the present retire,” said Magdalen; “when the abbess requires me to come forth, I shall obey her summons.”

Martha heard with sullen silence, and pursued her way to the superior’s retired apartment, while the young nun, with a heavy heart, sought her lonely cell, foreboding that much inquietude would arise from the late events.

CHAPTER XI.

MAGDALEN was not mistaken in her conjectures, for the irritated old woman, by her relation, had incensed the superior into a perfect frenzy, under the influence of which, she ordered Mary to be severely scourged, a command that Martha, aided by Bridget, took care to see obeyed. This violence, however, had not the effect of making the injured novice more compliant; on the contrary,—though mild and susceptible by nature, even unto weakness, she was now roused into a state little short of madness, and which terminated in a fever so violent, that on the second day her life was despaired of.

The abbess, for the first time, now began to think she had gone too far. Not that she felt any compunction for her savage barbarity; but she feared to defeat her own projects by Mary's death. Her character, too, for sanctity and humanity, possibly would be called in question; for, though the agents of her cruelty might be presumed to be her creatures, yet she knew that caballing and whispering was not unfrequent, even within the walls of a convent.

As Magdalen had also incurred the Superior's displeasure, she also was thought a meet object for punishment, though the abbess did not think it prudent to carry it to the extent she had done with Mary; she therefore contented herself with only restricting her of her usual liberty, and ordered her to keep close within her cell. But this restraint was of no long continuance; for when Mary was supposed to be in danger, it occurred to the sagacious abbess, that no one would be so likely to soothe her perturbed mind as Magdalen. She was, therefore, commanded forthwith to administer to the necessities of her afflicted friend, and by every means in her power to endeavour to recal her wandering reason.

Magdalen willingly obeyed, but was greatly shocked to see the ravages that the disorder had made, in so short a period, on the person of the persecuted Mary; she therefore lost no time in doing every thing in her power, not only to restore her wandering senses, but also to repair her weakened frame, which was much shaken and impaired by the violence of the fever. To aid both purposes, she obtained of the abbess permission to exclude all those who had been Mary's persecutors, and to be herself the sole attendant; this the abbess willingly acquiesced in, not from a desire to gratify either of the friends, but it was too plain to admit of a doubt, that Mary's derangement would never subside, while Martha and Bridget were admitted, her irritation of mind constantly increasing while they were present—nor would she take any medicine or nourishment from their hands.

A very little time convinced the abbess, that this was the only method to pursue, for Mary's disorder gradually abated, insomuch, that in a few days, she recognised the person of her friend, and rejoiced at her presence. But nature had been too much exhausted to expect an entire and speedy restoration, for which reason the crafty abbess forbore to urge, for the present, the completion of her interested project; on the contrary, her art and hypocrisy led her to assume an air of kindness and affability—a behaviour too palpable to deceive either Mary or Magdalen. It however had one good effect, for it rendered their situation more comfortable, by the liberty they enjoyed of a free and uninterrupted communication, of which even little Ela was now suffered to partake.

Some months thus passed, to the mutual satisfaction of the friends, who, notwithstanding the dull monotonous routine of a conventual life, thought themselves happy that the abbess had abated her former persecution; and that she contented herself with only daily recapitulating to Mary, the mild and calm satisfaction that the professed devotee enjoyed, on these occasions, appealing to Magdalen, whether they were not superior to the turbulent and guilty pleasures of the great world.

“Since the Almighty hath so willed it,” replied Magdalen, one day, “I bow submissively; and yet there are ties which busy memory will sometimes recal to wound and lacerate poor human nature. Oh, reflection! Parents—a friend and sister—and, alas! those still dearer ties of affection——”

“Magdalen,” sternly interrupted that abbess,—“have you forgotten your solemn—the only condition which preserved your wretched——”

“Ah, no!” articulated the distressed nun, dropping on her knees, and wildly gazing around, “my terrified imagination again presents the horrid scene;—again I behold the uplifted dagger pointed at my breast by injured——”

“Forbear, frenzied woman,” exclaimed the abbess, putting her hand before her mouth, “nor tempt your certain fate, should you betray——Instantly retire, and recollect yourself.”

Magdalen obeyed, and slowly rising sought her cell, to contemplate, in painful solitude, over the misfortunes of her eventful life.

A silence of some minutes ensued, which Mary did not venture to interrupt, in which interval the abbess endeavoured, and in part succeeded, to regain her former smiling complacency; after which she bestowed the accustomed benediction, and majestically withdrew.

Magdalen’s meditations were soon interrupted by a message from the abbess, requiring her immediate presence, a command which the fair nun instantly obeyed, though with a heavy heart; foreboding not only a severe reprimand, but also some severe penance being inflicted, for having inadvertently suffered her feelings to recal past images to her heated imagination.

But severity at this time did not suit the abbess’s purpose.—Magdalen was therefore agreeably disappointed when she found that the superior received her with a serene countenance, and mildly cautioned her to be more guarded in her expressions; as it might lead to dreadful consequences, from the effects of which it would not be even in her, the superior’s power, to save her.

CHAPTER XII.

SOME little time now passed in a state of happiness, that is when compared with the past, for the abbess ceased from her persecution;—in addition to which, the health of Mary became completely established. Little Ela was sometimes permitted to accompany them in their walks, and they again wandered together in social converse; congratulating each other on the calm of the present moment, and praying for its continuance.

When the child was with them they confined their walks to the garden; at other times, they would wander beyond the bridge, and not unfrequently the friends would drop a tear of pity on the sod which covered the remains of poor Agatha.

One evening, Mary having complained that she had a slight pain in her head, Magdalen would have declined walking, and continued with her, but the young novice knowing her friend's fondness for her accustomed exercise, insisted that it should be pursued; saying, that as the pain was but slight, she was well enough to accompany her. Magdalen, however, would not admit of this exertion,—at length it was agreed, that Magdalen should take a walk by herself as far as the bridge, and then return, as by that time it would be about the hour for vespers.—As this friendly altercation had continued some time, it was nearly dusk, the sun having sunk beneath the horizon, when the young friends separated.

The vesper bell tolled for prayer, and the nuns were assembled, but Magdalen did not appear. The abbess loudly exclaimed, and threatened a severe penance.—At that moment a vivid flash of lightning, accompanied by a tremendous burst of thunder, produced an instantaneous trepidation and silence in the whole assembly;—all fell on their knees, and endeavoured, by fervent supplication, to deprecate the wrath of Heaven.

For six hours the storm raged with the utmost fury,—the lightning exhibited whole sheets of fire, which illumined all around,—the thunder shook the building to its foundation,—the rain poured in torrents,—and such furious gusts of wind howled around, that the affrighted sisterhood, deeming all things in nature were going to wreck, had not leisure to bestow a thought on ought but themselves; alternately shrieking, and each, putting up prayers for her own individual safety. Poor Magdalen was therefore forgotten by the abbess, and indeed by all except Mary, whose anxiety getting the better of her terror, she attempted to bribe the old gardener and the portress to accompany her in search of her friend. But these personages declared, that the wealth of Christendom should not tempt them near the unhallowed purlieu of Agatha's grave,—where, doubtless, the foul fiend that guided the fatal dagger, was roaming, with more than common activity on such a ruthless night.

But a cessation of the storm, and a fine morning, brought a quietus to the perturbed minds of the alarmed fraternity;—their piety slackened as the hurricane subsided,—their vows to the saints, particularly pecuniary ones, were no more remembered,—and the extraordinary disappearance of Magdalen became the natural substitute. Some of the sisters remarked, with a calm stoical gravity, that doubtless she had perished in the storm; while others, amongst whom were Martha and Bridget, gave it as their opinion, that the evil spirit over the bridge, had not only destroyed her, but also had raised the late fearful tempest concluding their charitable surmise with saying,—“Aye, aye, hypocrisy, vanity, and pride will always meet with its deserved punishment.”

Whatever the superior's thoughts were, she however had the cunning to keep them to herself; and commanding silence, said, that some of the nuns, accompanied by the old gardener, should, at the first dawn of day, seek her. The latter did not dare disobey, and Mary directly presented herself for this purpose; others excused themselves, one having a violent cold, and could not therefore endanger her life by walking on the wet ground,—another had the tooth ache,—a third would have gone with a very good will, but then she must of course leave them at the bridge, having made a vow never to pass it. The abbess then ordered Bridget and Martha to accompany Mary and the gardener, saying,—that she would herself, though their superior, have set them an example of charity and humiliation, by heading the search, but that she had private devotions to perform, in gratitude for the preservation of the community from the effects of the late tempest.

The abbess having bestowed her benediction, majestically withdrew to her private apartment, to await the result of the search. Mary also waited, but impatiently, the return of light, which no sooner appeared than the whole posse proceeded, and without experiencing much terror from an apprehension of supernatural agency; it being a consequent conclusion, for weak understandings to associate darkness with areal forms, whether celestial or infernal.

This being the case, the gardener now declared, that being in such good company, he should not much care whether he, even for once, passed the dreaded bridge, should their search not be terminated before. The two old nuns held their peace, only now and then by significant winks, nods, and shrugs, gave each other to understand, they expected as fatal a catastrophe, in the present instance, as that which befel poor Agatha.

As for Mary, her friendly feelings for Magdalen, unsheltered, and exposed to all the fury of the tempest, absorbed every other consideration; that she had fallen a victim to its violence, she doubted not.—She would fain have consoled herself with the idea, that Magdalen's misfortunes and sufferings had now terminated; yet, when she reflected that she herself would be left without a single friend or adviser, her anguish was redoubled.—How trifling did she now think were her late troubles, and how gladly would she have compounded with acceding to the abbess's views, provided she could have regained her lost friend, and made her a partner in her seclusion.—“Ah!” said she, mentally, “I shall never again behold the hapless Magdalen, for doubtless she has perished.”

The thought was like the stroke of death,—a cold chill came over her,—she groaned aloud,—vital animation was for a time suspended,—and she fell motionless on the damp earth.

The old nuns shrieked and turned round, their pallid wrinkled countenances assuming a cadaverous hue, from fear, while the almost superannuated gardener's long neck was stretched out to develop the sudden mystery;—his eye-balls were fixed on vacancy, his short grey hairs became erect and bristling, his nostrils distended, and his whole frame agitated and tremulous, from extreme terror.

“Lord have mercy upon us!” exclaimed the nuns.

“Lord have mercy upon us!” roared out the old man.

Immediately some underwood in a thick coppice, close to the gardener, became violently agitated,—a rushing noise was heard, accompanied by a fearful scream,—the old sisters again shrieked, and measured their lengths by Mary.—Not so the gardener, for terror at different periods gives power as well as inability;—such now nerved the limbs of

the old man, who suddenly starting from the horrid spot, ran, or rather flew, till he regained the lodge of the convent, where, breathless with his extraordinary exertion, and incoherent from fright, he presented himself before the portress, who, not being able to make out the cause of alarm herself, thought it expedient to repair forthwith to the superior, and acquaint her with as much as she knew of the gardener's return.

Some little time elapsed before she could gain admittance, for the abbess being fatigued with watching during the storm, had, after recruiting her spirits with some choice viands and exhilarating cordials, quietly, now the danger was over, resigned herself to sleep, and was not in the most pleasant humour to be thus disturbed; but, on hearing that the gardener was returned alone, and much agitated, she thought it necessary to descend to the lobby, and endeavour to gain what information she could into the cause.

The old man was, by this time, sufficiently recovered to recite, minutely and circumstantially, the order of their march, until the terrific groan of Mary; her falling lifeless on the earth, in consequence, as he supposed, of her seeing some frightful apparition—the old nuns sharing the same fate—the goblin's disappearance, and loud scream, which shook the whole coppice—with divers other matters, which either fear or fancy had impressed on his disturbed imagination.

“And what is become of Mary, Bridget, and Martha?” enquired the abbess.

“Dead—stone dead,” replied the gardener.

“Dead!” re-echoed the superior. “Good Providence! And did you not see any thing of Magdalen?”

“Nothing! doubtless the evil spirit hath borne her clean away with him.”

“Heaven preserve us!” ejaculated the superior;—“but lose no time—haste to the dormitory belonging to the chapel, and summon Friar Lawrence; tell him a pressing occasion requires his immediate attendance, and do you accompany him hither.”

The old man obeyed, and speedily returned with the friar, for his order not requiring the ornament of dress, he needed but little time to array himself. The abbess, then, in few words, explained the cause for requiring his presence, and having called for two more of the older nuns, this company set forth, to renew the search for Magdalen, and to assist, if not already past assistance, the fallen members of the late cavalcade.

The abbess and holy father led the van, descanting on the disappearance of Magdalen, and the succeeding occurrence, while the two grave sisters formed a corps of reserve, and the gardener, at some little distance, and perfectly to his satisfaction, brought up the rear; resolving, on the very first alarm, to make his retreat, while the evil spirit was employed in carrying off, or otherwise annoying, his superiors. But a little time convinced him, that this precaution would be needless; for, on a nearer approach to the dreaded bridge, they all saw—not the apparition of Agatha, but the corporeal substances of Martha, Bridget, and Mary, sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree, in grave and social converse.

On perceiving the abbess and her companions, the first party immediately arose, and approached to meet them; when the superior lost no time in demanding an explanation of the gardener's report. Mary described her fainting as being caused by her concern for Magdalen; and the old nuns *their's*, in consequence of the supposed death of Mary.—“But the gardener,” rejoined the superior, reports, “that after he supposed all three to be lifeless, there was another loud scream, which proceeded from the coppice, accompanied by a violent agitation of the leaves and branches.”

“I know not from whence that could be produced, or by what means,” interrupted Mary, “unless it was occasioned by a screech owl; for I remember, on my recovery, I saw a very large one enter the coppice, making at the same time a fearful noise.”

“Doubtless it was nothing but this bird that occasioned the silly old gardener’s terror,” replied the friar.

“But have you seen nothing of Magdalen?” said the abbess.

“No, good lady,” answered Bridget; “though, indeed, we have not yet crossed the brook to search the wilderness.”

“We will then, so please you, direct our steps that way,” said the friar, “and also examine the stream, least, peradventure, accident, or design, may have precipitated her therein.”

“So be it,” replied the abbess; and the whole party then moved forward, carefully exploring every brake, dell, or cover; following also the course of the stream to its outlet, under the mossy wall which surrounded the convent’s grounds, where a strong iron grating was placed, in order to prevent any thing but water from passing.

But, notwithstanding the strictest scrutiny took place, not the least vestige of Magdalen appeared, and the whole groupe slowly returned to the convent; the superior and the friar earnestly conversing, in a low voice, while the rest silently followed.

Just as they were about to re-enter the convent, they saw the Abbot of Pau, moving with hasty steps towards them, who, addressing the abbess, exclaimed, in a hurried tone of voice,—“Have you heard the rumour?”

“Of what tendency,” replied she.

“That Henry of England is incog, in this province.”

“Ha!” groaned out the abbess, turning pale.

“Good heavens!” ejaculated the abbot, “has any thing displeasing?”—

“I—I was about sending for you,” falteringly replied the superior,—“Magdalen is missing!”

“Ha!” cried the abbot, his countenance assuming as pallid a hue as that of the abbess, and the eyes of both were now fixed on each other, in all the wildness of consternation and dismay.

For a short space not a word more was uttered; at length the abbess broke the awful silence, by commanding the inmates of the convent to retire, when she and the abbot, after having continued in conversation for about half an hour, the latter retired in much seeming perturbation.

CHAPTER XIII.

FOR three whole days the abbess was not visible, and the gates of the convent were kept closely shut and barricaded, but, as all remained quiet and unmolested, the novices began to ridicule this more than usual precaution; when, to their great terror and consternation, a little after midnight, on the fourth morning, the whole community was disturbed by a loud and repeated beating at the front portal, which not being answered, was renewed, with little intermission, at the other entrances. Though all were greatly alarmed, having speedily assembled together, yet the portress, Martha, and Bridget, appeared in perfect agony, often exclaiming, that nothing could save their lives. Mary, though young, and exceedingly terrified, asked the portress why she did not repair to the abbess, and counsel her in this emergency.

“Oh,” exclaimed the old beldame, “she is not in the convent; she has taken care of herself, and left us to the vengeance of the enraged.—Oh, Lord! there—there—they are breaking in,” screamed the terrified portress, the noise at this period being loudly repeated, at the same time throwing down the keys, and quitting the assembled nuns, with as much speed as her limbs would permit; in which act she was accompanied by Martha and Bridget.—In the mean time the noise ceased not, and Mary, though every limb quaked through fear, became collected enough to propose going up to a tower over the front portal, and from a lattice, demand the meaning of this violence, provided any of the sisters would accompany her. After some little hesitation, they agreed to move together in as close and compact a body as the premises, through which they were to pass, and the old winding staircase would permit. To encrease their courage, they carried with them a number of lighted tapers, for darkness is no mean auxiliary to terror. In this manner they began the procession, with Mary at their head; as they advanced, and the light from the tapers glared through the iron-grated apertures of the tower, the knocking ceased. Mary soon reached a small turret over the portal, and demanded if any one was at the gate?—“It is I,” answered a feeble voice, “for God’s sake admit me as speedily as possible.”

“Sure it is not Magdalen!” exclaimed Mary, with joyful surprise, joined with a doubt of uncertainty.

“Magdalen indeed, and I believe I speak to Mary.—But haste, for I am faint and exhausted.”

Mary needed no more.—“It is Magdalen!—It is Magdalen returned!” said she, endeavouring to get before the rest of the cavalcade; but this was impossible, for the pass was narrow, and those that were behind in the ascent, now, in their turn became leaders.—Besides, fear had given way to curiosity;—the exit of Magdalen had been wonderful,—her sudden return was no less strange, in their speed for information it is therefore, not amazing, that they made a small mistake,—namely, in repairing to the portal without the keys. This mistake was, however, soon rectified, for they recollected the portress throwing them down, in the refectory, when she made her exit. With some difficulty they unclosed all the doors between the main entrance, and at length reached the wicket of the grand portal, through which they admitted the trembling and almost exhausted Magdalen; who had no sooner gained the threshold, and found herself in safety, than sinking into the arms of Mary she fainted away.

This was a mortifying drawback to most of the members present, who had already vociferated in a breath,—“Where have you been?”—“How came you here?”—“By what means did you quit the convent?” &c. &c.—Mary, with much difficulty, at length prevailed on them to restrain their inquiries until Magdalen was in a better state to answer them, and to content themselves in the present instance with endeavouring to restore and comfort her.

This requisition, after some little demur, they thought proper to comply with, and for a two-fold reason,—in the first place, these ladies had been carefully instructed to preserve an appearance of humanity; added to which, they sagaciously concluded, that until Magdalen was recovered, their curiosity must remain unsatisfied. They, therefore, by different applications, and by administering cordials, at length restored and bore her into the interior of the convent;—she was, however, as yet too weak and faint to indulge them with the much desired recital, which being the case, some of the elder sisters thought it advisable to search for Martha and Bridget, as representatives of the abbess, in order to acquaint them with Magdalen’s reappearance.

This, for a time, was a task of some difficulty,—for whatever was the particular reason that impressed *them* with a greater apprehension of danger than the rest of the community, yet remained unknown; certain it was, they were more anxious to withdraw themselves from it, had what they feared, namely, a forcible entry into the convent, taken place.—However, some little time after sunrise, the noise and confusion having completely subsided, these sage damsels came forth from their hiding places, and received an explanation of the cause of alarm, and of Magdalen’s return.—The latter report appeared to give them much satisfaction, though to the great surprise of the rest, they did not seem at all anxious for the fair nun’s recital,—saying, that they must insist that Magdalen should not be disturbed by any one, until the abbess arose.

“Arose!” replied one of the younger nuns, “why did not the portress say that she was not in the convent, and that——”

“I said no such thing,” gravely interrupted the old beldame,—“did I, Martha and Bridget?”

“No, to be sure you did not,” replied the latter, “and whoever raises such false reports may rest assured they will not fail to be severely punished.”—So saying, the grave triumvirate stalked out of the assembly, leaving them not a little surprised at this declaration.

A silence of some moments ensued, which was at length interrupted by Josephine,—“Well, for my part,” exclaimed she, “I think the wickedness and effrontery of some people—mind, I mention no names—is beyond every thing;—what do you say, Ursula?”

“Say,” re-echoed Ursula, “why I say nothing, for the least said is the soonest mended,—but this I will say,—that in future I shall be careful how I trust to my own hearing, or give way to the evidence of any of my senses. To be sure I thought the old cross grained portress said, when she threw down the keys, that——But I will not repeat her words, for they say that walls have ears, and there is so much mystery now-a-days in every thing;—indeed, there has been nothing but mystery and confusion since this Magdalen came among us.—I am afraid she is no great things for all her outward demureness.”

“I think,” interrupted Mary, “that you give your tongue great latitude, notwithstanding your apparent caution.—Suspend your judgment, however, if you possess any, for a little time, and, my life on it, the character of Magdalen will appear as unsullied as that of any one within the walls of this domain.”

“It ill becomes such a chit as you,” returned Josephine, “and one who is only a novice, to address the language of reproof to a professed sister; but impertinence and folly are as natural to youth——”

“As scandal and malevolence to some of riper age,” replied Mary, “when that age has been attained without acquiring wisdom, or possessing humanity and good nature.”

“I am sure you want to be taught wisdom and good manners to boot,” replied Josephine.

“And I would gladly learn,” retorted Mary, “did I know where to apply for an instructor.”

“You may depend upon it that the abbess shall hear this,” said Josephine.

“And then, you may depend upon it that the abbess shall also hear what gave rise to it; and other matters which, no doubt, she will be equally pleased with,” answered Mary.

“Come, Josephine,” said Ursula, “let us leave this weak girl to herself,—the matin bell will soon ring, when we will pray for her amendment.”

“Do,” replied Mary, “not forgetting your own at the same time.”—Mary possibly might have added something equally as flippant, but the piqued ladies gravely stalked away; contenting themselves with bestowing only a spiteful glance at the young novice as they passed by her.

In the mean time, Martha, Bridget, and the portress had held a consultation together, the result of which was, that Friar Lawrence was dispatched on an especial embassy; these grave sisters then attended matins.—Some hours after which, about midday, the Abbot of Pau was announced, and ushered into the abbess’s private apartment, where he remained some time. The abbess then made a public appearance, declaring, that for the last three days she had been greatly indisposed and obliged to keep her apartment; she then retired, accompanied by the abbot, having first dispatched Bridget to Magdalen with an order for her forthwith to attend her.

The fair nun, though still very weak, was yet sufficiently recovered to obey this summons, and was received by the abbot and abbess with an appearance of much severe gravity; but seeing her weak and trembling state, they pointed to a stool, and commanded her to sit. A silence of some minutes then ensued, after which, the abbot addressing her, said,—“Magdalen, you have, contrary to your solemn oath, and against the rules of this house, clandestinely withdrawn yourself, and been absent for some days;—you are now to declare, without any prevarication or concealment, in what manner you contrived to surmount the high walls of the convent—who were your advisers and assistants—where you have been concealed during your absence,—and with whom you have had any communication?—It is expected, in your answer, that you will be very explicit and open, not only in regard to persons, but also in describing places, and the conversations that passed in your presence, from the minute of your departure to that of your return;—by so doing, we shall be the better able to decide, how far it may plead in mitigation of the dreadful punishment attached to a breach of your solemn oaths.”

A pause of some moments now ensued, after which Magdalen, with great modesty, but equal firmness, replied,—“If it be deemed necessary, most holy Father, that I should be punished for what I could not help nor prevent, God’s will be done, and I will endeavour humbly and submissively to bow with resignation beneath the unjust sentence.”

“How, daughter!” interrupted the abbot, “for such I will still call you,—did I hear aright?—was there then force used to oblige you to leave these holy walls?—But sure it could not be!—who dare be guilty of so much impiety? and what means could they contrive to penetrate into a place where no expence has been spared to render it secure?”

“Does not this circumstance, holy father, plead in my behalf?” returned Magdalen; “could a poor weak woman, unfriended and unaided, penetrate through, or ascend such enclosures?—Means of communication also I have none, nor doth a human being know that I exist, except those that are hostile to my re-appearance in the world.—I have no wish, no desire to leave this place, else why did I return, the minute that I was at liberty so to do? Yet I must confess, there are some ties—some dear pledges, of whom, nevertheless, could I but sometimes be assured, they were well and happy, I need no more.—Here would I live—here die.”

“Dear daughter,” replied the abbot, in a softened tone,—“your words have the appearance of artlessness, and I find myself inclined to give them credence, their tenor still tends to confirm their first import; proceed then minutely, and without interruption, with a narrative of all that happened after you entered the garden on that eventful day, in which you was missing.”

“An eventful day, indeed, holy father,” replied Magdalen,—“and never to be forgotten by me. You may remember, lady,” said she, addressing the abbess, “that Mary and I had been accustomed to walk together in the convent garden; on that fearful evening, I went forth by myself, for some faint flashes of lightning having appeared, and of which Mary had great dread, having also a trifling indisposition, she declined accompanying me, and would fain have dissuaded me from walking, and fortunate would it have been had I taken her counsel. I, however, only meant to proceed to the bridge, and from thence return to vespers. I had gained the proposed termination of my walk, and for a few minutes leaned on the old fence, seriously intent in viewing the reflection of the lightning playing on the water, when suddenly I was aroused by a dreadful flash, succeeded by a crash that nearly stunned me.—In the terror of the moment, instead of hastening to the convent, I pursued a contrary direction, and unknowing what I did, rushed over the bridge, and sought for refuge in a thicket; meantime the rain descended in torrents, and returning recollection prompted me to seek the convent, though certain of being drenched to the skin.—On raising my eyes for this purpose, what was my increase of terror, to behold the figures of two men, who barred my passage back to the bridge. I gave a loud scream, and immediately two more rushed from the thicket where I stood, who seized, and threw a large cloak over me—From this time I fainted, and became senseless.

“How long I remained in this state I cannot judge, I only know, that when I recovered, the storm had much abated, and I found myself seated on a bench, in a kind of mud hovel, supported by two of these men.—In a little time they were joined by a third; then all uniting, they bore me in their arms to some little distance, where, under the spreading branches of an immense large tree, there stood some horses, on one of these a

man was mounted, before whom I was placed; two other horsemen kept close on each side, while one went on at a little distance before, and another rode close behind. In this manner we travelled, I should suppose, for some hours, though our track never appeared in a direct line, for sometimes, I have since reflected, that it seemed as if we were approaching the same spot we had lately quitted, which possibly was done to avoid habitations, and direct roads; this also appears the more likely, as we frequently passed amongst clusters of trees, and between such thick underwood, that the horses with difficulty maintained their footing.

“Journeying for some miles in this manner, sometimes slowly, and sometimes at a brisk pace, the leader at length suddenly turned round, and, in the French language, commanded them to halt; then approaching me, he said, in the same language,

“You must submit to have your eyes covered for a short space; but rest assured, no other violence will be offered, unless you endeavour to resist this necessary measure, or that you make any outcry.”

“Fearing for my life, if I refused, for they were all armed with daggers, I tremblingly acquiesced, and the man who appeared their chief, affixed a bandage over my eyes, and that so effectually, as to exclude all vision.—After this, we continued to move forward for about another hour, in extreme silence, and at a very slow rate; then we suddenly stopped for the space of about ten minutes. I now found myself lifted from the horse, and led forward by two persons, each holding an arm; soon after we descended a number of steps, and, by the sound of our feet, appeared to traverse a long stone paved passage. Here our journey terminated, for in a few minutes my bandage was removed, and I found myself in a small vaulted apartment, without any casement, or other aperture, the only furniture of which consisted of a lamp suspended from the roof, and an old couch and table. Here the two ruffians, who introduced me into this dismal place, left me to my torturing reflections; under which I should doubtless have speedily sunk, had I not buoyed up my spirits with a suspicion, that is, I mean with a hope, that——”—Magdalen here faltered and paused.

“What *was* your suspicion and your hope?” hastily interrupted the abbess, her colour changing to a deep red;—“I trust that you had no criminal hope that the——”

“Oh, no,” interrupted Magdalen, in her turn—“my hope was—forgive me, lady—that you yourself had, conceiving some danger, and fearing that my residence in the convent was discovered, been the means of conveying me to a place of more security.”

“Well,” rejoined the abbess, “and during the time that you were absent from hence, did you meet with *any thing to confirm* your surmise?”

“Nothing, lady.”

“Well, go on,” impatiently replied the abbess.

“I remained some hours in all the cruel uncertainty of what was to be my future destination; at length I heard the door unbarred, and drawing my veil close around me, I, tremblingly, and in silence, endeavoured to resign myself to the will of Heaven, addressing my prayers to that power alone that could afford me succour.”

“It was well done; but proceed,” said the abbot.

“The door opened, and a tall man of a noble port, but with much harshness and severity depicted in his countenance, entered, and stood before me. For some moments he surveyed me with folded arms, where I was seated, for I had not power to rise; at length he broke the awful silence by saying—“Obstinate and perverse girl, at last you are in my

power; how long is the peace and prosperity of a noble family to be thwarted by your non-compliance with our views?—Here, instantly, sign this deed, or tremble at the certain vengeance of an incensed father?”

“The honoured name of father aroused me from an almost state of torpor. I started from my seat, threw back my veil, and endeavoured, with frantic ardour, to recal to my memory the revered features of my much-loved parent, but without effect—not the least similitude appeared.—But if my surprise was great, that of the man was tenfold; he started back—gasped for breath—uttered a fearful oath—gnashed his teeth, and exclaimed—“Undone! undone! This is not Mary de Vavasour!”—A sudden light from those words now broke forth, for I was well assured that this man could be no other than the unnatural parent of my dear Mary; and at the instant I did not fail to rejoice that the mistake of his ruffians had, in all probability, prevented her becoming a victim to his rapacious avarice.”

END OF VOL. I.

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