

LORETTO, OR THE CHOICE.

An Interesting Story for Both Old and Young.

Written by George E. Miles.

IN FOUR PARTS.

PART I.

CHAPTER VI—Continued.

Nor was the Colonel forgotten. Deeply as he bowed to the confessor, he was careful to preserve the demeanor of one who was conferring as great an honor as he received. And oh! his air of inimitable, and well nigh imperceptible condescension, when patting his country friends familiarly on the shoulder, he said in measured syllables, as they approached him in regular file, 'I expect you all at Loretto.'

During this scene, the Confessor had beckoned Agnes into the sacristy to say a few parting words. When they came forth, Agnes was weeping, and Lel's keen eye could detect the ghost of a tear, as she called it, wandering over the good old father's cheek.

'Good-bye!' It was soon said, but long remembered.

'What's that on the porch?' inquired Lel, as they neared Loretto, and why are all these people following us?

The Colonel smiled sagaciously. Lel, still staring in amazement, continued, 'Uncle, upon my word, your cottage has been metamorphosed into an admiral's flag-ship.'

She sprang from the carriage as soon as it stopped, and found a tall Christmas bush at each end of the porch, with shawls, cloaks, comforts, and blankets swung in festoons from the ropes connecting the columns.

'What in the name of all that's most mysterious is the meaning of all this?' ejaculated the bewildered girl. 'Do you mean to have a fancy ball?'

But the mystery was soon unraveled, as the whole population of the district, young and old, seemed to pour itself into Loretto. It was the Colonel's Christmas gift to the neighborhood.

The Colonel stood on the nicely gravelled walk, his hand thrust blandly into his buff waistcoat, whilst Charley and Mrs. Cleveland unrobed the bushes for the children and presented the more serviceable gifts—each was labelled—to its owner. And here Charley and the Colonel reversed their position in the trout season; for during the distribution, the Colonel spoke of the crops, the weather, the county assizes, the European news, the scarcity of part-ridges, without seeming to have the slightest interest in what was going on—whilst Charley claimed all the thanks and smiles as pompously and pertinaciously as if he had been the real benefactor. But in truth it was a spectacle worth contemplating; reminding one of the times when such acts of benevolence were daily witnessed at the abbey gates, which are now in ruins, or closed to all who come in poverty instead of titled splendor.

Whether through Charley or the Colonel, or Lel herself, it was soon ascertained that Agnes would leave in the morning for the city; and all their joy was turned to sorrow. Tears clouded the eyes which had been brightly beaming, and she could scarcely pacify them by promising a speedy return; for they loved her to jealousy and feared to lose her. Lel perceiving from the dark looks cast on her, that she had become an object of suspicion and dislike, retreated into the parlor, saying to Melville:

'I shall be mobbed, if I remain.' Nor did she venture forth until the crowd had dispersed, and Charley was taking down the bare ropes. 'Well!' cried Lel, playing with her uncle's ruff, 'if you are not an original, there's no eccentricity on the face of the earth. Am I in fairy-land? When shall I forget this memorable visit to Loretto?'

'Never!' whispered a low voice in her ear, and she felt her cousin's lips on her cheek.

CHAPTER VIII.

Mrs. Cleveland, Melville and Agnes were at Vespers, Lel and her uncle had the cottage to themselves.

'What ails you, pet,' said the Colonel; 'you are pale.'

'I have a headache,' replied Lel. 'Is that all? I have a homoeopathic pill up stairs, that will cure you in five minutes.'

'Stop, uncle,' said Lel, detaining him, 'have you one that will cure the heart-ache too?'

'Wh' whispered the old gentleman

with a most knowing look, drawing closer to his niece, 'Are you afflicted with the heart-ache? Pon my rattling, prattling, romping, laughing, merry, mischief-making mistletoe! Come! I'll cure you in half an hour; put on your bonnet.'

'A walk!' cried Lel, who longed for the fresh air.

'Arm in arm, they sallied forth. The afternoon was as mild and bright as spring, and the horizon was wrapped in a deep, mellow haze. They soon left the road for a path that wound up the hill, and here, for better walking, they had to part company. For a time, the Colonel led the way with more agility and ease than one would imagine—plying his stick with the dexterity of a wise mountaineer. Lel followed slowly, until near the summit—then every step her eye and cheek grew brighter and brighter, and, passing her uncle with a bound, she sprang forward like a deer towards the high rock that crowned the hill. While he was still panting and puffing up the ascent, Lel had climbed the rock. There she stood, balanced on a sharp splinter of stone, all glowing from the exercise, her bonnet dangling from her wrist, her hair breaking from its golden coil to sweep over her neck.

'Now I can breathe!' she exclaimed, extending her arms as if to embrace the free air, and glancing down on the wide circle beneath her—'Now I can breathe!'

The Colonel was by no means poetical, yet it cost him some minutes to persuade himself that the aerial figure before him so clearly defined against the flushing western sky, was his own niece Lel, and he could not help believing that, had he been twenty years younger, he would have fled in terror, and reported the bill as sacred as Parnassus.

'How's the heart-ache, Lel?' he cried, climbing to her side.

'Better!'

'And the head ache?'

'Gone! But I am ruined, ruined, utterly ruined! I shall never love the city again—Loretto has poisoned my home—my heart is among these hills! See how the sun plunges into that gorge, making those bare trees beautiful—see how it runs a race with your trout stream, capering there through those velvet fields of young wheat!'

'So ho!' shouted the Colonel, as she paused, 'my young enthusiast mistakes I see you in your father's parlor, shaking off our dust from your feet, and solemnly vowing never again to visit our barbarous solitude. Isn't it so?' asked the Colonel, expecting an impassioned negative, and he got it.

'But,' continued Lel, dropping her head, 'in a few weeks I should forget you all, and have as keen a relish for morning calls and evening balls as I had before. I should have nothing on my conscience; now and then a sweet recollection of the cottage, the convent or this hill might steal over me, and be a cordial for the heart-ache. But now—'

'What's on your conscience now?' said the Colonel, playfully.

'Agnes! replied Lel. Uncle, must I keep the promise I have made you?'

'No—certainly not,' muttered the Colonel, coldly. 'I have no authority to compel you to oblige me.'

'But you have power,' returned Lel, looking him steadily in the face, 'you have power to compel me to sacrifice myself to save you.'

'Then, far be it from me to exercise a power in which I can take so little pride or pleasure.'

'Let her stay, then, uncle, I beseech you. Tell her that, at the last moment, you cannot consent to part with her. Dear, dear uncle, do this, and save her—save me! You may have her back a woman of the world—but never, never as she is now!'

'Nonsense!' cried the Colonel. Isn't it a woman's business on earth to be a woman of the world? Do you want her to be a woman of the sun, moon, or stars? Do you want her to stand apart from humanity, a cold, unfamiliar, uncongenial thing—a being out of place—an unaltered unit? Give me a woman who possesses all the graces with which the refinement of centuries has adorned polite society,—whose words, motions, actions are tuned to ease and elegance,—who polishes her manners for the delight of all, and instructs her heart for the love of one! Such is a woman of the world, and honored be the title.'

'Such may be a woman of the world,' said Lel, 'but I would rather be a milk-maid, untutored and neglected, with one true friend to love me, than shine as a woman of the world from now to doomsday. Uncle,

have some experience, and I am inclined to think a woman of the world one of the humbugs of the day.'

'What are you then?' rejoined the Colonel, tartly.

'As complete a humbug as ever existed, and yet I'm only an approximation to a woman of the world. Some years hence, if I remain single, my education shall be perfected. I shall then have condensed into this little body of mine the congregated graces of nineteen centuries—I shall subdue impulse and be elegant by rule—fascinate my friends by my manners,—and win a husband by my interior worth.'

'You misrepresent and mock me, girl,' said the Colonel sternly and sadly.

'Then forgive me,' said Lel, kissing him. 'What I mean to say is this, that in the fashionable life to which I must introduce Agnes, there is such a preponderance of the bad and silly over the good and elegant, that she will lose more than she gains. I admit that I love the life I have been leading—that I would not willingly resign it;—it is only at times that I feel, as now I do, the emptiness, the nothingness of our pomp and etiquette,—but when the feeling comes, I despise myself.'

'Most unreasonably.'

'Perhaps so. But Agnes is not made for the world.'

'Is she made for a convent?'

'It seems to me that she is made to spend her days at Loretto, and die as she closes your old eyes.'

'Lel,' began the Colonel, with much hesitation, 'be candid. Have you not some other reason for wishing your cousin to remain here?'

'None?' said Lel, as unsuspecting as a child.

'None?' repeated the Colonel, with a searching gaze.

'Look deep,' said Lel, laughing, though her neck arched slightly, 'look deep and read all you can see!'

'I read,' resumed the Colonel in a whisper, 'that Agnes Cleveland is beautiful—that George Melville sees it—that Ellen Almy fears it.'

Lel's face was crimson in an instant, and then, pale as death, as she muttered indignantly—

'Fear it! and stood motionless, as if rooted to the rock. Then, with a flashing eye and quivering lip, she slowly raised her finger, and scanning the Colonel from head to foot, until he fairly quailed, exclaimed, ha! in pity and half in anger—

'Oh uncle—uncle!'

'I was jesting, Lel,' he said, reproaching her.

'You were not!' she cried, as the warm blood rushed back to her cheeks. 'But let it pass. And without another syllable, she tied her bonnet on and descended the rock—the Colonel following sadly and silently. Not a word passed between them, until they gained the road, though they walked side by side. The Colonel was breathing heavily, as if unusually fatigued, and he coughed almost incessantly. Lel, remarking it, slackened her pace to watch him as he passed her. She could not see his face well, for his head was deeply inclined; but she could see his hand ever and anon, nervously applied to his eyes. Her very soul melted at his sight, and stealing close to his side, she laid her hand upon his shoulder. He started as if stung by a serpent, and catching the merciful gleam of Lel's clear, loving eye, pressed her with a long sob to his bosom.

'Oh, my child, my child forgive me! was all he could say. But this was enough, more than enough, for the generous girl.

'I was a fool to mind you,' she said, 'and worse than a fool to fly at you like a blind bat.'

'I thought you a woman,' he added, 'but you are more than a woman!'

'Not more than a woman, uncle; only more than a woman of the world.'

Thus saying, she wound her arm around his, and sang for him until they reached the white palings of Loretto.

Mrs. Cleveland, Agnes and Melville had returned from Vespers, and were grouped around the fire. But it was no longer the same cheerful group we have more than once described; a shadow had fallen on the hearth; the note of the crackling wood was more like a sigh than a song. Lel made no attempt at merriment, she found the silence so much more grateful than conversation. Now and then a trivial question and answer was exchanged, but it meant nothing. Though each saw that the other was thinking of the morrow, they knew that it required but a word to conjure up the parting scene too

lightly; so, in mutual consent, they carefully avoided the subject. Agnes, herself, seemed to feel the least. It may have been that she did not realize the coming separation—that to her, as to most young persons, there was a vague sense of pleasure in any change—or that resignation and hope rendered her calmer. Time passed a very long hour.

We cannot dwell on an evening like this, it is better imagined than described. After tea, Melville and the Colonel played chess, whilst Mrs. Cleveland sat between her daughter and her niece. She addressed her self chiefly to Lel, and, with all a mother's minuteness and tenderness, described the course she wished her to observe towards Agnes, for though the separation was to be brief, it was the first experiment, and suggested a multitude of fears. And besides this, Agnes was peculiarly circumstanced, and might feel no inclination to participate in the amusements which others found so delightful. She did not think it necessary to apprise Lel of her daughter's intention—most likely, as Agnes believed, the Colonel had already told her.

Lel trembled at the anxious mother's words of the confidence she reposed in her judgment, sincerity and love—of the sacredness of the treasure she was about to entrust her with. Her sole reply was to press her aunt's hand to her lips, as Agnes and her mother rose to leave the room. We shall not follow them. It is well at times, like the ancient artist, to veil the workings of a parent's heart.

Lel had a never-failing friend and comforter in the piano. At home, it served to chase away many a sad thought, and she found it equally valuable at Loretto. She opened it, instinctively, and began to play. Melville, by dint of constant watchfulness and reflection, had contrived to let the Colonel beat him. But, as may have been noticed, Lel's music laid a spell on him. His attention was entirely withdrawn from the game, and playing without proper precaution, he made such havoc with the old man's pieces as nearly to cost him the Colonel's good opinion.

However, the night was winking away—the piano was closed—the mimic armies slept peacefully in the same seat. Lel had scarcely entered her room, when she heard a tap at the door. It was the Colonel; he held in his hand a string of pearls which he threw around her neck, many a lady would have received it as a bribe; but Lel, with truer feeling, recognized it as a peace offering, which it was his pride or cruelty to reject.

'You have made me a promise, Lel,' he said, patting her on the head, 'a promise which you repent. I release you from it, and trust all to your own good heart.'

Before she could reply, he had left the room. A load was taken from her heart—the thorn was plucked from her pillow—and long before Agnes left her mother, she was sleeping happily.

They breakfasted by candle-light, for the roads were bad, and they had to take the stage at seven. Charley's eyes swam as he looked at the coffee around.

'Charley,' said the Colonel, 'I believe you like Miss Agnes more than me.'

'No, I don't, sir,' stammered the boy; 'I'd cry more for her, but I'd do more for you.'

'Then assure you are in time for the stage.'

'Not a minute to spare,' cried the Colonel, tearing Agnes from her mother's arms. 'You are not parting for a century. Let her go, sister, she's not going round Cape Horn. Good-by, Melville. God bless you, sir; you know where to find us again. The trout will soon be at its best place this in spring and summer—much pleasanter than now—no comparison, I assure you. Do come—do come. Good-by, Lel—good-by, Agnes—be good girls. Take care of em, Melville. There you are—My Charley, off we go. Good-by!'

The whip cracked—the carriage rolled away. The Colonel stood on the porch until they were out of sight, and then embracing his sister tenderly, led her into the breakfast-parlor, and seating himself by her side, whispered in her ear—

'Come, Mary, cheer up! We are not too old to be just as happy together now, as we have been for many a year.'

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

In the breakfast-room of a large city, sat Lel's father. He had just

wakened, and was sitting up in bed, looking out of the window. The sun was shining brightly, and the birds were singing. He felt a sense of peace and contentment.

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