

LORETO, OR THE CHOICE.

An Interesting Story for Both Old and Young.

Written by George E. Miles.

IN FOUR PARTS.

PART II.

CHAPTER IV.—Continued.

Lel had often determined to tell her father of Agnes' choice of life, and of the agony it caused the Colonel. But in her heart, though she knew it not, she prayed that Agnes might adhere to her resolution, and not permit the false glare of a brilliant season to melt her heroic promise. She trembled at the responsibility of weaning the child of heaven from the breast from which it drew its first pure nourishment. She feared that her father, out of earnest sympathy for the Colonel, might employ every art to win Agnes to the world. This kept her silent. But her father was speaking as he had never spoken before—his whole frame was working as if he were giving vent to thoughts smothered for years.

'Father,' she began, 'forgive my concealing it. I should have told you at once—Agnes Cleveland is to be a nun!'

'Of her own free choice?'

'Yes.'

'Thank God!' cried Mr. Almy, and a light broke over his face, amid which Lel saw the expression he ought to have. 'Thank God! But what is she doing here?'

Lel hung her head.

'Does her mother oppose it?'

'No, her uncle does.'

'The hoary old fool!' thundered Mr. Almy, clenching his hand. 'And he sent her here to be reclaimed?' he added bitterly.

'Yes!' said Lel—'and I am his instrument.'

'His instrument!' repeated Mr. Almy, breathing deeply and drawing back from his daughter with involuntary disdain—'His instrument to seduce this vestal virgin from solitude and sanctity—his instrument to prevent the purest aspirations of the human soul—his instrument to deprive her of eternal joy for the sake of mortal life—and what a life!—No, no, Lel, I will not believe it—you are not sunk so low!'

'I am.'

'Lel!' exclaimed Mr. Almy, grasping her arm, 'I have been a cold, inconsiderate parent; I have but poorly played a father's part; I have neglected your soul, your immortal soul, because I loved the world more than heaven. I shall not speak of this now—not now. I love you, though, with all the love of which I am capable; you are dearer to me than all the earth. I would sacrifice fortune, health, life to save you from one hour of the suffering that is my daily portion—but though I must love you thus to the day of my death, come what may, yet if you attempt, by any influence, direct or indirect, to clip the wings of this beautiful soul now flying to its Maker's bosom, I shall cease to respect you.'

'Oh, hear me, father. A good old man, with trembling hands and gray hair, knelt to me, and begged me, as I valued his peace and life, to prevent his child—for he loves her as his child—from taking this final step, without experience, without reflection, without trial.'

'And is she to be sacrificed because he is old and foolish? Oh, Lel, the whisperings of God to a young heart undefiled by sin, and in constant communion with him, trusting, living, exulting in him alone, are worth ages of experience. Eminent piety is more than wisdom, without which reflection is nothing. And as for trial—are we to test her with acids like a lump of gold, when our very touch is enough to change her nature?'

'I have not soiled her yet,' said Lel, hurt at the insinuation; 'but if you think me an unfit companion for her—'

'I have touched your pride, my sweet Lel,' said Mr. Almy, drawing her to his side. 'My dear daughter, you have fine impulses, glowing sentiments, correct notions of right and wrong, as the world goes; you go to church pretty regularly, you say your prayers sometimes, you are a loving, dutiful child,—but oh, Lel, you are not what you might have been—what you might be had I done my duty, had I consulted your true interest, had I been true to your mother's dying charge!'

At these last words, uttered in a hoarse whisper, as if wrung by agony and remorse from his lips, the proud merchant staggered to a chair and buried his face in his hands, whilst

Lel, pale and trembling, knelt before him.

'Enough, enough—the fault is mine!' murmured the father: 'ask me no more—not one word more as you value my repose. Will you believe it, my daughter, that often when you were attracting all eyes and winning all hearts, I have wished, prayed—aye, a thousand times prayed that you had died in your cradle, before your feet had left your mother's chamber, before your lips had left your mother's breast. It was a wicked wish—but I wished it—I still wish it!'

'Why?'

'Because I have a conscience!' said Mr. Almy, with bitter emphasis, and as he raised his eyes he encountered Gabriel's, who was smiling.

'You come and go like a ghost,' continued Mr. Almy, addressing him; 'I am glad you come now with a smile. What's the matter?'

'Tea is ready,' whispered Gabriel, 'and Miss Agnes and Mr. Melville are at the door.'

We shall employ the time they are spending at the tea-table by relating what happened during the ride.

Melville did not feel exactly happy as he pranced so gaily beside Agnes, the future was not clear enough, his hopes were too far from fulfillment; yet he felt the charm of her presence, and was happier than he would have been anywhere else. At times, indeed, when Agnes gave full reign to the spirited creature that bore her, when, leaving the city behind, she flew into the country like an unaged bird—or when, checking their horses, they paced slowly along some wooded ridge, conversing as freely and fondly as if they had been friends from childhood,—the sanguine young man flattered himself that the cold obstacles to his happiness were melting in the warm light of affection.

Away they went, as fleetly as happiness, through the suburbs, over the main road, passing from turnpike to turnpike by various winding lanes, new to Agnes, but familiar to her companion. The horses stopped of their own accord beside a little ice-bound brook, and then walked most leisurely. The road was shut in by hills and trees, and wound gradually from a hollow up to a high point of land, commanding a fine view of the city and the river beyond it. Melville smiled sadly—the intelligent animals were truer to the past than he. Yet, it was Lel's favorite ride! There had been day after day with him—in spring when the first flowers were blooming, when the loving leaves stretched forth their tender cheeks to the soft kisses of the south winds, and decked the reviving branches for wooing birds,—in summer, when the little brook babbled against the heat, when thirsting doves came to drink and peck there, when the flocks and herds slumbered in the cool shade of noble oaks, when the bearded wheat and tasseled corn waved in green and gold—in autumn, when the mellow fruit glauced in beauty through the orchards, when every hill top and every bottom glowed in gorgeous livery of a thousand dyes, as if the numberless leaves had caught and held fast the colors of the sunset clouds. The horses had always walked over that ground, and they respected it now.

No wonder then Melville looked grave, no wonder he hung his head. He knew the very stones—they preached to him most powerfully of mortal inconstancy; and as memory after memory returned, with a load of looks, words and smiles, his heart smote him, and he felt like a traitor. Agnes was not entirely blind; yet up to this instant, she had never dreamed that Melville's attentions to her meant any thing more than common friendship. To a pure, unsuspecting intelligence, truth comes like inspiration. All at once it flashed upon her that Lel and Melville stood a little further apart, and that she herself stood between them. And then, putting this and that together, she rapidly came to a conclusion from which she recoiled, unwilling to believe it. When Melville looked up, he met her calm, dark eye searching his very soul, and he blushed and trembled like a truant school-boy. His embarrassment confirmed her suspicion, and a sentiment resembling aversion arose in her mind. It was but a transient shadow, yet, had he not looked away, he could have seen, for once, that gentle face administering a cold rebuke.

'Can we return by that road?' she asked, urging her horse to a full gallop.

Melville muttered, 'Yes.'

'Let us take it then; the sun will soon be down.'

There were pretty cottages strung along each side of the road, some on Barn, some on the Gothic, but most on the Vandal order, with here and there a dwelling of much pretension, its deformity rendered more conspicuous by its size. Agnes kept her companion busy telling her the names and history of the owners. His answers were not very entertaining or satisfactory, and the good people described could hardly have recognized themselves in the model he made of them. In short, he so confounded their births, marriages and deaths, that it must have been the most wonderful population on the face of the earth. He still felt that calm, dark eye searching his very soul, and half his replies were at random, until to his inexpressible relief they reached the edge of the city, where she suspended her queries, to observe the dirty, cramped, dingy hovels through which they were passing.

'You must excuse my bringing you this very uninteresting route,' said Melville. 'I scarcely know where we are. However, it is easy to escape these palaces of the sovereign people.'

'Excuse me,' replied Agnes, surprised and pained by this heartless sneer,—'excuse me if I find this the most interesting part of our ride.' Melville saw how far he had committed himself. Poor fellow! He was charitable or liberal to a fault; but, like all of us, in trying to appear to advantage, he only injured himself.

'Palaces they may be,' she resumed, 'of virtues that might put us, whom the poor need not envy, to the blush. Are these palaces ever visited by the rich—or are they avoided, as the Hindoo avoids a jungle which may conceal a lion?'

'Perhaps they do conceal a lion,' said Melville.

'A very lean one, then,' returned Agnes, glancing at the meagre forms that were sitting around them.

'Only the more desperate of hunger.'

'And whose fault is that?' cried the young girl, with a flashing eye. 'Were half the money that is squandered applied here, the danger would be over.'

'My fair friend is something of a socialist.'

'No,' she retorted with a smile. 'If Christian charity were more in vogue, socialism, which only lives in its absence, would be out of fashion.'

'It is their duty, as Christians, to bear and forbear.'

'Most unquestionably. But if we neglect the duty of relieving, are we to be surprised if they renounce the more difficult task of suffering? A republic destitute of active Christian charity wants the first principle of life.'

At this moment they were attracted by a little boy, who, darting through the door of an ill-looking shed, trotted along by their horses, holding his tiny hands up to Agnes with a gesture not to be mistaken. He could not have been more than ten years old; he was bareheaded, and his light, flaxen hair curled over his temples and cheeks. Though his clothes were tattered and old, yet his face and hands were scrupulously clean. Agnes was enchanted with him as he followed her, looked up with wild blue eyes from which his very soul appealed. Young as he was, his smile was adorned with a touching mournfulness—it was like a star peering through a water sky.

'What do you want, my boy?' said Agnes, stopping her horse.

'Help for my father,' murmured the child, blushing and hanging his head.

'Perhaps his confusion should be construed into an admission of imposture,' she whispered to Melville, and then continued—'What ails your father?'

'He has been very sick.'

'Is he better?'

'Oh yes, much better. He is getting well.'

'What does he want?'

The child was silent.

'Tell me!' said Agnes, in a tone of such heart-felt sympathy, that the little fellow wondered, smiled and wept.

'He never asks for anything,' answered the boy, shaking his head,—'he never asks for anything.'

'Have you nothing to eat?' resumed Agnes.

'Yes, we have bread and meat enough for a week; but father won't eat it, and if he doesn't eat, you know he must die. Here his tears flowed faster. 'I thought—that if I could only get money enough to buy him some nice things to-night, he would be better in the morning. And when I saw you passing, something seemed to say to me, "there

goes a lady who will give you some oranges and plum-apples and—"

For oh! you looked so good!—and the artless child, looking into her eyes.

'Flattery—another proof of the honesty. She—'—scoffing the vagabond, Mr. Melville, reaching down to pat the boy's head as she spoke.

'He attracts me strongly,' whispered Melville, taking out his purse. 'In spite of his light hair and blue eyes, I think he slightly resembles you.'

'What is your name, my son?' said Agnes.

'Clarence.'

'Have you no other name?'

'None.'

'Where is your father?'

'In there,' said the boy, pointing at the door from which he had issued.

'Can I see him?'

Again the round tears rolled over his soft cheeks—again his golden head inclined. Without a word, he pressed her hand passionately to his lips, then gazed at her in mute reverence.

'You are not in earnest, Miss Agnes,' cried Melville, as she was about to dismount.

'Indeed I am,' and throwing him the reins, and giving her hand to the boy, she sprang lightly from the saddle. Melville was instantly at her side.

'My dear Miss Cleveland,' he said, 'I implore you not to expose yourself to the close atmosphere of these cells, where you know not how many forms of disease may be lurking. Remain here—I will make an examination and see that the invalid is well nursed.'

So saying, he beckoned a man to hold the horses, and stepped before her.

'We will go together,' said Agnes, not noting Melville's concern for her and indifference to himself. But she could not be dissuaded by looks, speech or gesture; for not only did she long to begin her salutation at the bedside of suffering poverty, not only did she think of healing the invalid's temples and moistening his lips, but the man might be dying, an unshriven soul might be speeding to its last account!

Clarence led the way with his little hand fast in hers.

After ascending a narrow, crooked staircase, they entered a dismal chamber, uncarpeted and unpapered. They could scarcely see each other at first, for the room was badly lighted, and the broken windows were hung with blankets to nourish heat at the expense of light. The wretchedness of the scene, the imperfect ventilation, made Agnes dizzy, as, guided by Clarence, she approached a bed standing on a shabby piece of matting in one corner.

'He is sound asleep,' whispered the boy; 'he has not slept before for three days and nights.'

'Give me a candle, if you have one,' said Melville, drawing closer to the slumberer. Agnes shuddered—he was so still—his very breathing inaudible—it might be death!

Clarence hastily drew a match across the wall, and the least reflection revealing all the evidences of poverty and distress. Deepened the wretchedness of the scene, shading the light with his hand, Melville bent over the sick man. Agnes saw a mass of black hair—a forehead white as marble; she saw the closed eyes, the motionless lips, and, clasping her hands, knelt by the pillow, whilst Clarence, terrified at that deep silence, crept close to her side. She looked again, did not the thin nostril move?—did it not rise and fall regularly? She looked earnestly at Melville.

'He is living,' he said at last; 'his pulse is weak, but time his breathing faint, but regular. My son is continued, in a tone of unwearied tenderness, "your father will be much better when he wakes."

'When will he wake?' asked Clarence, with tearful eyes.

'Probably not before to-morrow.'

'But if he should not wake then?'

'So much the better. Let him sleep on.'

Agnes turned to embrace the boy, and to her surprise found the mysterious Gabriel amongst them.

'How did you find us out?' asked Melville.

'I saw the horses at the door,' whispered Gabriel.

'This atmosphere is enough to kill any one,' resumed Melville, examining the windows.

While he was improving the ventilation, Agnes moved about the room, like a sweet spirit, putting things in order. By her mere touch, the rubbish around her seemed to

be in motion.

Agnes, however, was not so easily satisfied. She was looking for the child who had been so good to her, and who had given her so much comfort.

Gabriel had been so good to her, and she was looking for him. She was looking for him, and she was looking for him.

One of the children, a fondness for children, could not be denied. He was looking for him, and she was looking for him.

Agnes felt that she had been so good to her, and she was looking for him. She was looking for him, and she was looking for him.

Let us go, Miss Cleveland, said Melville.

'I will return and see the boy,' said Agnes, and she was looking for him.

This is no place for me, said Agnes, and she was looking for him.

Agnes felt that she had been so good to her, and she was looking for him. She was looking for him, and she was looking for him.

But should he wake a mother? said Agnes, and she was looking for him.

'Leave that to me,' answered Gabriel.

'The man is in the house,' said Agnes, and she was looking for him.

'I shall inquire for him,' said Agnes, and she was looking for him.

'That is all right,' said Agnes, and she was looking for him.

Clarence, Gabriel, and Agnes were looking for him, and she was looking for him.

'This is all right,' said Agnes, and she was looking for him.

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