LORETTO, OR THE CHOICE.

An Interesting Story for Both Old and Young.

Written by George E. Miles.

IN FOUR PARTS.

PART III.

CHAPTER I.—Continued.

Must it be told that within a month after her return from the city, Agnes entered the convent as a candidate—that three months later, her long hair was cut to suit the brown cap of the novice? Until her hair was cut, the Colonel had cherished a hope that she would repent her girlish haste; but when he saw the ruin caused by those envious shears, he could not help saying—'It is all over—all over!' And ye who have clung to Agnes, in the hope that she would be induced to marry Melville, or incline to Mr. Almy, or that some romantic young gentleman would appear upon the carpet, invested with every virtue and every grace, between whom and our young novice, a sweet sympathy might be established, which should ultimately lead to better things than the cloister, and supply a chapter or two of delicious sentiment,—leave us, we beseech you, for her CHOICE is made, though the vows are not yet taken. Yes: she is lost to the world! that sweet, beautiful girl, who laughed so merrily with her load of premiums in her arms, the milk white lamb amongst those green hills; the friend who had gone to change Lel, and who did change her, though she nearly perished in the effort; the kind protectress who had comforted little Clarence and the Wanderer; the keen-sighted woman who had penetrated the secret of Mr. Almy's face, who had conquered Melville, and reigned supreme in the ball-room, eclipsing all the practiced belles of the season! She was lost to the world, that sweet, beautiful girl, who was so well fitted to delight and adorn it,—lost before the first bloom of youth had passed from her cheeks, before experience had dried the first bright waters of hope and trust that are born in our hearts; lost before there was any need to seek a refuge from the ills of life in that last resource, a convent. She is lost to the world, and what matters it what she has gained—what heaven has won! So thought the Colonel.

Yet what was his love for Agnes compared to her mother's—the mother who remembered her baptism, her first cries, her first words, her first caresses; who had counted her first smiles and treasured them in her heart, who remembered every incident of her youth, her first lisping prayers, her first songs, her first visit to mass, her first confession, her first communion, her confirmation:—what was his bereavement to hers? Agnes was her only child, her only companion in prayer, her jewel, her treasure, her all on earth;—a thousand uncles could not have loved her as she did—their lives had been one,—and now they are called upon to live apart. Oh! not apart! Who shall say apart! When they are repeating, day after day, and night after night, the same dear litanies, when they are appealing to the same saints, the same angels, the same Blessed Mother, the same Father, Son and Holy Ghost, when they are living together in God, who shall say they are living apart! And thus thought Mrs Cleveland, and she missed not her daughter's long, dark hair; and if she shed floods of natural tears, it was not because her daughter was clad in the plain livery of heaven. And so thought Lel, and she was glad of the CHOICE, though she had now to sit and sew alone, though she had to walk alone, though she had to watch the sun rise and set, and play Beethoven, and listen to the birds and pluck wild flowers, and muse under the old oak trees without Agnes at her side.

CHAPTER II.

Who shall say what passed in Agnes' heart after that memorable Thursday evening? What visions of worldly happiness crowded on her soul, outshining and eclipsing the silent convent to which she had pledged herself? Before her first visit to the city she had wondered how others could be so thoughtless as to abandon themselves to the insignificant pleasures which she despised, and which had not brilliancy enough even to tempt her. But on a sudden her soul had risen up in arms against her. The triumphs and the joys which had been contemptible now danced before her eyes in fearful fascination. They beckoned her on through a lovely vista, opening into sunshine and soft splendor, where roses were blooming, where trees were bending over glittering fountains, dropping luscious, golden fruit. She had measured herself with those who had sneered at the country girl, she had overtopped them and moved amongst them like a queen. She had perceived her superiority—it had been tacitly admitted—she saw a brilliant career before her—she had only to step forth and enjoy it.

Was not this a temptation? We have written to no purpose, if Agnes is still considered a cold, calm, passionless creature. We have written to no purpose, if the likeness to her father has not been detected by more than Lel. Few minds could spin such glancing, silky webs for the winged soul; few hearts could feel the enchantment of fancy so deeply. Yet how little did she know this, when she knelt for her Confessor's permission to save Lel, feeling certain of her own salvation!

She recalled the haughtiness with which she had referred Melville to Kempis on Nature and Grace, as if she were perfect in that sublime chapter. Oh Agnes, Agnes, was there not pride, presumption, in thy self confidence? was there not too much contempt for others, whom thou didst believe weaker than thyself? She admitted it, in tears, before the cross.

And the world—the world which thou hast scorned—is it not rather to be feared than dared? is it not rather to be pitied and prayed for, than spurned and denounced? Didst thou not exempt thyself from the censure which thou didst pass on that same world, and think thyself better than the rest of mankind? Aye, even during the conversation with the Colonel on the porch, when the moon was shining the evening of thy return, didst thou apply to thyself the condemnation so liberally bestowed on thy neighbors?

What would she not have given for that perfect repose, that calm delight she felt before leaving Loretot? Would it never return? Yet why so covetous of spiritual enjoyment, so restless under that spiritual desolation with which the saints themselves are visited. But in the tumult of leaving her mother—and such a mother!—there could not be that fulness of joy to which she had looked forward so eagerly. Not until the moment of parting, did Agnes know how much was due that meek, uncomplaining guardian of her youth. How imperfectly had she returned that mother's tender love—how often had she been wanting in affection—how little had she done to console, to amuse, to reward her for those early lessons of piety, without which her life might have been a warning!

Oh no! it was not on entering the convent that the young candidate's soul was at rest. A week's retreat! She had proved her own nothingness; she had discovered that all he strength came from God; that, without humility she was powerless; that the finger of heaven had pointed out her vocation, not as an honor due her virtue, but as a mercy granted to her weakness. She looked up with reverence and love to the old sisters around her, who were preparing to die as they had lived, and begged them to pray that, like them, she might persevere to the close. But that perfect repose, that calm delight, would not return! That spiritual desolation would not pass away! As the traveller in the desert pants for the palm trees' shade and running waters—as the weary schoolboy sighs for a Christmas holiday—as the wanderer longs for the sweet home he left behind him, so Agnes had sighed and longed for the beginning of her religious life, as if every aspiration would then be instantaneously gratified, as if the unspeakable rapture of that moment would exceed all the transports of youth and innocence. But instead of this, it is a time of tears and trial—a time of doubt and fear, in which not one of these bright promises was fulfilled. Oh, could she fling herself once more on her mother's breast and die! Is heaven so hard to win? Is it not easy to be a Sister of Charity? Courage, thou noble girl!

The fervor that carried thee so joyously to communion when thou wast a girl; the devotion that led thee to the city to save thy young cousin—this is something—but something more must thou have to be a Sister of Charity. Let the long hours of meditation pass heavily; let thy thoughts wander painfully to thy dear mother; let thy bosom ache even in the chapel; let thy pillow be steeped in nightly tears—a day of consolation may come, 'when the sand in the hour-glass shall glide away unnoticed; when thy Blessed Mother in heaven shall absorb thy thoughts; when thy breast shall swell with joy before the altar; when thy pillow shall have no thorn.

Whilst Agnes was thus advancing in the school of the cross, Lel undertook to accomplish herself in all the departments of country life. She rose before the sun, and (gentle reader, wince not!) fed the chickens, pigeons, geese, ducks and turkeys; she learned that corn was planted and wheat sown; she was initiated into the mysteries of milking, creaming, churning, curds and cheese, and her rural ambition endeared her to every hand about the place, to the dairy-maid in particular. She knew the names of all the birds, and could distinguish them by their notes; the lark; the plover, the robin; the quail, the woodcock, the flicker; the blackbird, were no longer strangers, but familiar friends. She loved to take the shade with the reapers, at noon-ing, and laugh and jest with them; and there, with her green sun-bonnet cast carelessly aside, and her back against the rough tree, few would have recognised, in our Lel, the admitted leader of fashion, the reigning star of many a winter.

Her daily rides, her daily rambles over the field in search of new flowers, had enbrowned her clear cheeks and forehead; and, cheered and reinvigorated by exercise and these innocent pastimes, the lightness, fullness, freshness of health returned, and her step was once more as free as air, and her figure rounded to its former symmetry.

But if she loved to stray over the farm with the Colonel and listen to his piscatorial exploits, still more did she love to accompany Mrs. Cleveland through the neighborhood, until she knew the road to every cottage that needed charity. And the people testified their gratitude by saying she was another Agnes: they knew no higher compliment. There was another pleasure: once a week, not oftener, she went with her aunt and uncle to see Agnes, and the two friends would visit that dear old Confessor who had made the name of Ellen Almy a household word in the Convent. And Lel wrote so many sweet, simple hymns, and was so good and kind, that the sisters loved her too, and their prayers were still offered up for her peace and happiness.

And, twice a week, she received letters from her father—long letters—letters that she might read and read again, and then file away in her little desk, as so many treasures. He was well and doing well. He promised to come soon and spend a fortnight with her. Was she not happy? Did she never languish for that brilliant circle which was still moving without her, and sigh for her place there? Never—never! If, at times, a fear would cross her mind, that the world might regain its fatal hold on her father, his next letter drove the thought away. True, she longed to be with him; she begged him to let her return and stay at his side, no matter where he was, or what might happen; that her health was restored; that she would be happier with him. But he forbade it, and she submitted. It was better to be away from Melville, and she tried not to think of him, save when she prayed for that generous friend.

Mrs. Cleveland could ill have spared this kind and loving girl; the Colonel could not have existed without her. The loss of Agnes did not grieve him long, for, with the facility of old age, he transferred his love to Lel, and thought that Agnes had never taken half the interest in his tackle, guns, and hounds that she did, and Charley, unconsciously following in his master's wake, boldly pronounced—out of his mistress's hearing, however—that Miss Lel was worth two of Miss Agnes. Most of our readers will side with Charley.

But where is the Wanderer?

CHAPTER III.

Any one, who has derived his chief pleasure from the society of one family, instead of relying on himself or on the everlasting many, and has been suddenly deprived of this sole dependence, will sympathize with Melville. For years he had seen Lel, almost daily, but he knew not, until they parted, that she was more than half his existence. He could easily understand why Lel should reject his addresses for a year, for he had given her reason to suspect his constancy; but not to hear him then, unless he was a Catholic, amazed and confounded him. He knew that the Catholic Church discouraged mixed marriages, and he would not have been surprised at such a declaration from an Italian peasant girl, but such bigotry in the high-bred, accomplished and beautiful Lel, was a mystery. Had she fallen a victim to those judicial doctrines by which the noblest minds in the world have been perverted? Had she stifled the sweet voice of nature in her soul, at the bidding of a black-gowned priest of Rome? It must be so! There is an insuperable barrier between them! Lel was in earnest: he could trust her word, as an infant trusts its mother's smile. There was no change in her love, and the knowledge of this was another pang, for he never could be a Catholic. It was out of the question—absurd—impossible.

He had her piano—there was some comfort in that—and would sit for hours brooding over the finger-board, strumming fragments of Lel's favorite pieces: but the instrument was dead—the animating spirit was gone—gone for ever! In the evenings he was reasonably happy in Mr. Almy's society—they roomed together—but the long, cheerless days were almost insupportable. Feeling the necessity of employment to save himself from constant despondency, he resumed, with a view to practice, the study of medicine, in which he had already taken a diploma; not that he wanted money, for Mr. Almy had partially repaid him with half the sales of the house and furniture. His generosity to the Almys was known—Mr. Almy had taken no pains to conceal it—but this was not much to his credit with the world. The world is never well pleased when called on to admire virtues it does not practice. Indeed, Melville was looked upon as a tenderhearted, credulous mortal, who had been duped out of a large fortune by the wiles of an old merchant and the blandishments of an artful young girl. They respected him, however, for being prudent enough not to marry Lel, and detected, in this wise resolve a glimmering of good sense amidst his folly. So powerfully had his insane behavior operated on society, that his former intimates were disposed to cut his acquaintance, and it was only when they heard he still had something left, that their disgust melted into patronizing pity.

Under these auspices, Melville might hope to start in his new profession with tolerable success. His manners were pleasing; his attainments considerably; and, with proper patronage, he was still a desirable match. If the silly fellow would only give up the Almys, all might yet go well with him, and he might even aspire to Mrs. Holly's occasional notice. This majestic and good hearted soul never met him without sneering at Lel, until he wished the portly widow a man, that he might dash her to the ground and set his foot on her neck. Once, in speaking of Lel, she said to him with a wink:

'Poor little creature, how hard she tried to get you!'

'It is false, madam,' cried Melville, 'I tried all I could to get her, and failed! I would give more for one hair of her head than for your parlor full of the proudest and richest of this city.'

This reckless and unpardonable speech sealed Melville's fate. There was no hope in the upper circles after that, and his practice must come from the lower classes.

Melville found abundant occupation in his medical books; but occupation is not always consolation. There was a void in his bosom that pathology could not fill. As for Gabriel, he was a poor companion, with his pale face and uneasy whisper. Almy was his main stay—for did not Lel write long letters to her father every week? and did not her father read some passages from rustic life to a very attentive listener?

One evening, to Melville's consternation and regret, Mr. Almy brought home to tea, the diminutive, old priest with short gray hair and small gray eyes. Melville could scarcely salute him with ordinary civility; he regarded him as the author of all his anguish, the thief who had stolen away his Lel. Mr. Almy had never seen such a bitter cloud on his room-mate's brow: there was something dangerous in it. Our friend, the priest, did not seem to notice it; or if he did, was not visibly moved by the gathering storm, having probably encountered rougher weather in his lifetime.

'I have been trying,' said Mr. Almy, 'to make this young gentleman a Catholic, and as my success has not been very flattering, I am disposed to hand him over to you. He is a good scholar, and could easily read the fathers of the church.'

'Yes,' said the old man, 'very good reading. But you don't want to be a priest, do you, Mr. Melville?'

'Not exactly, sir,' replied Melville, haughtily.

'No,' said the other. 'Then, I think the little catechism would be better than the fathers. Do you know any thing about us, Mr. Melville?'

'Something,' returned Melville, [illegible] that you have rendered me hopelessly miserable, by depriving me of a blessing that I might now enjoy, but for the heartless tyranny you exercise over all who are weak enough to admit your power.'

'Is that all you know?' asked the priest.

'It is all I wish to know!' thundered Melville, incensed at his antagonist's calmness. 'Have you a right to plunge two, who love each other, into an abyss of despair, that the predilections of the Pope may be gratified? I tell you, sir, that all the bishops in Christendom cannot love, as I do, the sweet victim of their superstition!'

'You do seem to be quite in love,' said the priest.

'Had you a right,' continued Melville, 'to dissuade her from marrying me, because I was not in your communion? Have I ever done any thing unbecoming a man or a Christian? Am I not as honest as thousands who seek your confessional?'

'These questions are rather hard to answer,' began the other, with a smile. 'I believe you are a very good man, though you are in a sad passion now. I claim a right to advise in all these cases, and hold myself accountable to God alone. I have been accused of being a match-maker, but this is the first time I have been upbraided as a match-breaker.'

'You mean to say, sir,' answered Melville, 'that you never had as much reason to save a young lady from such a villian as I!'

'I mean to say nothing of the kind. How do I know whether you are a villian or not? All I know, is that you are not a Christian, and that Lel is too good for any heathen on the face of the earth.'

'She is indeed,' muttered Melville, white with rage. 'If your persecution were confined to me alone, I could stand it, and console myself with despising you. But are you not well aware that you are exacting a sacrifice from her, which must be fatal to her happiness?'

The old man, smiling in his face, replied—

'Don't you think she can live without you?' so ingenuously, that Mr. Almy laughed outright.

Goaded to madness, Melville turned on Mr. Almy, grasping between his teeth,—'I little expected to be mocked by you.'

The significant emphasis of you, brought a deep blush to Mr. Almy's cheek, and he shaded his eyes with his hand.

'Gentlemen,' continued Melville, rising, 'if you expect to make a convert of me practicing upon my love, you are sadly mistaken. The game you are playing may break my heart, but it shall never make me the hypocritical proselyte of a faith I despise.'

So saying, he left the room, followed by Gabriel. He went to his bed-room, and, trembling in every limb, threw himself on a chair. His even temper like his, when [illegible] aroused, is terrible: his lips were white as death, while his cheeks and forehead burned like fire. Lel would not have known him, as he sat there, glaring at a candle with a steady, glazed eye.

'They shall find,' he said, [illegible] ing his hand, 'that I am [illegible] of more depth to be moulded [illegible] ing to the whim of a weak-[illegible] girl, or a cool, calculating [illegible] And when to be laughed at [illegible] heaven, they shall see that my patience, like my fortune has no end.'

He felt a hand laid on his shoulder: it was Gabriel.

To be continued.

An official of the Standard Oil Company has written a book to prove that the gravitation theory of Sir Isaac Newton is impossible. It must have been understood that the Standard Oil Company owns the earth, but we believe it ought to leave the law of gravitation alone.

There has been a season of terrible murders, in each of which servant girls were concerned. It would be comforting if the eye of prophecy could look into the near future and see a season of hangings in which the same people would be concerned. But the eye of prophecy is unequal to the task.

The possibilities of the trolley car are daily being demonstrated. At Camden, N. J., one of the machines bumped into a can of oil, fired it with an electric spark and the whole car blazed up so suddenly that the passengers barely escaped being toasted a nut brown. It is beginning to be believed that the trolley car can do anything mischievous short of chasing a man up a tree.

This is a good time a year to remind some folks to "keep your mouth shut"—for hygienic reasons—both day and night. It was an old superstition that devils would find their way into one who leaves the mouth open, but modern science gives better reasons for using the mouth only for eating and speaking, and depending on the nose for breathing. Shut your mouth and open your eyes, and you'll take in enough [illegible] you wise.