How they loved him, Vol. 1 (of 3) : $b A novel

Florence Marryat

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HOW THEY LOVED HIM.

A NOVEL.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT
(MRS FRANCIS LEAN).

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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Dedicated,

WITH THE WARMEST OF GOOD WISHES,

TO

MR AND MRS MICHAEL GUNN,

IN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF

MANY ACTS OF KINDNESS SHOWN TO MY CHILDREN

AND MYSELF.

‘Oh! human Heart, which thus art strong,
To love, to dare, to suffer wrong,
I will not doubt thee, though I see
Thy wickedness continually:
Nor fail to trust thy holier part,
Darkened and fallen as thou art;
But by thy faith--thy love--thy light,
Thy secret longings infinite,
Still trust in God that thou shalt win
Forgiveness for thy host of sin.’

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HOW THEY LOVED HIM.

CHAPTER I.

ASLEEP.

‘Her form was fresher than the morning rose When the dew wets its leaves,--unstain’d and pure As is the lily, or the mountain snow.’--_Thomson_.

Spring was over all the land, and the April sunshine was beaming mildly on the tender green leaves and half-blown flowers in the convent garden of Ansprach. On the broad open terrace, strewn with the golden petals of the fragile and short-lived laburnum, and scented with the delicate fragrance of lilac and apple-blossom, a pair of anxious, feathered parents were vainly endeavouring, by means of continuous twittering, to induce an awkward fledgling to return to the nest from which he had prematurely fallen; whilst up and down between the borders of primroses and polyanthuses, three or four old nuns, too feeble for work, toddled and sunned themselves, and talked together in quavering voices--Heaven alone knows of what--perhaps of the days when they were young and comely, and thought lovers and husbands were natural institutions and free gifts from God to Woman. From the pasture-lands around the convent, the lambs were calling to their mother ewes; in the farmyard the poultry softly chattered to each other as they picked up the scattered grain; from the playground was wafted a buzz of happy voices. There were no sounds to be heard, nor sights to be seen on any side, but such as breathed of purity, and contentment, and peace.

Suddenly, at the farther end of the terrace, appeared a group of

children, galloping and stamping as they played at horses, and the venerable sisters stood on one side, smiling, to let them pass. A tall graceful girl led the van, but she was evidently joining in the sport only for the benefit of the little ones, who had encircled her with half-a-dozen skipping ropes, and were driving her vigorously from behind. '_Allons--courage--plus vite!_' they shouted every time their charger showed the least symptom of declining speed. But as the tall girl reached the side of the sisters, she came to a full stop. It was not only to say '_Bon jour, mes sœurs_,' with a deep reverence, that she did so; she had caught sight of the little fledgling on the pathway, and her heart was full in a moment. She called to the children to be careful, and knelt down on the terrace to examine the fallen bird, much to the consternation of its anxious parents.

'What can I do for it?' she demanded of the old nuns who watched her proceedings.

'Do nothing, my child,' they answered, 'but lay it inside the flower border. It will be safe there; and the mother bird is close at hand. She will provide for it better than you can.'

'Yes,' shouted one of the little ones; 'see, there they are, Fenella--both the papa and the mamma. How dreadfully afraid they are lest we should hurt their child! And now it has hopped up to them--just as I shall hop up to my darling mamma when the midsummer holidays arrive. Oh, Fenella, don't you wish that they had come?'

Fenella did not answer; she was watching the twittering fuss that the old birds were making over their fledgling, and perhaps she did not hear what the child said. But as she rose and twisted the ropes about

her arms again, and set off at a gallop down the terrace, with the little ones tearing after her, something very like a tear fell from her grey eyes upon the bosom of her convent dress.

‘Is she an orphan?’ asked one of the nuns, as the girl passed out of hearing.

‘I don’t know, but I think she must be; she has not left Ansprach for five years. She is, at any rate, very friendless.’

‘Poor little soul! Perhaps they destine her to remain here for ever,’ was the reply; and then the old women were silent for awhile, as though the idea had conjured up some tender memory. It must be sad to arrive at the close of one’s life, and feel that very soon it will be ended, and leave not a sign behind it that it has ever been. But they soon shook off the feeling, for the Convent of Saint Barbara was like a busy hive of bees upon that April morning, and it was difficult to realise that it could ever be less so. Inside the solemn grey building dozens of hands were employed in cooking and washing and ironing, for the sisters allowed no one to assist them in their household labour, and brought up the children under their charge to be as helpful as themselves. In the class-rooms a score of teachers were engaged in the education of the pupils; the hospital had no lack of tender nurses, nor the chapel of reverent worshippers; whilst, as though in strong contrast to the latter employment, the mother of the English pupils--or, as she was generally called, Mère Josephine--was seated in one of the convent parlours, talking on the most mundane of matters with a visitor who had arrived in Ansprach but an hour ago.

To look at Mère Josephine alone, was almost to be persuaded that a conventual life must be the happiest life in the world. For she was not

so young as to be unaware of the weight of the duties she had undertaken, nor was she so old as to have lost interest in what might befall her in the future. And yet, though her lot was irrevocably fixed beyond the power of alteration, she not only looked happy, but was so. She was a healthy, intelligent woman, of from five-and-thirty to forty years of age, who was English on the mother's side, and spoke that language as well as she did her native German. She had blue eyes that twinkled with humour, firm rosy cheeks, an elastic step that would have befitted twenty, and a comfortably rounded form that seemed the very embodiment of maternity, though no one would have laughed more than Mère Josephine had you told her so. She was a thoroughly practical person into the bargain, with a keen appreciation of motives and character, and she jingled the huge bunch of keys that hung at her girdle with an air that said she would not be trifled with. In fact, you would have had to get up early to take in Mère Josephine.

The person with whom she was engaged in conversation was not a bad specimen of her class either, but it was a lower class. She had a mild face, which would, under any circumstances, have denoted rather a weak and easily led disposition, and it had had no opportunities of learning to attest itself--for she was a servant. Her name was Eliza Bennett, and she was the housekeeper and lady's-maid and confidential agent of Mrs Barrington, of South Audley Street, London.

Mrs Bennett was sitting on the edge of her rush-bottomed chair, looking very ill at ease. She was tired and hungry and cold--for though the April sunshine was on the convent garden, it did not penetrate the thick walls sufficiently to give a look of warmth to the polished oak floor and the uncurtained casements of the parlour.

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