

'There have been good men in the Church, there are still; but I do not try to interfere with their belief. Let them think as they please. For myself, I will think as I please, Madame. This is a progressive age. Narrowness has been shelved, and it is the broad-minded tolerants who will revolutionise the world.'

'Alas, to their own and the world's undoing!' answered Madame Blanchet. 'Emma, I remember you as a happy young girl; you do not seem to be happy now. Your convent days—have you forgotten them?'

'They seem to me like a childish dream, Madame,' said Emma, proudly lifting her dark head. 'In those days I was only a parrot since then I have learned to read and to think.'

'Come, my dear,' observed her father. 'It is near Madame's dinner hour.'

All Madame Blanchet's amiability seemed to have returned. She arose smilingly, and went with them to the door.

'You are both too good to perish,' she said as they stood a moment on the landing. 'I am going to pray for you.'

'Thank you, Madame,' answered Emma, pleasantly enough; while her father added laughingly:

'Pray that I may have the benefit of a priest before I leave the world, Madame. I am apt to go suddenly, with my heart complaint.'

'Do not jest, Monsieur,' said the widow seriously.

'But I am not jesting,' the old man responded. 'I assure you I should feel very uncomfortable if I thought I would not have the priest before I died.'

'Ah, Monsieur,' murmured Madame Blanchet, 'I cannot understand your position! It is most inconsistent. You are taking a great risk—a very great risk. Who can presume on the mercy of God?'

'I am not afraid,' said the old man. 'And remember, Madame, you have promised to pray for me.'

So saying, he continued his way, laughingly, down the stairs; while a little in advance of him marched his daughter, with head held erect. Madame Blanchet looked after them thoughtfully for a brief moment, and returned to her apartment.

II.

About the middle of July the malady of the heart from which Monsieur Margeron suffered began to make itself unpleasantly evident. In a fortnight he had become seriously ill and was obliged to remain in bed. His daughter attended him with filial devotion.

Madame Blanchet was absent in the country at the time, but returned in August on business, and then learned of her landlord's illness. The next morning she met Emma on the stairs. After exchanging salutations with her, the other lady said:

'They tell me your father is quite ill—confined to his bed.'

'Yes, he is ill,' Emma replied. 'His heart troubles him a great deal.'

'Do you not know, Emma,' said Madame Blanchet, 'that in a disease like his, and at his age, a sudden breaking-down is dangerous?'

'Yes, Madame, I know it very well; and I am doing all I can to alleviate his sufferings.'

Madame Blanchet hesitated.

'Emma,' she inquired, 'has he had the priest?'

'The priest?' echoed Emma. 'Why should I frighten him to death by calling in the priest?'

'Has he asked for one?'

'No,' replied Emma: 'he has never alluded to the subject.'

'It would be a terrible thing to let him die without the last Sacraments. He would not wish to do so himself,' said Madame Blanchet.

'Madame,' answered Emma, 'I am aware of that. I have studied the nature of my father's disease. If he does not recover from this attack soon, he cannot last long. I am hoping, by good care and perfect quiet, to restore him to his usual state of health. The least excitement might defeat all this. Do you not understand?'

Madame Blanchet remained silent. She did not know what to say to this subtle and no doubt sincere excuse.

'Will you allow me to speak to him?' she asked, after a pause. 'I assure you I shall not alarm him.'

'No, I cannot allow anyone to see him. You would be sure to mention confession.'

'Yes, I would.'

'Very well,—you shall not see him. I beg of you not to worry yourself about it. I know your motives are good, and I appreciate them—though you may find some difficulty in believing it. I am not at all narrow-minded, and can view the subject from both sides. But I have firmly decided on my course, and shall not alter my decision.'

'You are taking a great risk, my girl,' said Madame Blanchet.

'I am willing to take it, and to suffer for it. I beseech you to trust me, Madame. My mother died while I was still a child. I was instructed and educated by religious. I know what is required. And I am not by any means an infidel. Certainly between your ideas of religion and mine there is a difference; but, all things told, I am a Christian, and feel that my father would wish to die as a Christian. And so he shall.'

'But, in a matter so grave as this, one should not be too—prudent.'

'Permit me, Madame! Prudence may be exercised in two ways, especially in such a case. I have not only to watch that my father may comply—at the proper time—with the laws of the Church, but I must also take care not to inflict upon him one pain more than he already suffers.'

'Then do I understand you to mean, Emma, that you will wait to call a priest until your father has lost consciousness?'

'I might resent this interference, Madame, were it not that I know you are really concerned. However disagreeable your questions may be, I will answer them by assuring you finally that I shall not hesitate a single moment to call a priest when my father asks for one.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Madame Blanchet. 'It is a bitter and dangerous thing to temporise thus with Almighty God. Emma, I beseech you—'

But Emma, placing her finger on her lips to ensure silence, hurried into her own apartments, and softly closed the door behind her. Madame Blanchet returned to the country without seeing her again.

The first of September came, and with it Madame Blanchet. She went to see Emma at once.

'How is your father?' she asked.

'Just now very weak.' And, reading the question in her neighbour's eyes, she added: 'He will rally again, the doctors say so. And then I will send for the priest.'

'Whether he asks for him or not?'

'Whether he asks or not.'

Madame Blanchet went away, praying that the old man might indeed rally before the end. That night it came.

The next day, after all the funeral arrangements had been made, Emma knocked at Madame Blanchet's door. That lady had gone once or twice to her apartments, but had not been admitted. She thought it strange, but knew that many persons prefer to be alone in the first hours of their grief. Her heart was troubled: she feared the sick man had died without the priest.

Dry-eyed and pallid, Emma stood in the doorway. Madame Blanchet took both her hands and drew her inside. Blinded as a statue, she seated herself by a table, refusing the easy-chair which Madame Blanchet offered.

'Madame,' she said, 'they have refused to put my father in consecrated ground. They will not let him lie beside my mother.'

'He did not have the priest, then?'

'No, he did not receive the last Sacraments. It was entirely my fault. Yesterday I told you a lie, in order to be rid of what I called your importunities. I said the doctors had told me he would rally. It was a falsehood: they had said nothing of the kind. Last night he had a severe choking spell. I felt that he was about to die. As he was recovering, speechless and agonising, he looked at me with imploring eyes. I knew what he wanted to ask. "Father," I whispered, "shall I send for the priest?" In those strained, beseeching eyes I read the answer to my question. I rang the bell, a servant came; I bade her run as fast as she could for a priest and doctor, telling her to summon the priest first. I held my father in my arms, his terrified eyes alternating between me and the door. I shall never forget that imploring look, never! As the poor head sank lower and lower on my shoulder, I prayed aloud. And then—the door opened, the doctor hurried in, the priest behind him. But it was too late—too late—my poor father was gone!'

She arose, walked nervously up and down the room, pausing at length in front of Madame Blanchet.

'And now they will not let him lie in consecrated ground!' she cried out hysterically, clasping her hands high above her head in the agony of her sorrow. 'He may not repose beside my mother; he will be alone, all alone! And it is my fault, my fault! But it is just Madame—it is just! It is the law of the Church—that Church which I have ridiculed, but which I now admire! It is the law, and the law must be obeyed. It is just, Madame; but, oh, how sad, how sad! And I—what will happen to me?'