A Night at the Hospice of St. Bernard

On we climbed (writes the late Frances E. Wiliard in 'Glimpses of Fifty Years Ago'), while Mr. Smith impelled our flagging footsteps by an explosive recitation of Longfellow's 'Excelsior,' the scene of which is here. Around a sharp, rocky bend, up an ascent as steep as a house roof, past an overhanging precipice, I went, leaving the gentleman behind me in the enthusiasm of the approach, and then the gray, solemn, friendly walls of the great Hospice, which had seemed to me as dim and distant as the moon's caverns, rose before me outlined upon the placid evening sky.

I stopped and listened eagerly as I approached its open door—no sound but the gurgle of a distant brook; no living object but two great St. Bernard dogs seated upon the broad, dark steps of stone.

A Gentleman

may be defined as a being always wisely and benignantly equal to the occasion. Such a character appeared upon the scene in the person of 'Reverend Besse,' the 'Hospitable Father' and chief of the establishment.

Our party in committee of the whole (and no 'minority report') voted him the most delightful man we ever saw. All that is French in manner, united to all that is English in sturdiness of character, all that is winning in Italian tones, united to a German's ideality, a Yankee's keenness of perception, a Scotchman's heartiness, and an Irishman's wit, these qualities seemed blended in our 'nonesuch' of a host, and fused into harmony by the fire of a brother's love toward man and a saint's fidelity to God. Young, fair, blue-eyed, he stood among our chattering group like one who, from a region of perpetual calm, dispenses radiant smiles and overflowing bounty.

So Quick was His Discernment,

and so sagacious was his decision, that almost without a question he assigned us, in detachments correctly arranged, to fitting domiciles, made each one feel that he or she had been especially expected and prepared for, and within five minutes had so won his way into the innermost recess of everybody's heart; that Mr. Jones expressed in his own idiomatic way the sense of fifty guests when he declared: 'To such a man as that even the Little Corporal might well have doffed his old chapeau.' Who shall do justice to the dinner at that L-shaped table, where the Father sat at the head and said grace, beaming upon his great cosmopolitan family with that young face, so honest, gentle, and brave?

Then came the long evening around the huge and glowing hearth-fire. How soon we felt 'acquaint'; how fast we talked in French or German, minding little how the moods and tenses went askew so that we got and gave ideas.

The Father turned from side to side answering with solicitous attention every question that we asked, so that a mosaic of his chief replies would read something like this:

'Mademoiselle asks the indications of the thermometer this August evening? I learn the mercury stands already at 45 degrees Fahrenheit, and the boundary-line of Italy is but five minutes distant. Here, Brother Jean, please provide the beds of all our guests with warming-pans.'

'Yes, lady, our Hospice was founded nine hundred years ago by Count Bernard of Savoy, who devoted 40 years of his life to entertaining and protecting, as we still try to do, the many travellers who annually pass through these mountains between Switzerland and Italy. About 20,000 were cared for each year in olden times, without the smallest charge being made to rich or poor. Now we have not so many, the facilities for travel having so greatly improved. But a great number come over the pass who are out looking for work, and there are also many beggars. These we limit to three days' entertainment. We would gladly keep them longer, but cannot. Our dogs are a cross between Newfoundland and Pyrenean.

In Winter.

travellers are obliged to wait at a place of refuge we have provided at some distance from these buildings, which is on the very top of the pass, until we send out a man and dog, with refreshments fastened to the neck of the dog, who never once loses his way, though the distance is long. The snow is often 30 feet deep, and the only guide the man has is the banner-like tail of the dog waving through the storm.

'The monks always go out in the most dangerous weather. I lead them at such times. They are not obliged to go—we make it perfectly voluntary.'

Here Kate broke in with an important question: 'How do you occupy your time in summer?' 'Oh, mademoiselle, we study and teach—we had 50 students last season.' 'What do you teach?' 'All that a priest ought to know—theology, philosophy, the laws of the Church. We know contemporaneous events, except politics (!) which we do not read.' 'What is your age?' here chimed in the practical Jones. 'Monsieur, I am thirty-one.' ('But he does not look a day older than twenty-three,' whispered practical Sophie, and we all nodded our energetic acquiescence in her figures.) 'How long have you been here?' 'Eleven years, and I remain in perfect health. My predecessors in the office could not endure this high altitude—three of them left in a period of four years.' 'Why are you here?' persisted Jones. The scene was worthy of a painter—that shrewd Yankee, whose very figure was a walking interrogation point, and that graceful, urbane monk, in his long cassock, as leaning in his easy chair and looking forward and a little upward, he answered with a slow melodious emphasis, 'Brother, it is my calling, that is all.' So simple was his nature, that to have heard 'a call' from God and not obeyed it would have seemed to him only less monstrous than not to have heard any call at all! At early dawn we were awakened by men's voices in a solemn chant, led by the Hospitable Father—and never did religion seem more sacred and attractive than while we listened as through the chapel door came the words of the 'Te Deum,' consecrated by centuries of Christian song.

Thrones Without Tenants

'It is a privilege,' wrote Disraeli, a good many years ago, "to live in this age of rapid and brilliant events. It is one of infinite romance. Thrones tumble down and crowns are offered like a fairy tale'; and one is reminded by the fact that Norway has after some difficulty secured a king, that our own generation is no whit behind its predecessors in this feature of romance.

When Disraeli wrote these words it was the crown of Greece that was going a-begging. Greece was thoroughly sick of Otho and his pampered Bavarians, and determined to have a King who understood at least the elements of fair government. Otho was dismissed, and the choice of his successor fell on Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, to whom the crown was offered. But the three protecting Powers, England, France, and Russia, had bound themselves not to allow anyone connected with their ruling families to become King of Greece, and the Prince was thus obliged to decline the alluring bait. The Greeks then transferred

Their Offer of Sovereignty

to Lord Stanley, son of the great statesman and brother of the Earl of to-day. 'It is a dazzling adventure for the house of Stanley,' wrote Disraeli at the time, 'but they are not an imaginative race, and I fancy they will prefer Knowsley to the Parthenon, and Lancashire to the Attic Plains. . . I think he ought to take the crown, but he will not. Had I his youth I would not hesitate, even with the earldom in the distance.' But the young lord refused to be tempted; and after further refusals a King was found for Greece in Prince William of Schleswig-Holstein, second son of the King of Denmark, who as King George I. is reigning to-day. A generation earlier still the Grecian throne was refused by Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, father of the present King of Belgium.

When Isabella II. was driven from the throne of Spain it was almost literally hawked round Europe in search of a Prince willing to sit on it. It was offered first to one scion of Royalty and then to another—only to be declined by all. Its offer to Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen was the cause of the terrible war between France and Prussia; and it was only when Amadeus, second son of the King of Italy, was approached that an occupant was at last found, in 1870. Amadeus, however, found the crown too burdensome for his tastes; and he resigned it thankfully after having worn it for three years, when it was accepted by Alfonso XII., the young son of the exiled Isabella. In 1866, when Prince Cuza, a man of odious character, was forced to abandon the throne of Roumania, it was with the utmost difficulty that

A Successor was Found.

Prince Jerome, who had an eye to that much more valuable prize, the crown of France, would not even look at it, in spite of the pleading and pressure of his exalted relatives; other polite but decided refusals followed, until it began to seem probable that the crown would never get a head to wear it. At last, however, Prince Charles of Hohenzollern wavered and yielded, and was proclaimed Hospodar of Roumania in April, 1866.