

Marcel : An Hotel-Child

By Lena Milman

I

I HAD arrived in Venice, after a long journey, and, with a confused impression of lapping water, of shimmering mosaic, and one, far more distinct, of discontent with the room allotted me, had gone early to bed. My window looked upon a court with a well in the middle, and, as I had feared, the drawing of water aroused me betimes, so that it was but seven o'clock when, exasperated by the rattle of the chain which seemed suddenly to have grown louder than ever, I got up and went to the window. The clatter was accounted for by the inadequate strength that drew the handle to and fro. Surrounded by a group of Venetian women, each with twin copper pails slung over her shoulder, a little boy, evidently a *forestier*, was pulling with might and main, his foot set against the side of the well, his lips tightly pressed together. One of the onlookers good-naturedly laid her brown hand over his little fair one as though to help him, but : "No, no," he cried, "I can do it quite well myself," and, although the words were strange to the listeners, the redoubled vigour of his attitude, and the little frown, just visible under the brim of his hat, showed him impatient of aid. It was a pretty scene, and I watched until

all the pails were filled, and the little lad could let go the handle which had left red traces upon his palm.

Taking off his hat, he leaned for a moment against the wall, and I was conscious of an Englishman's innate contempt for a picturesque 'boy, as I looked at the graceful little figure, whose lines even the loose sailor's suit sufficed not altogether to disguise, and at the fair hair that waved upon the child's forehead. Still there was no lack of manliness in the boy's bearing, and he bounded into the house in a way which dispelled much of my prejudice.

After breakfast, I took a book into the hotel-garden, and was fortunate enough to find one of the recesses overlooking the canal empty, so that, in the intervals of my desultory reading, I could look towards *San Giorgio* and watch the gondolas go by. The garden was full of roses—pink, and white, and yellow—and, twining in and out of the stone balustrade, they shed their petals into the water. There was just breeze enough stirring to make the gondolas at the *traghetto* sway gently, and to flutter the yellow hat-ribbons of two gondoliers whose craft lay just below me. There was something about that gondola which attracted attention. By the brilliant velvet carpet, by the embroidered flounces of the awning, it seemed to struggle against the sombreness of its body, and, feeling it to be as thoroughly "bad form" as a pink-lined brougham, I was glad to notice that the stars and stripes floated at the bows, and not my national ensign. Presently, at a cry of "*Poppe!*" from the hotel, the two gondoliers sprang up, and, deftly turning, brought their boat to the water-steps, where a gaily-attired lady, and a man, whose yachting-cap but ill became him, stood waiting. There was just the length of the boat between us, so that, as they took their seats, I could hear the man say hurriedly: "Don't take the child to-day," and the woman, with

with a little pout, answer : " I had promised that he should come, but, if he bores you . . . " and, just then, my little friend of the morning appeared on the top step. He was evidently in the highest spirits, and I was amused to see that he wore the yellow scarf and sash of a gondolier. He had just leapt eagerly into the boat, when the lady said, in a high-pitched American voice : " We can't take you to-day, Marcel ; we shall not be back until too late, so you must stay and amuse yourself in the hotel." I cannot bear to see a child disappointed, still less can I bear to see a child take disappointment meekly, as this child did. It is well for men, for women, to school themselves never to hope where they wish, but in children such power of self-repression argues a precocity of pain. Poor Marcel ! I saw how his face fell, I even saw him glance ruefully down at the fluttering fringes of his sash, but all he did was to go silently up to his mother, stoop down to kiss her, and leap out of the boat again to watch it out of sight, with tears in his eyes. I detest hotel-children, but this one so attracted me, that, when at luncheon, I saw him preparing to eat a little lonely meal at the table next to mine, I invited him to sit with me, and even told him how sorry I had been for his disappointment.

" I was sitting in the garden and saw the start," I explained.

" It was Monsieur's fault," said the child ; " he is often like that. Mother always lets me go with her, but mother's friends always want her all to themselves."

He spoke in a tone so matter-of-fact, that I thought that it must be forced and glanced uneasily at him, fearing lest I should discern some look of precocious sarcasm ; but the child's eyes were innocent of mirth, and all his attention seemed devoted to the tangled skein of macaroni before him, which he was endeavouring to wind into his mouth, Italian-fashion,

" I see

"I see that you are quite an old Italian," I said, pointing my fork at his plate. "I still chop my macaroni into inches, and even then I find it unmanageable."

"Mother and I have been in Europe ever since I can remember, but generally we are at Nice; it depends on mother's friends. I like Venice, but I have no one to play with."

I wondered at this, for the hotel seemed swarming with English-speaking girls and boys. But my new friend gave me no time for thought, as, with a little sigh of relief expressive of difficulty overcome, he laid his fork down upon his empty plate, and, evidently glad of a listener, told me of the English tutor who had given him lessons at Nice, not only in Latin and Greek, but also in cricket; of how his mother sometimes talked of putting him to school in England; of how Baldassare, the gondolier, had begun to teach him to row; and he showed me a little white blister on the palm of his hand, which testified to his exertions of the day before.

"Which way did you go?" I inquired.

"Just beyond the Giudecca. But we couldn't go far, as Monsieur wanted the gondola after dinner again."

"Is Monsieur a Frenchman?" I asked.

"Yes," was the laconic answer, from which I gathered that Marcel thought Monsieur unworthy of further remark.

I had feared that, after luncheon, the child might hang heavy on hand, but, no! he said: "Thank you for letting me sit with you!" and disappeared by the lift.

I was sitting smoking in the cabin-like hall, when, on an opposite sofa, I recognised a Mrs. Campbell, who had been my fellow-sojourner at Territet six months before, and crossed over to speak to her. Presently we were deep in memories of Geneva, which she interrupted to say: "I thought I saw you at luncheon with Marcel Van Lunn."

"I did

“I did not so much as know the child’s name, but I felt sorry for him, seeing him alone, and invited him to sit at my table. Who is he?”

Mrs. Campbell desired nothing better than to impart information :

“Poor child ! I too am sorry for him. But, though I am often in the same hotel, I dare not take much notice of him, on account of his impossible mother. I have to be careful on account of Félise.” (This was Mrs. Campbell’s stolid daughter.)

Before ten minutes were passed, I was fully informed as to Mrs. Van Lunn’s utter impossibility from the point of view of society. Monsieur—his name was Casimir Portel—was not her first travelling companion ; others might succeed him. Worse still, such was her notoriety on the Riviera, that she was known as “Sally Lunn !” I cared not at all, as far as Mrs. Van Lunn was concerned, but, as I listened to the sordid story, I saw again the pathetic profile of Marcel, and felt gloomily conscious of my impotence to avert the misery which I saw threaten.

That afternoon I wandered into the Piazza, and, as I sipped my coffee, espied at a table, not far off, Marcel, his mother, and Monsieur. The child seemed happy enough eating an ice, and, his back being turned to me, I had the better opportunity for studying his mother. She must have seen five-and-thirty summers, but, by much artifice, she had knocked off some ten of them to the superficial observer.

“Pretty ?” I hesitated ere I answered the self-imposed question. “Yes ! decidedly pretty, but more remarkably well-dressed.” The face, framed in wavy bronze hair, was irregular, but the soft skin, the very red lips, and bright eyes, would doubtless have made most men forgive the little blunt nose and the square chin, which, to women, would have seemed the most remarkable features.

Monsieur

Monsieur was far less attractive. He was tilting his chair back, so that I had a full view of him, from his low-crowned sailor-hat to his high-heeled boots ; and I noticed how he looked defiantly round, in a way which rather challenged attention from the passers-by to his fair companion than made it appear impertinent. He had small eyes and a mouth of almost African coarseness, which last he was at no pains to conceal, for, as he looked round at the company, he twisted first one side of his moustache and then the other.

"*Dépêche toi donc,*" I heard him say to Marcel, who seemed trying to make the delight of the ice as lasting as possible, by consuming it in almost imperceptible mouthfuls. "*Nous t'attendons déjà depuis une demi-heure,*" and he rapped impatiently upon the tray for the waiter, who was just then giving me my change.

During the next few days, my time was so taken up with sight-seeing, that I saw no more of Marcel, except at meals and from a distance. But, returning one day past San Moïse, I espied the painted chalice and waving red over the door, which announce Exposition. I am not a Catholic, but the Devotion of the Forty Hours so strongly appeals to me, that I pushed aside the buff curtain and went in. The church is architecturally one of the most contemptible in Venice, but riotous Rococo is admirably adapted for the display of festal crimson and gold, and that afternoon the impression was to me altogether delightful. The altar, agleam with lights, the faithful kneeling here and there in twos and threes or genuflecting as they passed to and fro, the silence within, made the more conspicuous by contrast with the noise of the *calle* without, the church, a palatial Presence-chamber, in which I gladly lingered. I was still standing just inside when, my eyes becoming more accustomed to the dim light, I recognised a little kneeling figure not far off as Marcel's. I was surprised, I confess,
but

but the child's praying made the place more solemn than ever. So solemn, indeed, that I felt an intruder, and slipped out into the air again. I was crossing the bridge, when I heard a light foot-fall and Marcel's voice greeted me. I said nothing about having seen him in church, but he began of his own accord.

"Don't tell Monsieur that you saw me in San Moïse. I don't mind mother's knowing, but Monsieur is what they call a Liberal, and so he always laughs at me for going to church."

The sarcasm of the deduction was quite lost upon the child, and, since I was not acquainted with Monsieur, I explained that there was no fear of my telling tales.

I intended going to Torcello next day, and it struck me that the child might enjoy a day on the lagoons, so I invited him to come too. He accepted at once, evidently in no fear that any one else should want his company. "May I bring my oar?" he asked. Any excuse for loitering on the lagoons being welcome, I gladly consented, and accordingly at eleven o'clock next morning, Marcel and I set off.

He had put on his gondolier's dress, and I thought that Mrs. Van Lunn, at her *entresol* window, looked quite proud of her son as he waved his hand to her.

"This is Mr. Rivers," shouted Marcel, rather to my confusion, but I took off my hat, the lady bowed graciously, and I felt that I had only myself to thank for the acquaintance of Mrs. Van Lunn.

I am an old Venetian, but the delights of the place never pall, and now, as I lay back upon the cushions, the eager child's face beside me was an added pleasure as he told me how often he had longed to go to Torcello, and how his mother's dislike to long excursions ("They tire her so," he explained), had always prevented his going.

The

The contrast between sun and shade is never more marked than at Venice, when, from the gloom of narrow canals, the gondola shoots out on to the lagoon. That day there was not enough wind to ruffle the surface of the water, which was as smooth as the sky, so that the islands seemed hanging in mid-air, and the velvet folds of the distant Alps fell immediately into the sea. Fishing-boats with tawny sails floated by, bearing sacred symbols as in solemn procession ; here and there in the shallows, brown-limbed boys waded after shell-fish.

To my joy, my companion spoke but little until we neared San Francesco in Deserto, where I had planned lunching ; with its associations, its stone-pine, its cypresses, its meadow, and its monastery, no island of the lagoons has for me a charm like this one, and, while the gondoliers were getting luncheon ready upon a daisy-strewn bank under the cypress shade, I took Marcel to see the cloisters and the chapel. The brother who admitted us was delighted with the child's reverence and interest : "*Cattolico!*" he said ; and I saw no reason to distress him by contradiction.

As we ate our luncheon, I told Marcel the story of St. Francis's famous sermon to the birds, and, appropriately enough, the larks sang over our heads, while the child, lying full length among the flowers, sought them in the blue.

"Last time I listened to the larks," he said, "I was in England. Mother had a little house near Ascot, and I never enjoyed myself so much, for I had her all to myself all day long. We did not know any of the people who lived round there."

He paused a moment, and then, as if impelled to speak of what had long been in his thoughts, he said, still looking up at the sky :

"Why is it, I wonder, that Félice Campbell is no longer allowed to play with me ? Mother says that it is because I'm an
American,

American, and so Mrs. Campbell is afraid lest Félise should grow to talk like me. Mother says that I ought to be proud of being an American, and so I am ; but I should like some one to play with all the same. Besides, I don't think that mother can have guessed the right reason, for there were some very noisy American children in the hotel last week, and you must have seen Félise romping with them all day long. So what do you think is the real reason, Mr. Rivers ? ” and here the speaker rolled over on the grass and faced me.

It was morally impossible for me to tell the truth, it was mentally impossible for me to invent an answer then and there, while Marcel's trusting blue eyes were fixed upon mine, so I evaded the question by throwing a stone into the water and saying :

“Do let us talk of something more interesting than Mrs. Campbell's reason or unreason. Tell me about your life at Ascot ? Had you no friends of your own there ? ”

“Yes ! I had one great friend : Father Simeon. He is one of the fathers at the convent, which was the next house to ours ; and I used to go to him every day for Latin. That was how I grew to wish to be a Catholic, for Father Simeon played the organ at Mass and Benediction, and he used often to let me sit up in the gallery with him. Mother had given permission for me to be ‘received,’ when, one day, Monsieur came down and heard of it. He made a dreadful fuss, insisted upon my lessons being stopped, and, when Father Simeon called to inquire after me, treated him so rudely that he never came back. I think, though, that he wrote me a letter, for I noticed how Monsieur walked down the drive to meet the postman for some time after, until, one day, I saw him slip a letter into his pocket and, though I cannot be sure, I think that I recognised the convent note-paper. Soon after we left for Nice, and I went to mother and asked whether

whether I might write to Father Simeon. She said that I might do so, and undertook to post the letter herself. I only wrote a few lines to say how sorry I was not to see him again, and that I hoped that some day he would write to me ; but, although I was careful to give him the address, he has never written, or, if he has, the letter must have been lost. When I am a man I shall be a Catholic and take mother to church with me. She will not need Monsieur for an escort then, will she ? When shall I be old enough to take care of mother, Mr. Rivers ? I was ten last birthday."

"Oh, you will want to be a good many years older and wiser !" I said ; "and you must learn to take care of yourself first, and not come out for an excursion, as I see that you have done to-day, with no great-coat to put on when it turns chilly !"

"May I row now ?" asked Marcel, eagerly, as, from below the great cross at the landing-stage, we pushed off for Torcello, and, taking my consent for granted, he sprang up even as he spoke, and bade the gondolier take his oar out of the rest. The man was willing enough to sit idly down opposite me and watch his little substitute. We made the slower progress, and occasionally the child's oar slipped ; but he was skilful enough on the whole, and the rhythmic sway of the little figure, all within my line of sight, so soothed me, that I was between sleeping and waking, until roused by Marcel's throwing himself panting down at my side. He looked very much over-heated, I thought, and I insisted upon his putting on one of the wraps which I had with me.

"Monsieur is always so impatient when I row," said Marcel, as soon as he had recovered his breath. "I have no sooner got into the swing than he bids me stop."

"Perhaps he is more careful of you than I have been !" I suggested.

But

But "Oh, no! It's not that!" was the answer in tones so positive as to admit of no contradiction.

Presently the child went on: "Sometimes I think that the reason people don't care about me has to do with Monsieur. I remember that when mother and I were together at Nice last year, people were very kind to me, until Monsieur arrived, but after that I had no more invitations, and some even pretended not to see me when they met me in the street. I shouldn't have minded so much for myself, but I could see that mother noticed it. Oh! how I wish I were a man!"

It was but a few days later that I received news recalling me to England, and I was quite touched at the regret Marcel expressed. I gathered from the poor child that henceforward he would have once more to choose between solitude and making an unwelcome third with his mother and Monsieur, of whom the latter was at no pains to conceal his impatience of Marcel's company even at meals. The child begged me to let him come to see me off, and, on the way to the station, asked me for my card, and whether he might write to me. I had grown really fond of him, and gladly consented.

"We are going south in the spring," he said, as he stood on the platform, "but I will send you our address. Do go on being my friend, Mr. Rivers!"

That was the last sentence I heard as the train moved off, and I had no time to reply.

II

On my return to England, I did not forget to write to Marcel, but before hearing from him in answer, I unexpectedly succeeded, by the death of a distant relation, to a small estate in the West Indies,

Indies, and was obliged to go out there without delay. I was abroad for over twelve months, during which time I had but little leisure and a sharp attack of fever, which two circumstances, combined with the lack of a fixed address, led me to postpone writing to my little friend. When at length I returned home, I felt rather remorseful at finding among the letters awaiting me two or three directed in a childish hand, which I recognised as Marcel's. They were as little informing as children's letters are wont to be, and the last one bearing a date some six months old expressed disappointment at my long silence, and gave me an address which would find the writer but for the next few weeks. The time had so long passed by, that it had been unavailing for me to write, and I felt regretfully how likely it was that I should never see Marcel again.

The following spring, however, I set off as usual for Italy, and one wet day at Naples, was idly turning over the leaves of the hotel visitors' book, when, among recent entries, I read the following :

Mrs. Hyman F. Van Lunn,
Marcel Van Lunn, U.S.A.

I was standing in the *bureau* of the hotel at the time, so I inquired of the clerk whether he knew what had been the Van Lunn's destination. At first it seemed as though the man had no recollection of them at all. Certainly no address had been left for possible letters, but the landlord, happening to come in and over-hearing my inquiries, reminded the clerk of Marcel, of whom he spoke as "*le petit du numéro soixante-dix qui jouait toujours de la mandoline tout seul dans sa chambre.*" So I learned that Mrs. Van Lunn and her son had spent a fortnight at Naples, and had then gone by steamer to Palermo. I hardly know how much a wish to see Marcel had to do with it, but I fancy that the child must have

have excited more interest in me than I admitted to myself ; for certainly a languid wish to see Sicily suddenly toughened to a determination. The rain had ceased, and the Mediterranean glittered alluringly in the pale afternoon sun. There seemed nothing to detain me in Naples. A steamer was to start that very evening, and, taking a berth, I started for Palermo. There is practically but one hotel, so I was not surprised to read Marcel's name on the register as, among a crowd of other travellers, I stood awaiting the landlord's pleasure in the hall ; nor did I fail to notice that, whereas Mrs. Van Lunn had a *suite au premier*, the number of her son's room was in three figures.

I had half expected to see him at luncheon-time, but not doing so, I made my way to his room, which was in the same passage as mine, but on the opposite side. As I drew near the door, I heard the tremolo of a mandoline within. It was Marcel, and he was singing "Carmela" in such Neapolitan as he could command :

Sleep on, Carmela !

Sweeter far than living 'tis to dream.

I knocked ; the singer stopped and came to open. I received a warm welcome.

"I was afraid that I should never see you again, Mr. Rivers," said Marcel, as, his hand on my arm, he led me to a chair next the window ; "and, ever since I said good-bye at Venice, I seem to have been collecting things to tell you ! You must have heard me singing 'Carmela.' Don't you remember how they used to sing it on the Grand Canal that year ? But I had no mandoline then. Mrs. Campbell gave it to me when she left. She told me that Félise could make nothing of it ! You never had much opinion of Félise, had you, Mr. Rivers ?" and Marcel, laughing merrily

merrily at my gesture expressive of the weariness with which the very mention of Félise filled me, at once changed the subject to one more interesting.

“Have you been to Monreale yet, Mr. Rivers? I have only been once. Mother let me sit on the box the first time she drove out there.” (From this I judged that Mrs. Van Lunn was not alone at Palermo!) “May I go there with you? The terrace is full of flowers now, and the *custode* will let us lunch there. I have never forgotten our luncheon on that island,” and so saying, he pointed to a photograph of San Francesco in Deserto, which was pinned to the wall.

It saddened me, as I looked round, to see evidences of this being the poor child's living-room as well as bedroom. A folding music-desk stood in one corner, while the dressing-table was littered with books and papers. The window looked into the garden, thickly planted with fantastic tropical plants, one great date-palm growing so near that one could all but touch the spiky leaves.

“I think that your room is too near the garden to be quite healthy,” I remarked. “What does your mother say about it?”

“Mother finds the stairs tiring, and she is afraid of lifts,” said the child, colouring. “She has never been up here; her rooms are nearly as far from mine as you remember they were at Venice. I have often asked Salvatore, our courier, to take a room for me close to hers, but he never does.”

Spite of the schoolboy's jacket and trousers which replaced the sailor-suit, Marcel looked little less of a child than he had done at Venice; but I was glad to notice that his head was now quite on a level with my shoulder, and so his fragile appearance might merely result from his having outgrown his strength.

I asked

I asked him to come out with me and show me my way about the town, which he eagerly consented to do.

So it was that, for the next fortnight I saw a great deal of Marcel, and even exchanged a few words with his mother, and a cold bow or two with Monsieur, who, in a suit of tight white flannels, lolled about the hall. My first impression of Marcel, as singularly little changed in the last two years, was much modified. He had grown more serious, and now never referred to his dislike to Monsieur, although I could see that it had in no wise lessened. His eagerness for information showed me that his neglected education was a grief to him, and I had soon made up my mind that, before again bidding him good-bye, I would overcome my reluctance to seek an interview, and approach his mother upon the subject of sending her son to school. Marcel's resolve of being a Catholic was as strong as ever, and the devotion which he paid at the Lady-altar of any church we happened to enter especially struck me. Poor child! It was as though he had a conviction (never confessed even to himself) that he needed a woman's love, such as his own mother refused him, and sought and found it in the Divine Mother of God. Would not a sexless Protestantism have left his childish heart uncomforted? In his room I noticed a little figure of the blue-robed *Immacolata* on her crescent, and I wondered whether the day would come when he would know how unfitted was the portrait of his mother to stand beside it.

One day Marcel told me what he considered delightful tidings. Monsieur was going away on business to Naples, while his mother stayed on at Palermo. This being so, I felt that Marcel stood in no need of my company, and I decided to seize the opportunity of making a tour of the island, returning to Palermo in a fortnight's time, and postponing until then the interview with Mrs. Van Lunn on her son's behalf. Marcel was so elated at Monsieur's departure

departure that he hardly expressed regret at mine, since I promised to return so soon. He would like to write to me though, he said, but, as I was travelling chiefly by sea, I could only give him the name of the hotel at Taormina, at which I intended spending the last few days of my fortnight.

Marcel was usually so methodical that I wondered at finding no letter awaiting me, nor did I receive any during my four days' sojourn at Taormina. Again, at the station at Palermo, there was no Marcel, although at parting he had eagerly volunteered to meet me, and although I had not failed to send a post-card giving the time of my arrival. Could it be that Mrs. Van Lunn had already gone? I inquired of the landlord as soon as I reached the hotel. "He is here!" was the answer, "he has been ill ever since you went away," and I noticed how Signor Tiziano lowered his voice as a group of visitors went by.

"But what is the matter?" I asked impatiently.

"Oh, a feverish attack; but I must beg of you, sir, to say nothing about it. It will do me so much harm if it is known that there is any sickness in the house. But here comes the English doctor!"

I gladly left Signor Tiziano's side to inquire of the doctor after his little patient.

He looked very grave. "It's a serious case," he said, as I followed him out of the hotel; "Malarial fever, caught from sleeping in one of the rooms looking on the garden. At this season they are most unhealthy, but Tiziano always gives them when no particular inquiries are made, as seems to have been the case in this instance. The child seems strangely lacking in recuperative force, but to-day there is a decided improvement. He has often asked for you, but, as I hope he may sleep, I must beg of you to wait until to-morrow to see him. Can you tell me, by
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the way, whether the child is a Catholic? The mother denies it, but certainly, in his delirium, he would constantly repeat passages of the Rosary."

I gave what information I could about Marcel's religion. "He is far too much alone," I added, "his is not a morbid temperament though a sensitive one, but his life has been too empty of the amusements natural to his age."

At ten o'clock next morning the doctor knocked at my door: "Will you come to see the child now?" he said; and I followed him.

I was prepared for a great change in Marcel, but not for so great a one as I found. His curls had been shorn, so that the little thin face was outlined sharply upon the pillow. Too weak to greet me except by a little smile, I noticed how the hand that lay upon the sheet moved restlessly, and I took hold of it to find the fingers scarcely able to return the slightest pressure.

I sat down beside him. "I am so grieved to find you like this," I said; "now, I shall not leave you until you have grown quite strong again." The room struck me as sadder than sick rooms are wont to be. All Marcel's little belongings were heaped together in one corner, and covered with a sheet, through which I could trace the gourd-like outline of his mandoline. The photographs and music had been stripped from the walls, and all that was left was the crucifix over his head, from behind which a plaited palm, which he had jealously guarded, had been ruthlessly torn. On the table beside him, among an array of medicine bottles, soared the *Immacolata*. His mother's portrait lay on the bed within reach of his hand. The palm-leaves without, swayed by the sirocco, seemed to wave menaces. I sat there for some time stroking the hand that lay so passively in mine, and

was glad to see that, far from exciting, my presence seemed to soothe the invalid, so that he soon fell asleep. I was so afraid of moving, lest I should awake him, that I did not get up when Mrs. Van Lunn came in. Apparently, she had come on my account rather than her child's, for, almost without glancing at him, she handed me a visiting-card, on which I read the words: "Will you come to see me this afternoon? Room 15." It was no time for ceremony so I merely bowed my head in assent, and she hurried away.

Directly after luncheon, I bade a waiter announce me to Mrs. Van Lunn, whom, to my surprise, I found in a room encumbered with luggage. She wasted a little time in preliminary apologies for the untidiness of her *salon*, and then said that she ventured to ask me to do her a service, which she had the less hesitation in asking, as she had noticed the kind interest which I took in Marcel, of whom she spoke as her "dear child."

Shortly, apart from many specious excuses, she proposed leaving her only child, whom she knew to be, at least, seriously ill, in the care of a stranger. She had received a telegram, she said, summoning her to Naples on business, and go she must, by the evening steamer. She had observed my kind feeling for Marcel, and she hoped that, if I were staying on at Palermo, I would look in occasionally, and see that he was receiving proper attention. She said that the child was so fond of me that she felt quite happy about leaving him, and she had left a cheque with Signor Tiziano.

I was so amazed at the woman's effrontery that I found myself stammering consent in disjointed sentences, and not doing what, all the while, I felt to be my duty, namely, to urge her to delay her start at least for a few days, lest the sorrow for her departure should

should throw the child back again. I made the litter of packing in the room an excuse for hastily taking my leave, merely begging her not to omit to assure Marcel that I would stay with him until she returned, which she said she would certainly do within a week or two.

I happened to be sitting, writing on my knee beside Marcel's bed, when his mother came to tell him she was going away, but :

"Do not let me disturb you," she said, "I can only stay a minute."

I could see by the way his countenance changed that her travelling dress had partly prepared Marcel for the announcement she came to make. She leant over to kiss him, "Marcel," she said, "I am obliged to go away for a few days ; mind that you do all that Mr. Rivers bids you, and next week I shall hope to find you almost yourself again. The doctor tells me that you are getting on famously."

Marcel would have suffered anything at his mother's hands without a murmur, and, though I saw his lips tremble, he merely whispered :

"Good-bye, mother !" and Mrs. Van Lunn's red lips brushed her son's forehead, her tightly gloved hand was laid but for a moment in mine, before, with a tinkle of the little gold lucky-bell at her wrist, she went her way. I sat down to my writing again, and, when next I looked up, Marcel's eyes were brimming.

"Be a good, brave boy !" I said, laying my hand on his, which were tightly clasped together, and he smiled through his tears as he said : "After all it is Monsieur's fault, mother did not want to leave me."

Next morning I inquired anxiously of the nursing-sister how he had slept, and was relieved at her fairly good report. Once,
indeed

indeed she told me that he had started from his pillow crying : " I hate him, I hate him," and the words were so unlike her gentle little patient that she had feared a return of fever, but none such had ensued. I knew only too well to whom these words referred, and I knew too that this hatred had been begotten of love, as such hates are.

The convalescence was so slow that the doctor recommended a move to the sunny side of the house. Signor Tiziano was loth to allow it. He said that if it once got about that there was sickness in the house, his season was spoilt ; but I insisted, and at last he consented on condition that the move was made under his personal supervision and after dark. Accordingly the room was made ready and, at dead of night, Signor Tiziano in his stockinged feet held the light before me as I carried Marcel through the passages. Spite of the many blankets in which he was wrapped, I was quite shocked at the lightness of my burden. As events proved, we were only too successful in effecting the change noiselessly.

The child's strength was gradually returning, and he had even walked twice up and down the room supporting himself by chairs and tables, when one day I looked into his room on my way out. The sister with her finger on her lip, pointed to where the little invalid lay calmly asleep upon a sofa. Softly I closed the door behind me, but hardly had I done so, when it appears that the sister thought of something she required from the chemist's, and, running after me, stopped me a few minutes in the hall. What happened in the interval I learned later !

The room next to Marcel's had been empty some days, but, as I had passed down the passage, I had noticed a portmanteau at the door and had recognised the initials as belonging to an English family called Ford, whom I had known slightly at
Geneva

Geneva and whom I had grown to know better during my stay at Palermo. Mrs. Ford told me how that morning she and her sister (not knowing that Marcel was next door) fell to discussing Mrs. Vann Lunn, whom they had seen and observed at Nice.

"I could forgive her anything save her neglect of that dear child," said Mrs. Ford; "he is in the hotel now, ill with fever, from which a little care would have preserved him, while she has gone to amuse herself at Naples."

While she was speaking, she heard a soft knock, and almost before she had had time to answer, the door was pushed open with a jerk, and Marcel, supporting himself by the handle, stood before her. Wasted with illness, a feverish flush upon his cheek, he exclaimed: "It is not true! Indeed, indeed, it is not true. Mother stayed here until the doctor said I was nearly all right again, and she did not want to go. It was Monsieur who made her, and she is ever so fond of me and ever so kind, and I love her more than . . ." the poor child's voice failed and Mrs. Ford caught him as he fell. Marcel had fainted.

The nurse came along the passage just then, and met the two terrified ladies carrying the boy back to his room. It was some time ere he recovered consciousness, and, even before the doctor came, I knew the truth: this last effort had overtaxed his feeble stock of strength—he was dying.

I lost no time in telegraphing for his mother and I told Marcel that I had done so, for, although giving no hope of his recovery, the Doctor said that he might last a week.

Poor child! he seemed clinging to life, and the way in which he eagerly looked towards the door when any one came in or even when there were footsteps in the passage, told me for whose coming he chiefly longed. What could I do? Mrs. Van Lunn

was

was possibly hurrying to him, possibly she had gone on beyond Naples and the telegram had not reached her (I have an Englishman's distrust of foreign posts). So I thought as I stood beside the bedside, grieving that, though Marcel looked the more piteous when I left him, I was powerless to give him his heart's desire. Suddenly my eye fell upon the *Immacolata*, who was the more conspicuous that, since the child was beyond human aid, there was little need of medicine bottles. Marcel's own mother had failed him, what of letting him draw nearer to the Mother of God? I laid the blue and white statuette upon the sheet before him and whispered, using the idiom which I knew to be familiar to him, "Would it be any comfort to you if I went to San Giuseppe's, and asked the priest to 'receive' you?"

We had forbidden him to speak and he was very docile, so he merely bowed his head in assent, while an expression of real delight came over the wan little face. I told the nursing-sister in a few words what I intended to do, and she was quite overcome with joy. It had been such a grief to her, she said, when she heard that the child was only at heart a Catholic, and therefore would be denied the last sacraments.

It was still so early that I met the priest in the church, preceded by a tiny server about to celebrate Mass. I formed his congregation in a side-chapel, and followed him into the sacristy, where my Italian but just sufficed to tell him what I needed. I explained how Marcel had been instructed two years ago, had constantly attended Mass and read the books given him by Father Simeon. I told him, too, that the child understood a fair amount of Latin. I was not personally attracted by the good Father. He was evidently of the peasant class and totally uneducated in all but theology. For a moment, my heretic blood rebelled
against

against the idea of the gross, unkempt man having any dealings with the pure little body and soul of Marcel. But, as I talked, a light of real enthusiasm lit up the coarsely-moulded face, so that I lost sight of the man in the priest, and eagerly accepted his offer of coming there and then.

The ceremony was a short one, merely conditional Baptism, and the expression of peace on the little convert's face more than repaid me for the responsibility which I had taken. He was sinking. There was no doubt of that, and it pained me to see how, even now, his eyes were constantly fixed upon the door. Evidently the hope of seeing his mother had not quite died out. The end came even sooner than we had feared. Three days after his "reception" I was sitting beside him, when I saw his lips move and bent down to listen :

"Tell her that I forgive . . ." But the effort to speak even so few words brought on so alarming an attack of faintness that I sent for the priest, who hastened to administer Extreme Unction. The nursing-sister and I were quite overcome with grief, but there was little suffering. Only a few moments of gasping for breath, the hands let go their hold of the *Immacolata*, a look of almost rapture was in his eyes as a little sobbing cry of "Mother!" burst from him, and so startled me that I, too, turned and looked towards the door, expecting to see that Mrs. Van Lunn had indeed come. But, no! and, when again I looked at the little figure in the bed, I saw that all was over.

Was it a vision of the blue-robed, star-crowned Madonna that he had so greeted, or one of Mrs. Van Lunn, in her *Doucet* travelling suit, as he had seen her last, as he had so longed to see her again?

* * * * *

It was about six months after this that, one day in Paris, my
eye,

eye, catching sight of a familiar name among the society paragraphs in *Galignani*, I read the following announcement :

Wedding.—At the American Church of the Ascension, on Thursday, the 10th inst., Lillie, widow of Hyman F. Van Lunn, of Kansas, U.S.A., was married to M. Casimir Portel, of the Villa Paradis, Nice.

So Mrs. Van Lunn was *rangée*. The obstacle had been removed.