



The Love Letters of a Portuguese Nun: Being the Letters Written by Marianna Alcaforado To Noel Bouton De Chamilly, Count of St. Leger (Later, Marquis of Chamilly), in the Year 1668

Marianna Alcaforado

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Alexandre Piedagnel, in his preface to *The Love Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, a reading from which is given in this number, says: "In 1663 it became the policy of Louis XIV. to help Portugal against Spain; this was done indirectly, however; subsidies were secretly furnished, troops levied, and a crowd of volunteers pressed to the front. Between this little army, commanded by Schomberg, and the poor Spanish army which disputed the field, each summer, much marching and counter-marching took place with very small results. There were many skirmishes and encounters, and among them, perhaps, one victory. Who cares about it today? But the curious reader, in search of what may charm him, cannot help saying, as Saint Beuve said: "This was all well enough, since the letters of the Portuguese nun came of it."

This war, which lasted until 1668, and in which Portugal triumphed, is indeed quite forgotten! The Portuguese Letters, on the contrary, have passed through twenty editions, and their great success is still undiminished. This is due above all to the accent of sincerity in the writer. The poor nun of Beja, Marianna Alcaforado, has painted with such fire, with so contagious an emotion, the state of her wounded heart, her helplessness, her fleeting hopes and persisting passion, her endless and cruel disappointments, and her legitimate anger, that we eagerly read and read again these ardent and touching pages, ever fresh, because absolutely true. In 1661 Noel Bouton de Chamilly (afterward Marquis of Chamilly), took service in Portugal.

He was then twenty-five years of age. At the same time a convent of the city of Beja sheltered the Franciscan nun, who belonged to one of the best families of the country. She relates how she saw M. de Chamilly for the first time from a balcony of her convent. He on his part, having been attracted by the charming nun, visited the convent several times and gained the heart of the unfortunate Marianna, who until her last hour tried vainly to curse the brilliant officer whose desertion, so sudden and complete, broke her too confiding heart.

We must read these letters carefully on account of their very simplicity and naive eloquence. What exquisite tenderness, what profound grief! Love, regret: This is the whole book—which will not die, because it is pervaded with the suave perfume of youth, of passion, and sincere tears."

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