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LIFE IN THE CLOISTER; OR, FAITHFUL AND TRUE.

By the Author of "The World and the Cloister,"
&c., &c., &c.

One after another rose before the eyes of the unhappy Lillian and her sister a thousand little acts of parental love and fond indulgence, whilst before them pleaded—ah, would that we could say with dignity—the white-headed father, who was content to sacrifice the years of their youth and maturity for the short span which might yet remain to him of life.

Lillian paced up and down the library; she asked herself, 'Would Christian saint or Spartan hero demand such a sacrifice?' and her keen perception of right and wrong replied with an unhesitating 'No.'

She paused before him in her weary walk. 'My father,' she said, 'I will not forsake you; your Lillian has accomplishments and talents she can place to good account. Fear not—I do not fear—but ask me not to wed for the love of gold.'

'As I expected, Lillian,' he calmly replied;—then turning to his youngest and best-loved daughter, he added, 'and what is your determination, Marion?'

'To give up for the present, for the discharge of a filial duty, the desire which I feel to leave the world—to work for you, live for you, die for you, if needs be, my father; but ask me not, tempt me not, to break this my resolve. Would that I could do your will, and save you from impending ruin—but this I cannot avert.'

'Enough, enough, my children,' said the old man, hastily arising; and waving his hand impatiently, he dashed past them to the solitude of his own chamber. He spent therein two weary hours communing with his own sad thoughts.—He felt convinced that expostulation and entreaty were alike useless; for could he—dared he—drag them to the altar in defiance of all rights, human and divine?'

It was late in the evening ere he could bear to seek their company. They sat alone, silent and sorrowful, in the elegant boudoir in which they had passed so many happy hours.

Perhaps adversity would, after all, be beneficial to that poor worldly heart; he was certainly in a softer mood than was his wont. He approached them both.

'You have sorely grieved me, girls,' he said, 'thus to run counter to my wishes, and that just now when ruin presses heavily upon me; ay, and your beauty too would have placed you high amongst the matrons of our city. But let it be, let it be—we will tread the rough paths of life then, as we have glided down the smooth ones, together; but, alas, alas, my Marion and Lillian, you know not how thorny will be the future which spreads before us.'

CHAPTER IX.—THE SHADY SIDE OF LIFE—IMPORTANT NEWS; STRANGE, IF TRUE.

When will she come back—when will she come back? murmured, in a querulous tone of voice, an aged, imbecile man, as he drew aside the curtain which shaded the first-floor window of a small house in one of the net-work of streets which run between the Walworth Road and Kennington Common, or Park, as it is now termed.

The night was dark and gloomy, black clouds flitted across the starless sky, and a drizzling rain pattered against the window. Archibald Craig moved from the window with a heavy heart; his fortunes, and those of his children, were gloomy as was the November night.

Oh, what a contrast between that poor abode in the small seven-roomed house in the Palmerston Road, and Mr. Craig's former stately abode at Bowden! Two years have passed away;—the break up is spoken of as a thing of the past; Marion and Lillian, the belles of the county in which they lived, are now two poor young ladies, enduring that—what shall we call it—well, that severest of all distress, the distress of the well educated and the gentle born.

Who thinks now of Marion? The poor daily governess, who leaves home early in the morning, in her simple gray merino dress and cloth mantle, to while away the weary, weary day, how weary those alone know who are cooped up the livelong day with high-spirited and sometimes ill-tempered children, and then returns, long after the shades of night have fallen, not even to meet a bright face and sunny smile, but whose task it then is to soothe the querulousness of old age; and when she lays her aching head upon the pillow, before she sleeps she will bedew it with her tears, because she knows not how to eke out her slender pittance. Who cares now for Marion? Who cares now for Lillian? The stately queen-like Lillian, beautiful and accomplished as she is—but she is only the wife of Herbert Leslie the poet-painter.—They married and recked without their host,

when they thought they would do well in the world; things seemed at the fairest merely to entrap them as it were into matrimony; it is the shady side of life with them. Who cares now for Lillian?'

'Vanite dos vanites; et tout est vanite!' Well, but we wander from our point. We are not going to tell you of Lillian just now, but of Marion, the self-devoted, who practises an act of heroic virtue every day and hour of her life.

On, on through blinding sleet and cold gusts of wind, along the open Clapham Road does she thread her way with rapid step. It is a wretched night for that delicate young woman, used as she has been to every luxury, fenced in in her happy girlhood, lest the breeze of heaven should blow too roughly upon her, to tramp along that lone dark road, for it is past nine at night; but, you see, when she left home in the morning there was one shilling in the house; she could not spend it in riding, it would purchase a humble meal at night. O reader, try and realise to yourself the misery of not having a pound in the whole world, and not knowing how to get it, and if you have not been soft-hearted all your life to others, you will surely begin to be so now. On still, a long walk of one hour and a half before you can reach your home. A weary pilgrimage is thine, poor Marion.

Marion had visited the Canley Heath Convent that day. Why was she happy amidst all her sharp sorrow? Why, because Sister Angelle had drawn aside from the boisterous pupils who had accompanied her hither, had spoken words of gentle loving-kindness, had reminded her,—ah, who more likely to do so than holy priest and gentle nun?—whatever the world may say; that surely she was doing the will of God, in staying in the world to support and care for him who, imbecile and helpless, could not help himself; and thus had ended her speech:—

'Remember, my child, your loss of fortune makes no difference to us. When by the death of your father you shall be free, the Novitiate of Namur will be open to you; and the Community of Notre Dame, should you make your vows as a religious, will receive you without a pension.'

'Alas! my good mother, I shall indeed have nothing to bring you now, nothing save a good will, good health, a good education; and ah, I had almost forgotten something else,' she added, smiling archly, and holding up her small white hands. 'You know you have no lay sisters or servants in your institute of Notre Dame, and I shall be able to do lots of work with these little hands of mine.'

'Ah, we shall see, we shall see,' said the Sister Superior, laughing. 'I do not think they look as if they had done much hard coarse work as yet, Marion; perhaps you may be put in the school, you know.'

'Well, then, I can teach French and German, and painting and music, and half-a-dozen other things beside,' said Marion, laughing; 'but I fancy these hands of mine do rather more than you give them credit for. Do you know, dear Sister Superior, they light the fire every morning, sweep the room, and do half-a-dozen other things? only, I of course plead guilty to the vanity of wearing gloves in order to keep them white.'

'Very right, my dear child,' rejoined the Superior; 'you are in the world, and teaching as a governess, your little pupils would soon lose their respect for you, Marion, did they behold you with the red, coarse hands of one who does a servant's hard work.'

This little conversation with the good Sister Superior had sent Marion on her way rejoicing; she must bear the burden of the day and its heats for an infinite period, it was true, but still there was a haven of rest at last. She would go on caring for and helping him to whom she was all the world; and then—yes, then—when her work for him was over, she could bring her trim little bark into the harbor of religion.

It was half-past nine that stormy November night before she reached the house in which she lodged; wet, weary, and fatigued, she ascended the stair case. Her father, now imbecile, and always more or less querulous, had worn himself out with pacing up and down the narrow limits of his little room, imagining to himself a thousand horrors about Marion. He would have it she had been garrotted, or run over in that long dark road; and as his watch and he had long since parted company, had worn out his landlady with inquiries, repeated certainly every ten minutes, as to the time.

'My dear child, you have frightened me out of my wits. What can have detained you so long?' he said, as Marion entered the room.

'I am not much later than usual, papa,' said Marion, forcing a smile, and throwing off her cloak, which was wet through; 'but time hangs heavy on your hands; you have nothing to do, you see, so grew timid and apprehensive about me.'

'Not without a cause, not without a cause,' murmured the old man, with a sigh; 'as to myself, Marion, I read till I can read no longer, and then I amuse myself with sitting at the window and watching my neighbors. How true it is, my dear, that one-half of the world know not how the other half live. I could never have imagined, when I was revelling in luxury at Bowden, that positively genteel people herded together as they do in this very street; for instance, why, my dear, these are only six-roomed houses, and positively there are three families living in one of them opposite: first, the people who own the house—I have ascertained without a doubt that they are located in the lower apartments, or kitchens, to speak properly—then the shabby-genteel people, as we call them, have the parlors, and up-stairs there are those pale, ladylike young women whom we see perpetually embroidering at the windows; and then I set to work reckoning up what the mechanic and his wife, who hold the house, may make by letting the whole of it in furnished rooms, especially if they are furnished like these.'

Marion cast a contemptuous glance around the rooms, mentally calculating for how much she could purchase the sordid furniture it contained.

It was a fair specimen of a third-class London lodging-house, this small suburban residence; for Marion's first-floor room had apologies for curtains, an old settee dignified by the name of a couch, an uneasy, rather than an easy chair, with a tall, straight back and ponderous arms, an old-fashioned piano of the spool class, a dingy, well-worn druggist, four cane chairs with green baze carefully nailed over the worn seats, whilst in the bedroom a piece of wood nailed against the window-sill did duty as a toilet-table. Mrs. Shears, the landlady, had no notion of putting good articles into her lodgers' rooms—no, not she—they were sure to spoil them, she was wont to say; any makeshift did for lodgers. Thus, by charging a good price for the use of her worn-out furniture, and by sundry other peculations, she and her husband managed pretty well to live out of their small house and the two sets of lodgers, and the single gentleman who dwelt therein.

Marion was yet lingering over a warm cup of tea the old gentleman had made for her, when the postman's double knock caused her to hurry to the door.

She heard the man pronounce her name, and hastening down-stairs she received a lady's dainty epistle, also another in a large blue envelope, such as commercial gentlemen generally use. Trembling with agitation she re-entered the room, and first breaking the seal of the tiny little perfumed note, she read as follows:—

'Mrs. Burke is desirous to engage the services of an English lady as daily governess. Her vices of an English lady as daily governess, daughter, recently returned from Canley Convent, informs her that Miss Craig will shortly be disengaged. Mrs. Burke will pay you one hundred pounds a-year, and will require Miss Craig's services five hours daily. She will be glad of an early answer.'

The letter fell from Marion's hands. 'A hundred a-year?' she exclaimed; 'but it is in Ireland, such a way from dear Canley Convent. However, it cannot be helped. O papa, think how delightful to be engaged only for five hours, to have all my long evenings at home, and get just as much again, as I am having now.'

'You have forgotten your other letter, Marion,' said her father; 'but dear me, child, it looks like a lawyer's letter,' he added, placing the letter in her lap.

'Oh, I can't bear to see these large blue letters!' said Marion, pushing it aside. 'I really feel afraid to open it; then turning it over and examining the postmark, she exclaimed—

'Why, it is positively from Manchester; and see, papa, the handwriting is that of dear, good Mr. Gilmour;' then breaking the seal, Marion read as follows:—

'My Dear Marion,—I think it well that you should hear of something which may tend to raise your spirits in this your day of trial; so I will tell you the good news which I have heard about you in a very old manner. I happened to call in at Heywood's, the law-stationer, in the High Street yesterday, and his head clerk let me into a very great secret about yourself. He said he had been engrossing the will of a lady of rank to whom Miss Craig was well known; and that her name was down for a legacy, amongst various bequests to other persons, for no less a sum than two thousand pounds? Now, my dear Marion, this lady cannot possibly be any other than your late most kind friend the Dowager Lady Evelyn. She is both aged and infirm in health; what more likely than that she should have drawn up her will at this very time, and should remember by a bequest one whom she has so nobly assisted in life? I could not get him to confide to me the name of the lady in question; indeed, he seemed half in fear after he had opened his mind, saying, that it would be considered a scandalous breach of confidence; which

would cost him his place were it made known.—Keep up your spirits then, your past and your present forlorn position is well known; and so many things point out Lady Evelyn as being the party alluded to, that I myself have no doubt as to who the angel in human shape is who has determined one day to rob your path of its thorns. She has taken a great interest in you. She is a woman of large fortune, childless, and a widow; so hope on, and keep up your courage.—With kind remembrance to Mr. Craig, I am, dear Marion, your sincere friend,

'JOHN GILMOUR.'

The letter fell from Marion's hands. She was dazed, bewildered; she knew not what to think; she was inclined to be incredulous.

'Would Lady Evelyn even bear me in such kindly remembrance, and yet not cheer my troubled path by telling me that my future, so dark and so uncertain now, had been thus kindly cared for?' was the first question she put to the sanguine old man, who, three short years since, would have held the sum reported to be left to his daughter in Lady Evelyn's will as of very small consequence indeed.

'I do not see that her silence to yourself has anything at all to do in the matter,' urged the old gentleman, somewhat displeased with Marion's incredulity; 'but it is always the way with you. Do you not see that she might fear that this should become public. No person ever liked the dispositions of their will to be made known during their lifetime. Besides, Marion, remember how her ladyship has addressed you.'

'Yes, quite true,' replied Marion; and a bright gleam shot across her features as she replied, 'true, papa, human kindness cannot surpass hers; think with what delicacy she sent me checks for a hundred pounds, when your bankruptcy had taken place; and then later, how we have often profited by her benevolence. Only a few days since, too, remember how she wrote me, saying, she had kept silence so long that she feared lest her own sufferings made her selfish, and neglectful of me. It was very strong language to use;' she continued, after a pause.—

'What if she did seem neglectful of me? what if she really were so? I had surely no right to complain.'

'None whatever,' replied her father; 'but the very familiarity of her intercourse strengthens the idea in which we are led to indulge.'

'Yes,' replied Marion, 'if true; and without some foundation, how should such a story have reached Mr. Gilmour's ears.'

Thus the conversation terminated. And Marion went to bed, reproaching herself that ever and again she found her thoughts reverting to this strange story, thinking how happy she might make the last days of her father if it were true; and then blaming herself for letting her thoughts thus run riot, for she remembered that the death of a kind friend must inevitably take place before this story, strange, if true, could be verified in her regard.

CHAPTER X.—THE WAY TO MAKE HOME HAPPY—THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

'Lillian dear, I think I shall leave you very soon,' said Catherine Leslie, one winter afternoon, as, supported by pillows, she played with the tiny hands of an infant, some three months old, which lay in Lillian's lap.

'Nay, Catherine dear, do not speak so,' replied Lillian; 'you have been better, much better lately, spite of the winter weather. If things take a turn for the better, we may all be so happy together; indeed, no blow would be heavier to me than that of your death, always excepting that of my dotting sister.'

'But it will come nevertheless, Lillian, and perhaps at the moment when we least expect it,' said Catherine. 'I am convinced that the change for the better which I really feel is a mere delusion; for myself, I have not a wish for my life to be prolonged. My sole desire on earth is that I could see the dawn of brighter days for you.'

'No more of this, love; you make me quite sad,' said Lillian. 'I owe so much to you, Catherine, that I cannot bear to think that the day is perhaps very near in which we must part.'

'Owe so much to me, Lillian,' replied the humble Catherine, with a slight laugh. 'I wonder what Lillian could learn of me.'

'The art of making a home happy, Catherine; of husbanding my humble means; of keeping it neat and in good order; of making my own dresses, pies and puddings, cooking a dinner; and last, though not least, you have taught me so well the practice of economy that I can positively make one shilling go as far as five when I strive, as Mrs. Leslie, to keep house myself.'

'Ah, Lillian, but you were an apt and a docile pupil too,' said Catherine; 'you did not resent; as some would have done in your place, my offer of showing you how to manage your little home; and after all, dearest, how very little could I do.'

'How very little? rather say how very much,' said Lillian; 'for, Catherine, these very little duties of everyday life, so little that our sex are apt to pass them by as beneath their notice, comprise in their fulfilment the very essence of domestic happiness; in their neglect, the misery of the whole household.'

Lillian spoke but too truly; she was the light of her own home, humble though it was; plunged from the highest affluence to poverty, she had had much to learn. Very weary and repulsive was the task at the beginning, but she had put her hand to the plough, and would not look back. Reason, love, and religion came to her aid. Brave Lillian, the slatternly wife of the mechanic, with double the money earned by your poor author and artist husband, Herbert, might look at you and learn a lesson for the future.

Industrious Lillian, the wife of the man with his hundred and fifty pounds or two hundred a year, may come and learn of you how to keep her home; for you would teach her that the thorough discharge of the duties of domestic life are not incompatible with the tastes of a refined and intellectual mind, should a reverse have plunged such a one from affluence into comparative poverty.

When Lillian first essayed the art of house-keeping she made such sad blunders that she turned to the experienced but sensitive Catherine for her lesson. It was not very long before it was well learnt, and Lillian's white hands skilled in the art of cookery, then turned oftentimes to still rougher duties.

Catherine had never fully recovered her health from the time she had been attacked by the fever, and her declining state of health had terminated in pulmonary consumption.

In the midst of much distress, and whilst Catherine lay sick unto death, Lillian's first child was born. New duties of every kind had devolved upon her, but in the hour of trial she was not found wanting.

Lillian was peculiar, perhaps, nevertheless it was a peculiarity which never spared itself. She loved to use white toilet-covers, and white quilts, and snow-white daperies, as much as she had loved them in the hope of her sunny youth; so that Catherine's sick room always looked—at the cost of great trouble to herself,—clean, and the linen as white as if it had just come from the hands of the laundress. Another peculiarity, doubtless, in one so poor especially, was her determination always to have a white baby, as she jestingly termed it; and when Catherine asked her what she meant by a white baby, she replied,—

'If I am so poor, Kate, that I must needs wash my baby's clothes myself, then I will do it; for no infant of mine shall be disfigured with colored frocks and socks,—a pure invention, I believe, to save a little work; consequently this peculiar and eccentric Lillian not unfrequently was caught by Herbert ironing at midnight, after her own hands had washed the tiny frocks made of the soft embroidered muslin robes which she had herself worn in other and happier days.'

The infant, Archey, whom she had named after her father, was thus never seen with other than a spotless frock of white muslin; and we can safely aver that neither colored socks nor petticoats disfigured the infant limbs of Lillian's child.

We are no admirer of Mistress Fanny Fern, nor was Lillian. The former lady sagely writes that she does not like houses in which children and takes are not marked with the impress of baby fingers, and in which the state of the apartments does not bear indubitable marks of the presence of children.

Surely Fanny Fern has not the organ of neatness and good order well developed; if she had, she would abhor disorder and untidiness, however fond she may be of the baby portions of humanity. It is surely not hard to be fond of children and of good order at the same time. As to Lillian,—the refined and industrious Lillian,—she would, with many of our lady-readers, have been ready to swoon at the thought of an ill-kept household, dirty children, and an ill-managed table, around which little men and women are sometimes suffered noisily to clamor forth their wants.

But the little home was to undergo a change. Lillian tried very hard to wear her usually smart smile, but sometimes the effort was in vain.

Catherine was dying. She could deceive herself no longer as to that. The orders at the studio in Newman street were but few and far between, and Herbert had in vain tried to get series of articles on the fine arts, on which he had devoted much of his leisure, into the pages of Blackwood.

He had met with just sufficient success as a writer to sharpen his appetite for more; he had yet to find out the difficulty of the task, unbacked by interest or influence.

There were moments in which he had been