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HAWTHORNDEN

A STORY OF EVERY DAY LIFE

BY MRS. CLARA M. THOMPSON

CHAPTER VI

CONSCIENCE VS. FRIENDSHIP

As the day went on, Rosine became disheartened with herself, and very uncomfortable within. She found herself unable to resist Laura's affectionate, bewitching ways, her conciliatory, soothing ways, her conciliatory, soothing ways, her conciliatory, soothing ways...

It is at such times that the care and guidance God has given us in His Church should be especially sought. Rosine knew this, she knew that the very dread she had of meeting kind Father Roberts betokened something wrong. Each new step out of the right way would send her back to her room with a headache, and tears would come without cause.

As she was leaving the church on Ash Wednesday, the remembrance of the ashes and their significance increasing the uneasiness of her conscience, the sacristan came to her with a request from Father Roberts that she would come to the sacristy. Trifling as this incident was, it made her heart beat rapidly, for she knew if her pastor discovered anything amiss in her, he would not leave the matter till it was searched out to the very end.

"There isn't much danger in your case of being injured by preaching," retorted Laura. "I think I never heard of you at church more than half a day of a Sunday." "And probably never will, Miss Laura," he replied. "I hold religious disputation to be as bad as any other disposition; and now I'm speaking of gadding," he added, turning quickly around and giving her a look which brought a blush even to her cheek.

"I love her very much," Rosine struggled to reply; "she is very kind to me, always doing something for me, has stood by me from the first," she added, her young heart kindling at the thought of her early days at school, and this her first girlish friendship.

Father Roberts shook his head. "I know it is hard," he said, "but it will not do; I see food for sorrow and regret, perhaps life-long, in the continuance of this intimacy. You need not be rude, but the daily, hourly communion with her must be withdrawn, if you would have a heart and conscience at peace. By your own acknowledgment, she leads you continually wrong."

"It is not her fault that I go," said Rosine, her sense of justice rising to the defence of Laura. "No, certainly," replied the clergyman, "no one is to blame for our sins but we ourselves, but we are very grievously at fault, if we do not forsake places and companions that lead us to doing wrong. All our confessions are invalid, if we do not determine to shun the occasions of sin."

Rosine remembered how often Laura had said that her friendship was all she had, and her heart clung closer to her than ever. "Will you not tell me, Rosa," continued her pastor, after a pause, "that you will, for the sake of all that is good and lovely, give up this unfortunate friendship? Believe me, my daughter, it is a pain to me to ask it, but duty tells me I must. Will you say that it shall be as I wish?"

There was a long silence. Father Roberts looked at his watch. "Come, my child, I must claim that promise, or if you will not give it me," he hesitated—"I cannot give you my blessing, and I shall have a sad letter to write to your dear mother." "O please don't write to mother about it," she pleaded, looking up into his face with the tears on her cheek; "if she were here I would tell her all—but so far off, it would distress her unnecessarily."

let the blame of giving her up as an intimate rest with me. Will you, my child?"

"I will try," said Rosine, in a voice so low as scarcely to be audible. "That is not enough," he replied gently. "I will try is the word needed in this case. 'I'll try' leaves room for going back."

She did not speak. He looked again at his watch, a rap at the door, which had been repeated for the third time, was heard; he turned away with a grievous countenance and went out. Rosine was more miserable than ever; to go away without her pastor's blessing, there was something dreadful in that thought. He had often told her duties never clashed, but she was still unwilling to allow that the battle in her soul was a struggle between duty and inclination. She resolved upon this—she would tell Laura at once that their afternoon walks must be curtailed, it was Lent, and she must go to some of the Lenten lectures, which would begin that very evening, her afternoon walks must be taken for study. Laura was not disturbed by this arrangement, but she was glad to do anything to make you contented; she looked at the bright flush that tinged her cheek, and paused.

"Pray, Mrs. Hartland," said the young girl, as soon as she could speak, "do not think I am pining for home. I am sure the Colonel and all of you are so kind, I could not be discontented."

"Then you must be ill," persisted Mrs. Hartland; "now tell me all about it, and if you need medical advice, Ned is here, and you can consult him through me."

"No, I am not ill," reiterated Rosine; "I beg you will not speak of my health. I really am perfectly well," she added, as the lady looked at her doubtfully.

"Then what is the difficulty?" said Mrs. Hartland, relapsing into her usual cold, calm manner. "If you are neither homesick nor unwell, I cannot see the cause of so many tears."

The tone and manner threw Rosine back within herself. Mrs. Hartland would not have understood her trouble had she opened her grief, indeed she hardly knew how to name it herself. "It is very strange," said Mrs. Hartland, rising to leave the room, with vexation apparent in her manner, "strange that you are not willing to tell me if there is any serious difficulty; I shall be obliged to make the doctor his own messenger."

Had she seen Rosine's pleading look, she might realize that even such a child might have a sorrow of which she could not speak.

The following week came her visit to Sister Agnes. She was carried all over the house to see the new dormitories and pretty rows of children, and the new wing which had been completed during Sister Agnes' absence; finally the good sister took her to the little parlor and talked to her of her mother. She had always, in the absence of her mother, carried her troubles to this friend, and her gentle, persuasive tone soon gained the confidence of Rosine, and her perplexities were all made known, even the conversation with Father Roberts was related. "My dear child, and lost good Father Roberts' blessing, how could you?" said the sister. "I can sympathize with you in the self-denial, but I cannot sympathize in any doubt as to the propriety of the sacrifice. I wanted to speak to you about this very thing, for a gentleman friend of your mother's hinted to me only last week, that Laura's company was not the most select, and he was sorry to meet you so often with her. I pity the poor motherless, homeless girl, but I can't have my Rosa in danger of being the least sullied by the companionship. Young as you are, you should certainly believe that your best friends are better capable of judging in this matter than yourself. And you are bound to obey Father Roberts in every thing relating to your spiritual welfare, and by your own showing this intimacy is far from salutary. Go, my child, to your pastor, and give him the promise he requires; you will never have peace otherwise."

Rosine knew Sister Agnes was right, she also knew that Father Roberts would be peremptory in his requirements; and she resolved as she left her kind friend, that she would do something, but had not quite made up her mind as to her first step.

had suggested that Rosine's health might be at fault, went bravely to her room to hear this conversation, where she found Rosine endeavoring to calm herself after a flood of tears.

"My child," said Mrs. Hartland, seating herself by her, and speaking as tenderly as her nature would permit, "I am anxious about your health; if you are ill, will you tell me?"

"Thank you," replied Rosine, in a timid, fearful voice, "I am not ill, only foolish. I have a headache, which will pass off with sleep."

"But you seem sad," continued Mrs. Hartland; "the doctor and I are anxious about your health; the Colonel fears you are not happy. I would be glad to do anything to make you contented; she looked at the bright flush that tinged her cheek, and paused.

"Pray, Mrs. Hartland," said the young girl, as soon as she could speak, "do not think I am pining for home. I am sure the Colonel and all of you are so kind, I could not be discontented."

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Rosine came at his bidding; she, too, was fast losing her timidity with Dr. Hartland.

"They are getting up a fair," he said, drawing her towards him, and pointing to Laura and his mother, "and they mean to put you in somewhere."

"O, I hope not," replied Rosine; "I never had any part in one in all my life, and should not know what to do."

"Never had anything to do with a fair! Poor ignorant heathen! Where have you been all these sixteen years?" said the doctor, assuming a look of pity. "I thought they were the staple commodity of you pious people. Not acquainted with this religious way of picking our pockets? Why, Rosine, you are deficient in first principles!"

"Many Catholics, as well as Protestants, disapprove of fairs," replied Mrs. Hartland, not looking up from her work. "I remember Father Roberts and Sister Agnes both set their faces against a fair for the 'House of the Infant Jesus,' very unwise, certainly, for there is no more successful way of raising money."

"Father Roberts is a bit of an old foggy, begging your pardon, Rosa," chimed in Laura, "an age behind the times. As the venerable told me that he opposed prizes in Sunday-school for the best lessons, would not allow them to be given; said the spirit of emulation was unchristian brought anywhere, and should not be brought in his Sunday-school. Precious scarce Christians must be, by that standard! Fairs he considers very worldly machinery."

"They are certainly not religious machinery," said the doctor, grimly. "Pious acts of self-denial! Bless me! there is no more piety in them than in tableaux, theatricals, or any other exhibition of pretty things and pretty women!"

"Don't, for pity's sake, waste our time discussing their merits secular, or religious," replied Laura; "we are bound to have one, and Mrs. Hartland is to be Major-General, and I am—"

"Under orders," whispered Aleck in her ear, bringing the first flush to her cheek that had yet been seen there.

"You are bound to be on her staff," said the doctor, elevating his eyebrows, as he observed the whisper and the blush. Laura felt the thrust he intended, but did not gratify him by any show of resentment; she commenced an animated discussion with Mrs. Hartland about the fair for the fair, the arrangement and distribution of the tables, passing the pencil to the Lieutenant, who according to her statements was making a sketch of the Hall.

"The flower table," said Mrs. Hartland, "should be the most prominent object. It ought to be raised above the other tables, and made the most attractive spot. I think, Laura, you would be a nice hand there, because you are not afraid of anybody."

"Then who is taking care of her? Is she all alone?" Mrs. Corrigan inquired with real concern.

"No, not alone—but she might as well be. I went from door to door on the East Side and could not induce, or bribe, or force anyone to go to her; then I drove into the country in the direction of West Sommerville, in search of a colored girl whom some one recommended because she had smallpox. She was not working, so her friend told me, because she was too lazy to work—a treasure, you see, and she's with Miss Hamilton now, and I don't know what to do about it. Miss Hamilton, of all people!"

"If it wasn't for the children I'd go to her myself. I'm not afraid. Surely we can think of some one who would be willing, and a better nurse than the shiftless colored girl. No doubt many people would be glad to volunteer."

The doctor was less sanguine than she. From long experience he thought that he knew the limits to which kindness will go. "Well, Mary, mention a few just a few women who might agree to go," he said hopelessly and rather crossly.

"Oh, I hardly know, but I'll think of some in time." Then, after a little reflection she added, "If she and Winifred Beatty were as devoted as they used to be—"

Her husband granted contemptuously. "As devoted as they used to be! To my certain knowledge they have not spoken to each other for fifteen years. So much for women's friendships!"

"It's not a typical case at all; you know that it is not," Mrs. Corrigan protested; and after a moment she continued thoughtfully, "I have always wondered what it was that came between those two. No one ever understood. They were such good friends from the time they were little girls until they were twenty-two or twenty-three. All any one knew was that suddenly and apparently without reason they were not seen together, and then it was observed that they did not even speak in passing. Some people believe that they quarreled about that good looking Martin Campbell—Judge Campbell's son."

Mrs. Corrigan paused again before she added, with a laugh and a twinkle in her eyes, "If they were Catholics they would have forgotten their quarrel long ago—they would have had to!" She was thinking of certain little feuds of her own which she had reluctantly sacrificed when her confession day came.

"What's the use of talking about Winifred Beatty now?" the doctor exclaimed impatiently. He was not often ill-natured, but was tired and anxious that afternoon; and he spoke as pleasantly as usual, a minute afterward, when he suggested, "Would Miss Beatty go? But probably she's too old. There is Miss Henderson. She is a friend of Miss Hamilton's and—"

"She wouldn't go for a million dollars!" Mrs. Corrigan interrupted. "She would not even inquire at our door when the children had mumps. Besides, she and Miss Hamilton are only acquaintances. The trouble is that Miss Hamilton has no intimate friends. So far as I know she never was intimate with anyone but Winifred Beatty, and John, you must admit that it is a great deal to ask of anyone—such a loathsome disease, and so contagious."

"She's in no danger at present, but of course she is very uncomfortable."

They were still standing face to face, just inside the office door, and suddenly Miss Beatty's poorly assumed indifference quite forsook her, and she put a trembling hand in the doctor's arm and looked into his face with eyes full of tears. "Oh Doctor, and she's alone with the servants!" she said tremulously.

"No, she isn't!" Dr. Corrigan contradicted with savage impatience. "When the servants heard the word smallpox whispered—very noisily whispered—they couldn't run away fast enough. There hasn't been one of them about the place for three or four hours."

Again Miss Beatty's eyes filled with tears. "But who is taking care of her? A trained nurse?" "Couldn't get a trained nurse. Jennie Finney from a farm near West Sommerville is with her—a good-natured and entirely good-for-nothing colored girl. I made a last call at the house half an hour ago. Jennie was eating a foolish kind of supper in the dining room. She had cake, and fruit, and mush-rooms, and pickles. She intended, so she said, to get something for Miss Hamilton later, although she did not suppose that she would want anything—'being as she's sick.' Consciously or unconsciously Dr. Corrigan imitated Jennie's drawl.

Something big and uncomfortable had come into Miss Beatty's throat, and it was some moments later before she could say simply, "Perhaps you don't know that we used to be friends, Miss Hamilton and I; very devoted friends, years and years ago. It is only a mistake that we are not friends still. You see—you must never mention this, Doctor—you see we were both young, and there was a young man who was a friend of hers and of mine, and I—I—That is, he asked me to marry him, and I said no. I thought that Louise Hamilton loved him, and that he liked her better than anyone except me, and—and that they would be very happy, and I could be happy, too,—after awhile. But instead of turning to Louise he went away. He never came back. And some gossip talked, and made Louise believe that I had kept him away from her. It was all a mistake, you see; a misunderstanding; but the last time we talked together she said bitter things, and I am afraid I did too, and—well, you know that the older a quarrel grows the harder it is to mend."

"I understand," Dr. Corrigan said, and pushing a chair forward he made Miss Beatty sit down. "I understand," he repeated. His anxiety about his patient was beginning to lighten.

"You don't know how dear and good she is!" Miss Beatty said earnestly. "People call her haughty and cold, but she's only shy. She is the best friend in the world to any one whom she really likes. I've never mentioned it before, but since father and I lost our means ten or eleven years ago—I've never told any one, but every fall we get coal enough for the winter; but no bill; and every week for years a countryman has brought us butter and eggs, plenty of eggs, and he always says that they have been paid for. And then sometimes at Christmas—you know she excels in sewing, and can embroider, and sometimes—"

She broke off, and Dr. Corrigan said quietly, "Yes, I understand; a real woman's friendship." His voice was reverent; it was quite unlike the tone he had used when making a similar remark only a few hours before.

Miss Beatty clasped her hands tightly, and unclasped them; she unbuttoned and unbuttoned one of her gloves. "Doctor," she said at last, in a voice hardly above a whisper, "I am going to take care of her, if she will let me. She needs me now, so will you ask her if I may. Tell her that I promise not to talk unnecessarily if she doesn't want me to."

Dr. Corrigan rose briskly. "We'll go to the house at once, and I'll speak to her," he said. "I'll try to persuade her to have me," Miss Beatty begged. "Of course," Dr. Corrigan answered drily. "She will be doing you a great favor." "Yes," Miss Beatty agreed, in all seriousness. "She doesn't forget easily, and she thinks that I was deceitful and mean. I should love to be with her!"

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