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HAWTHORNDEN

A STORY OF EVERY DAY LIFE

BY MRS. CLARA M. THOMPSON

CHAPTER XXXI.

AFTER STORM COMES SUNSHINE

We must find Laura, whom we left with a weight of sorrow and remorse crushing her heart, and wearing like a fetter into her young life. With the impulsiveness of her nature, when the last hope of reconciliation with her husband had died out, she had desired the seclusion of the cloister, but this, with her husband still living, was impossible. She had buried the bitterness of her remorse, and found solace where the penitent one is never refused, and contented herself with a life nearly as secluded from society as if she had taken the vows of a religious, submitting her will, which had so nearly been a rock of shipwreck to her soul, to the guidance of good Father Roberts, dwelling under the same roof with the orphans, spending herself and her means in the service of Christ's poor. She too was an orphan, her father having been brought down from his berth in his cabin, and buried with military display, and thus the grave had shut down over her last hope from this world; the deep black she had worn after this heavy stroke she had never removed, she wore it still for her deeper grief, her more than widowhood. Letters from Miss Greenwood during her novitiate, and the society of Sister Agnes, were her chief worldly solace; now and then a glimpse of Rosine rewarded her patient waiting, although her friend's life was close on the subject of her deepest interest, both from a sense of delicacy and Captain Hartland's expressed wish.

There came a time when these visits were more frequent—after Rosine returned from Hawthornden, the betrothed of Harry Greenwood. He had from many interviews with his sister, imbued her firm faith in Laura's innocence of the crime of which her husband held her guilty, and naturally he imparted this faith to his wife and daughter, who accepted it gladly as the echo of her own heart, so without comment or question from the still faithless Ned, interviews between Rosine and Laura were multiplied. Years of such suffering as Mrs. Hartland's could not fail to tell on her whole nature; spiritually it had brought her to a life of constant penance, leading her by the way of the Cross to the sure refuge of the disconsolate; physically, she had lost her bounding pulses and hearty laugh, her bold, fearless manner, and self-assured step, and a shame-faced pensiveness shadowed her countenance.

A call was made at this time upon the religious houses of the north for the hospitals of one of the southern cities, where fever was raging. Miss Greenwood had just taken her final vows, and from henceforth we know her only as Sister Angela. She had been sent at once with a band of co-workers to New Orleans, and Laura wished to accompany the two sisters going from the House of the Infant Jesus to the same destination; she wished to help, to be of some service, if she could not be one of them. Sister Agnes placed no obstacle in the way; perhaps a change might benefit her young friend, and Laura entered on her new position with something of her former energy, and the help and comfort of Sister Angela were like sweet flowers in the bleak desert of her life. Months of such work as she had never before known invigorated her mind and body, she saw others more abandoned than herself, and helped to soothe the misery of many a poor soul whose life was darker than her own.

In time the yellow fever increased to a pestilence, the panic-stricken inhabitants fleeing in many instances, and leaving the dying and dead uncared for. It was the mission of the sisters to seek out the forsaken ones, as often in the houses of the wealthy as in the hovels of the poor; all alike shared their succor. The hospitals were crowded, enclosures were improvised, where hundreds in every stage of this dire disease were brought for the tender offices of the religious. The enemy spared neither age, sex, rank, nor profession; physicians were stricken down in their efforts for others, and were carried to the channel house in a few hours. Requiem Masses were chanted for priests and Sisters who had fallen in the midst of their arduous labors. Laura looked with envy upon these shrouded martyrs, and worked with new vigor; onerous duties had separated her from Sister Angela, who was called by her Superior to the care of some of the worst cases in the temporary hospital.

A gentleman, evidently a man of wealth and position, had been found at dead of night in one of the large hotels, leaked into his room in an advanced stage of this fearful fever, his friends and destiny unknown. Sister Angela had received him; though every bed was filled, she found place for another amid the groans of the dying and the rattling of the death cart. His appearance was maddeningly in the extreme; his skin cold and clammy, presented the direful hue of the advanced patient, changing already from the bright orange to the dull brown; the pulse was feeble and intermittent, and the breathing irregular and labored. He was in the vigor of manhood, with a foreign air, and evidently had been a man of mark; new his words were

few and incoherent, and his wandering eye singled out Sister Angela, and never left watching her as she smoothed his pillow, bathed his head and hands, and bustled herself constantly in a subdued and quiet way for his comfort. The physician, as he looked at him, showed no hope in his face, and soon after whispered to his attendant, "He cannot last long; if he has any thing to say to his friends, it should be said at once," and passed on to the next patient.

"Sister Angela bent over him to see if reason held her seat, that she might help, if possible, the soul in its death struggle. Words came at length, and unexpectedly he spoke in English.

"Dying, did he say?" he inquired with a gasp.

"Very low," replied the voice at his side. "Have you any words you would say?"

"But I must not die!" he cried, grinding his teeth. "I'm young yet, and shall weather it."

"God calls whom he pleases," was the reply, "and we have only to prepare to meet Him."

"Mon Dieu!" he exclaimed, with a sneer; "I did not believe in Him. Ah, yes, I threw all that away long ago; but I can't die," he groaned, writhing and twisting in his cot.

The Sister prayed for the poor wretch; it was all there was left to do.

"Message for friends," he continued. "Message! did he say! I have none, all lost,—perdu!"

He turned to the wall for a moment and was quiet. Sister Angela thought he might sleep, and attempted to go to the next cot, when she heard a low stifled groan, and the sick man rose wildly, tearing away the curtains and sinking back.

"Don't you leave me!" he cried frantically, clutching the Sister's dress as she returned. "He says I must speak; yes, I have something to say—pencil—paper." The articles were at hand. "You don't know me?" the Sister asked her. "I know you," he muttered, fixing upon her his piercing black eyes, over which the film of death had not yet gathered. "Yes, there is one wrong I must right; it may help me there, if there is any hereafter." He grew feeble, faltered, and sank under the exertion. Stimulants were applied, and Sister Angela waited with her patient, prayerful spirit till he should again speak. "Write," he said at length, "his name," he added, trying to raise himself on his elbow.

"Yes," replied his attendant quietly. "What is it?"

"Captain Hart—" he articulated very feebly, his voice dying away in a struggle.

"Captain Hartland?" interrogated the Sister, as a light seemed to break upon her mind, like a flash from an unseen cloud; her voice slightly trembling. "Is that Captain Hartland?"

"Alek is what she called him," he said wonderingly.

"Yes, tell me what I shall write for Captain Alexander Hartland," inquired the Sister, realizing the need of haste.

The man slowly raised his hand to his forehead, as if to collect his scattered senses, and bringing it down upon the paper with all the force of which he was capable, he said with a terrible oath. "Tell him I deceived him; I never loved him; I never loved him; and again his mind wandered.

Sister Angela hesitated but a moment; enough had been said already to lift the dark cloud from Laura's heart; she felt this, as she looked at the miserable man before her, striving with the few gasps of his flickering life to undo his own wicked labor for years. She knew only pity for him, and she prayed to the good God, if peradventure there were any hope for his soul, about to appear before his Judge. It was some moments before he again opened his eyes, or rallied from the state of unconsciousness into which he had relapsed. The Sister had written on the paper, "I protest in my dying hour, that Laura Hartland is innocent of that of which her husband accuses her." Once more he opened his eyes, still clear with the light of reason, and with evident anxiety turned towards her, while she, stooping over him, read the paper distinctly.

"More," he said eagerly; "I seized the ring, their wedding ring, when she lay helpless in a swoon." This was added, and with the last energies of a strong nature, by a powerful effort of will he snatched the pencil and signed his name, "Eugen Le Compte," almost as legibly as in his palm-leaf days. This done, he sunk rapidly; all efforts to turn his mind to any thing beyond this life were useless; all that might be breathed still, but did not speak, and his pulse was imperceptible. Prayers constant and fervent were said for this soul which seemed to have abandoned God; but he sunk away and made no sign; having lived as the fool liveth, he died as the fool dieth. Sister Angela had no time, directly to make use of the intelligence she had gained; the pestilence raged more and more, and lest she should be stricken down in the midst of her labors, she imparted the precious secret to her Father Confessor, with the understanding that if she were taken away, he was to reveal it to those most interested. But at length the early frosts of autumn checked the raging scourge, and her first care was for Captain Hartland. The difficult task of bringing back her thoughts to the living was accomplished, and this letter was dispatched.

"New Orleans, September, 18—.

"Captain A. Hartland:

"My dear Sir—It is my pleasing duty to inform you, that the cloud

which has hung like a pall over your life, has been lifted by the hand of death. I enclose the evidence of your wife's innocence, which I have long felt was unquestionable. I will only add, that this paper was written by me at the request of the signer, and the name was subscribed by him almost in the agonies of death. Praying our dear Lord that this may relieve your heart of a heavy burden. I am, Very truly, yours,

ANGELA."

The letter reached the residence of Colonel Hartland in due time, and came into the hands of the Doctor, who eyed it suspiciously, and not without some curiosity; recognizing as he did the hand-writing at once, there could be no other like it to him, even now, and this was the first time he ever felt an impulse to open a letter not addressed to himself. He turned it over and over again—no, there it was, fairly written in Doris's clear, bold hand. "Captain Alexander Hartland, U.S.N." "Ah, how shut out she must be from us all," he said to himself, "not to know that Alek has resigned."

His brother was at Hawthornden, that dear paradise for souls wearied with contending against the ills of life, and the letter was at once forwarded to him in his retreat. Here he had built himself a tiny cottage below the lawn, where he could look up to the mansion of his friends, and be alone when he chose. He was in the rustic arbor which Harry had planned, now covered with vines of his own planting; he was gazing over the dark days of the past, thinking, O, how relentlessly, of the knowledge that this day years ago had brought to him; the anniversary had never been forgotten, the ring still rested on his finger, and a ghostly bitter smile spread over his sunken pallid cheek as he gazed at it. "Never, never!" he said, in a cold, stern voice, as if replying to some inward pleading. "No, never!"

A sound of a footstep met his ear, and he arose hastily; it was only the blind boy, who was going over to bring him a letter, which he held most carefully in both his hands, as if it were made of some brittle substance. The captain took it carefully, looked at the post-mark, then turned to the dear boy, whom he had learned to love with almost paternal affection. He thought the missive was from some of his old navy friends, and he had hardly curiosity to read it, so he slowly broke the seal, turning to Willie, and holding one arm about his neck, slightly trembling. "Good God!" he exclaimed, when he saw the purport of the letter, the blood rushing to his heart.

Willie turned anxiously to his friend, and stroked his beard with his small hand. "Uncle Alek, does it tell you bad news?" inquired the child.

"Who knows?" replied the Captain, abstractedly, his voice trembling as he spoke.

"Let's go to mamma," said the boy, affectionately. "I will look after you when she comes." "Willie really the stronger of the two, in that silent, rapid walk. Alek Hartland gave the letter and its enclosure to Mrs. Benton, and hurried away into the library, as if afraid even of her presence; overwhelmed with mingled emotions, all of them more or less tinged with the doubts and distrust of the long years of darkness; distance, time were annihilated, and the hours of those dreadful days in a far off and was alone remembering. Presently, there came a low tap at the door, and a gentle voice, speaking his name; he arose to meet Mrs. Benton, but staggered to a seat, unable even to offer her a chair.

"This is so wonderful, such a heaven-sent blessing," she said, coming towards him, her face shining with delight, and putting her hand on his bowed head. "Such blessed news! Indeed I am so grateful to the good God for you; you will seek out your wife at once."

"But I have wronged her bitterly," he said, his head still bowed on his arm—"wronged her constantly in thought and deed, all these years of suffering."

"Yes, Alek," she replied; "years of terrible suffering for you both, let us hope it may increase your reward, I know it will; and O, what a weight this will take from many hearts: dear Rosa always had faith in Laura's innocence."

"Rosine is a saint!" he said, looking up for the first time; "I think what she was to me in those first horrible months. God bless her for it—but I must not wait," he added rising. Eagerness, hope, strength, had returned with human sympathy; before night he was in the city, with an invitation to bring Laura immediately to Hawthornden. He did not pause at his father's residence, he made no delay till he stood at the entrance of the House of the Infant Jesus. The little child who opened the door shook her small head when he inquired for Mrs. Hartland; and after several ineffectual efforts to explain himself, he asked for the Sister Superior, and was forthwith ushered into her presence. The calm, subdued, chastened spirit of Sister Agnes was melted by the intelligence, and tears glistened in her eyes, as Captain Hartland imparted to her the news which had so changed everything for him; but Laura was in New Orleans, to leave soon—it was uncertain how soon, but probably before he could reach there, and she advised his waiting a few days. He waits! he sits still! while she whom he had so deeply and tenderly loved was repudiated! Never! He rushed to his father's house, meeting Rose with the door just going for a drive with

Harry, who had lately returned from a long sojourn in the far west. Captain Hartland pulled them both back into the house, with an earnestness that made them fear for his senses, and taking from his memorandum book the letter of Sister Angela, he thrust it into Rosine's hand. Harry Greenwood stood by her side while she gave one glance through the lines, penetrating at once to their meaning, and turning to Alek, who stood as if waiting to be gone, she clasped her arms about his neck, uttering no words but tears.

"Thank God," said Harry, as he closed the letter, "right must prevail; and what a joy to my dear sister Doris to be the instrument. Alek, let me congratulate you; we will have a double wedding next month, Rosa, sit Alek can wait so long."

"Wait, Harry," replied the Captain, soberly. "I am off for New Orleans tonight."

"O, do see Ned first, dear Alek," said Rosine, coaxingly; "it will be such a triumph for me. I do not care to tell him; we have fought this battle over and over again, and the dear Colonel!—O, here he comes, I must tell him," and breaking away from Harry, she ran to the room with the story for the Colonel. He was at first stunned by the suddenness of the news, and then joined heartily in the general rejoicing saying, "I hope Ned will not be sorry; he is rancorous in this matter."

"He ought to sorrow with me," replied Captain Hartland, "that his fierce injustice added fuel to the fire in my bones; you may tell him—but I am off by the quickest route," and taking his hat he hurried out before the disgraced Colonel. "Welcome her here," which was in his heart.

He reached New Orleans, weary but not exhausted, to find the band of Sisters had left only the day before for the north, Laura travelling with them. One night's attempt at rest, and he started again, overtaking them in Baltimore. Sister Angela came at his bidding; she had never hinted to Laura what might be in store for her, lest there should be some slip. "At last, Doris," said Captain Hartland, taking the Sister's hand. "Thank you with all my heart, may God reward you for all you have done for me and mine. Where is my wife? does she know of this change?"

"I have told her nothing," was the reply, "knowing that it was more fitting the pleasing intelligence should come through you. She is in the house; I will send her to you."

Into that interview we must not go; it must suffice us that Laura, the disgraced, forsaken wife, was restored to the inmost heart of her husband—to all the love of early days, made tenderer, truer, and more enduring by the fires of adversity.

"So the steek was sold at auction, and you're going up the store!" she began. "Way, Mr. Kinsella, Spruce street went down like Spruce street without it, as I said to your husband only this morning. Your store was the very first place I dealt when we came here to live, thirty years ago,—just after we was married in Council Bluffs. And Mr. Hebsen tells me that you are going to Cincinnati to live. He thinks you're making a big mistake to leave here; but I said to him—and I spoke emphatically,—I said: 'You may be sure Mr. Kinsella knows his own business best.' That's what I told him. He thinks that, because you're always been busy and active, you won't be content to fold your hands, even in your own daughter's house; but that's a foolish way to look at it, isn't it? I told Mr. Hebsen so. You have worked hard, and now you can rest; and you may be happy there. You will, if Susie has grown to be like her mother. Many and many a time I've said to my husband: 'There never was a sweeter, kinder woman than Mrs. Kinsella.'"

Having murmured something by way of vague reply to all this, Mr. Kinsella managed to escape from Mrs. Doane. He had no wish to talk to any one. But at the corner he was waylaid by the gentle kindly old man who had been his family doctor—when he had had a family.

"So you are leaving us, Mr. Kinsella," he said, with a little tremor in his habitually cheery voice. "I hope you will soon feel at home in Cincinnati, although I can't help wishing that you were not going. You know us all here, and we know you. We are all your friends; we have been your friends for thirty years."

Mr. Kinsella gave him his hand. "Thank you, Doctor," he said. "I could stay, but I'm going to live with my daughter, you know." And he passed on before the old doctor could say another word.

Mr. Kinsella turned down Centre street, and as he approached the parish school Father O'Boyle came down the steps and went to meet him, both hands extended and a wealth of affectionate concern on his rugged face. "This time Mr. Kinsella had no desire to escape. He took the proffered hands and held them close for a minute.

"It's good by, father!" he said in a choked voice, and his lips trembled and his eyes filled.

Instantly Father O'Boyle remembered how, in the old days, Mr. Kinsella's face had been the most genial in all West Yorktown, and his laugh the most frequent and the most infectious.

"I shall miss you sorely, and many another will," he said. "But I hope you are going to be very happy, Mr. Kinsella. You will see all old friends and find new interests in Cincinnati. But don't forget your old friends."

He spoke as cheerfully and as hopefully as he could; thinking in his heart how lonely and restless the old man would be where there was no work for his eager hands, and amid new and unfamiliar surroundings in which, ninety-nine chances out of a hundred, he would be only half welcome.

Mr. Kinsella had no reserves from Father O'Boyle. "I haven't said so before and I won't again, father, but I hate to go. I love West Yorktown; I'm used to it; and in Cincinnati I'll be a stranger, and—my son-in-law is so rich and fashionable. But I did my best, and I failed, and now I have no choice but to go. I am too old and too much discouraged to try to start again here. Besides, when my last debt is paid I shall not have more than two or three hundred dollars in the world. And I'm too old and tired to begin again. Mr. Swartzlander's letters and Susie's have been very kind, but can't help hoping that it won't be long. I am old and broken—or—or it might be—sometimes I think that perhaps some day I can come home again."

He paused, but only for a moment. Before Father O'Boyle could say anything he repeated slowly:

"I did my best. I could do no better if I had a chance to begin again."

Father O'Boyle laid a sympathetic hand on Mr. Kinsella's shoulder, but what could he say? Thinking it kindest to change the subject a little, he asked a commonplace question: "And will you start this evening?"

"Yes, father; on the 31st train. It will be a long trip. I shall not reach Cincinnati until Friday morning." And, having grasped Father O'Boyle's hand again, he went his slow way toward the second-class hotel in which he was living.

It was 6 o'clock when he reached his room, but he did not think of supper. First he dropped a few things into a cheap new bag, and afterwards laboriously packed a queer old trunk putting his everyday suit and a well-worn overcoat on top of a strange assortment of clothing, books, and papers. Next he very carefully packed in the upper tray a faded photograph of his wife, the prayer-book she had always used—a leather-bound "Key of Heaven,"—and a box containing the only letters he had ever received from her, written during a visit she had made to her sister in Omaha; it was not a large box, for she had been too homesick to stay long. Afterward Mr. Kinsella wrapped in newspaper and put beside these a First Communion candle, a battered doll, and a pair of baby shoes, a quaint daguerotype of his father and mother, and another of himself at the age of fifteen,—a round-faced boy in impossible

Father O'Boyle alone was at the station to bid Mr. Kinsella good bye; and it was with the heaviest heart he had ever known that he heard the engine whistle, and putting his face close to the window of the sleeper, stared into the semi-darkness as the train moved slowly through West Yorktown, and sped past the little cemetery. Only after the street lights had grown dim and indistinct, and at last were blotted out by distance, did he try to read his paper.

That night he did not sleep or even have his berth made up. He was busy with a thousand thoughts. It seemed such a little while since he and his wife, young and hopeful and merry, had gone to West Yorktown to live,—and now she was gone; his work had ended in failure; and, alone and old and tired, he was going eastward to begin a new life that would be only a waiting for the end, in a home not his own, where he would be a dependent and possibly an unwelcome care.

Throughout the next day the seat before him was occupied by a coaly old couple, evidently well-to-do and unmistakably devoted to each other. They were going back to their first home for a visit, so Mr. Kinsella learned from their talk; and, in their eagerness to see their old friends again, could hardly wait for the end of the journey. Mr. Kinsella was glad when they got off the train on Thursday evening.

Night fell, and again Mr. Kinsella did not, could not, sleep; and, as the long hours wore away, more and more did he dread the day to come. It was six years since his daughter had visited him in West Yorktown; and then she had seemed so changed from the loving, sensitive, little girl whom he had cuddled and praised and scolded, that he had been slightly in awe of her. His son-in-law, Mr. Swartzlander, he had never known well, and he had not seen any of the children since they were babies. All these things and many more haunted him throughout the night, and making him feel more sick and more desperately homesick than before.

About 6 o'clock he heard the porter tell one of the other passengers that they were half an hour late, and he was glad of even so short a respite. But at 9 the train backed into the station, and with a heavy heart Mr. Kinsella stepped on the platform and looked toward the gates. Just inside of them he saw his son-in-law, stouter than of old, and even more prosperous looking. Beside him stood his daughter, a little stout, too; and grouped about them were two little girls about six and eight years of age, and two boys somewhat older.

At first they did not see him in the midst of the eager, hurrying crowd; but he needed not Mr. Swartzlander's sight to find a sad face under a shabby hat, and said a quick word to his wife. When she saw her father, bent and white-faced and slow, she forgot the strangers all around them and the dignity of her forty years, and fairly ran down the platform. After one instant's surprised hesitation, Mr. Swartzlander ran, too; and the children followed, pell-mell, at their heels. In a moment Mr. Kinsella was surrounded by six pairs of loving arms, while each child clasped to be kissed first, and Mrs. Swartzlander kissed him again and again.

How they reached the machine Mr. Kinsella never knew, but soon they were speeding through the business section of the city toward a beautiful suburb,—Mr. Swartzlander driving the car, while Mrs. Swartzlander sat close to her father, with one of his hands tenderly held in hers; and the children climbed to his lap and leaned against his knees. Mr. Kinsella was glad to have one hand free; for more than once he found it necessary to brush away tears that poured down his cheeks.

It was not long before Mr. Swartzlander drove under an arched stone gateway and through beautiful grounds to a house far finer than any Mr. Kinsella had ever seen. After a breakfast which he was too happy to eat, the boys took their grandfathers to see their dog, and their girls showed their rabbits and their birds. Then Mrs. Swartzlander led him to the drawing room, and proudly displayed a picture which her husband had given her a short time before. Mr. Kinsella thought it peculiar and very ugly, and was trying to think of something non-committal to say about it when Mr. Swartzlander came into the room.

"Why, Susie, father won't care for your queer old Italian things! I have something much more interesting to show him." And, turning to Mr. Kinsella, he went on: "If you are not tired, I'd like to take you to our store. We have a fine place now. It occupies almost an entire block. I am very proud of it; you will be, too."

Mr. Kinsella said that he was not tired; but he said so rather sadly, with a sudden recollection of the empty storehouse in West Yorktown. "Take us with you!" exclaimed the boys.

"Let us go! It is our turn!" pleaded the little girls.

"Well, well! Get your hats, and you may all go," Mr. Swartzlander said good-naturedly.

Mrs. Swartzlander said nothing, but when the others reached the car they found her already seated in it. "This is your place, here beside me, father. I wasn't going to allow them to take you away from me this very first day," she said; and again Mr. Kinsella hastily dried his eyes. "I was a little afraid you wouldn't

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