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Professor of Chemistry at Laval University

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GRAPES AND THORNS.

By M. A. T., Author of "The House of York," "A Winged Word," etc.

CHAPTER V.—Continued.

Mr. Schoniger did not tell her that his interest was in her more than in the children, and that he desired to see how she would conduct herself in such circumstances rather than take any note of the persons and acquirements of her pupils. To his mind it was very strange that a lady of her refinement should wish to assume such a work without necessity. His conception of the character of teachers of children was not flattering; he thought a certain vulgarity inseparable from such persons, a positiveness of speech, an oracular tone of voice, and an authoritative air, which the employment conferred on successful teachers, if it did not find them already possessed of. It amused him to fancy these fifty children swarming about Miss Pembroke, like ants about a lily, and it annoyed him to think that she might receive some stain by them.

"I like ladies to be charitable," he said to himself, as he went homeward; "but there are kinds of rough work I would prefer they should delegate to others."

He was thinking of the physical part of the work; Honora of the spiritual.

The school room was the lower floor of a house at the corner of two streets, and had been used as a shop, the two wide show-windows at either side of the door giving a full light. The upper floors were occupied as a dwelling-house. These windows looked out on a wide and respectable street; but the cross street, beginning fairly enough, deteriorated as it went on toward the Saranac, through the poorest section of the city, and ended in shanties and a dingy wharf where lobsters were perpetually being boiled in large kettles in dingy boats, and crowds of ragged children seemed to be always hanging about, sucking lobster claws, or on watch for them. Miss Pembroke's charge were from this class of children, and one of her great difficulties was to keep her schoolroom from having the fixed odor of a fish-market.

The room was severely clean and spotless, and, but that the side-walls were nearly covered with maps, bookcases and blackboards, would have been glaring white; for the walls and ceiling were white-washed, the woodwork painted white, and the floor scoured white. Two rows of oak-colored benches extended across the room, the backs toward the windows. The sun shone in unobstructed all the afternoon. Only when it began to touch the last row of benches were the green worsted curtains drawn down far enough to keep it within bounds. Miss Pembroke's chair, table and piano, were in the space opposite the door. On the centre of the wall behind her hung a large crucifix, and on a bracket beneath it a marble Child Jesus stretched out His arms to the little ones. On larger brackets to right and left stood an Immaculate Lady and a St. Joseph. They were thus in the midst of the Holy Family.

These images were constantly surrounded by wreaths, arches and flowers, so that the end of the room had quite the appearance of a bower; and on all His festivals, and whenever prayers were said, a candle was lighted before the Infant Jesus, who was the patron of their school, and the dearest object of their childish devotion. It was delightful to them to know that they need not always approach their God in the language, to them, often inexplicable, of the mature and the learned, but that they could whisper their ingenious petitions and praises into the indulgent ear of a holy Child, using their own language, and asking Him to be their interpreter. St. Joseph with the lily and the white Lady with her folded hands they worshipped with awe; but they were not afraid of the dear Infant who stretched out His arms to them.

Fifty little faces, all brown, but otherwise various, looked straight at their teacher—blue eyes and brown eyes, black eyes and grey eyes, large and small eyes, bright eyes and dull eyes; and fifty young souls were at that instant occupied with one thought. The first faint thrilling of the silence with martial music was heard, and they were eager to take their places to see the advancing procession. But Miss Pembroke waited still. She had told Mr. Schoninger to come at three o'clock, and it lacked five minutes of that. Just as she was thinking she would give him two minutes grace, he appeared.

She went at once to place the children, and he watched with a smile of pleasure and amusement the soldierly precision of the performance. The door was opened wide, and two of the largest boys carried out and placed a bench near the edge of the upper step. At the motion of a finger, the smallest boys filed out and seated themselves on this bench, and an equal number of larger ones stood behind keeping guard. Then the door was closed. At the next silent gesture the smallest of the boys and girls remaining seated themselves in the low, broad ledge of the windows, the next size placed a bench across each window recess for themselves, and the largest again stood behind the benches. Not a word had been spoken, not a child had turned its head, not the slightest noise nor confusion had occurred, and all were perfectly well placed to see.

"What admirable order!" the gentleman exclaimed. "You must have drilled them thoroughly."

"It did not seem to me wasting time," Miss Pembroke replied. "I wish to impress on them the necessity of a decorous and reserved manner in public. They are too prone to presume, and be more than ordinarily lawless on such occasions. Besides, it teaches them self-control."

The two sat back at a little distance. The children began to stretch their heads and whisper explanations to each other. The air resounded with martial sounds, and a solid front of superb grey horses appeared, well-comparisoned and well-ridden, the full, crimped manes, tossed over their arching necks. Behind them another and another line pressed, making a living wall.

"I think one feels the influence of such a mass of strong life and courage," Miss Pembroke remarked. "It seems to me it would invigorate a weak person to be near those horses."

Mr. Schoninger had been thinking nearly the same thing. "I have fancied it not unlikely," he said, "that in a bold cavalry charge the horses may help to inspire the riders. The neighborhood of strong animal life is, no doubt invigorating. It would be fine to stand face to face with a herd of wild cattle, if they could be surely stopped in mid-career, to feel the air stirring with their breaths, and see their eyes glaring through heaps of rough mane. There would be something electrical in it, as there is in a crowd of men; and in both cases it is merely physical excitement."

"But a crowd of men may be electrified by some great thought," suggested Honora.

"Not unless each had the thought of his single mind before, either latent or conscious. I do not believe that any crowd or excitement, however immense, can put a great thought into a little soul. I can never act with an excited crowd, can hardly look at one with respect." His lip expressed contempt. "It is true that an eloquent leader may have the power of inciting people to some good deed; but even so, they are only a machine which he works. Great thoughts are not vociferous. They float in air, with no sound, unless it is the sound of wings."

Honora checked the words that rose to her lips so suddenly that a deep blush bathed her face. She had been thinking of the crowd that roared "Crucify Him!" and had recollected only just in time that they were this man's remote ancestors. But she recollected also that it was to him as original sin was to her, an hereditary, but not a personal, stain, and that baptism could wash both away. Her charity began at home, in the great Christian family, but it stayed not there: it overflowed to all living creatures.

"I have almost an enthusiasm for firemen," she said hastily. "They sometimes perform such wonders, and run such terrible risks for scarcely a reward. Unlike soldiers, they save without destroying anything. How beautiful their engines are!"

The procession was a long and very brilliant one, and the companies had vied with each other in decoration. The engines shone as if made of burnished gold and silver, and wreaths and bouquets of green and flowers decked them.

"These processions, more than any others I have seen, remind me of descriptions of pageants in the old time," remarked Honora, when they had been silent a while. "There is so much show and glitter in them, and the costumes are so gay. How I would like to be transported back to that time for one year!"

Her thoughts had taken a flight between the first and last words, and she was thinking of mediæval religion, with its untroubled faith and its fiery zeal.

Mr. Schoninger did not share her enthusiasm. Those had been bitter days for his people, and perhaps he was thinking so.

"I imagine you would ask to be transported back again before the year was over," he said quietly. "Those times look very picturesque at this distance, with their Rembrandt shading. But there was no more heroism then than there is to-day. I far prefer the hero of to-day. He is a better bred man, not so blatant as the mediæval. It seems to me that the admirers of that time are chiefly the poets, who sacrifice everything to the picturesque; ambitious men, who covet power; and—pardon me!—devout ladies who have been captivated by legends of the saints, and stories of ecclesiastical pageantry, but who take little thought for humanity at large."

"But in those days," said Miss Pembroke, "men had some respect for authority and law, and now they despise it."

"It is the fault of authority if it is despised," Mr. Schoninger replied with decision. "License is the inevitable reaction from tyranny, and is in proportion to it. So long as man retains any vestige of the image of the Creator, tyranny will always, in time, produce rebels. The world is now inebriated with freedom; let those whose abuse of authority created this burning thirst share the opprobrium of its excesses. Some day the equilibrium will be found. We cannot force it; it is a question of growth; but we can help. You are helping it," he added, smiling.

"What you have said sounds just," she replied, thoughtfully; "and I like justice. Perhaps the abuse of legitimate authority is a greater sin than rebellion against it, since the ruler should be wiser and better than the ruled."

They were again silent awhile, the gentleman hesitating whether to speak his thought, and finally speaking.

"Trust one who has studied the world well," he said earnestly. "Instead of being determined not to believe, mankind at this time is longing to believe. But it is determined not to be duped. The sceptic of to-day was made by the hypocrite of yesterday, and half the scepticism is affected, as half the piety was affected: Men are ashamed and afraid to be caught in a trap, and they pretend to disbelieve, when in fact they only doubt. You must now prove to them that truth itself is true, since they have so often been deceived by falsehood in the garb of truth. Let a man or a measure prove to be sincere and honest, and there was never a period in the history of the world when either would win more hearty approval than now. It is true that the childlike trustfulness of mankind is gone, partly from growth, partly because it has been abused; but the nobler powers are maturing. To believe this, you need not give up your faith. I have seen the eyes of one of the most bitter of scoffers fill with tears, and his lips tremble, at a proof of ardent and pious devotion which was not meant to be known. That a man was a scoffer because his common sense and sentiment of justice had been insulted by pious pretenders. If he could believe, he would be a saint."

Honora Pembroke's face was troubled. There could be no doubt that the man was honest and sincere in what he said, and that much of what he said was true. But was a Jew to teach a Christian? She could not be sure that his judgment was unbiased, and that one more learned than she would not be able to refute him. She said the best thing she could think of.

"False professors do not make false doctrines. And if the human mind is becoming so adult and strong, it should judge the truth by itself, not by the person who professes it."

"You are quite right," Mr. Schoninger answered. "And that is precisely what people are learning to do. It is also what many, who wish truth to be believed on their own testimony, object to their doing. I repeat,"—he glanced with anxiety into her clouded face—"I earnestly assure you that I have not uttered a word which conflicts with your creed, though it is not mine. If I were to-day to become a Catholic, I should only reiterate what I have said on this subject."

The cloud passed from her face, but still she did not speak. She was not gifted in argument, and this subject was complex, and, moreover, a bone of contention.

"It has occurred to me," he said presently, "that the people in Crichton, though they appear to be very liberal, may still have a prejudice against me as a Jew. That would be of no consequence to me in the case of most of them; but there are a few whom I should be sorry to know had such a feeling. The Jews are much misunderstood and slandered, though people have an opportunity of learning their true character if they would. The majority seem to look on every Jew as a probable or possible usurer and dealer in old clothes, and a person capable of joining a rabble at any moment, and pursuing an innocent man to death. I do not, of course, fancy for an instant that you have any sympathy with such people; but I think it possible that you may misundertand my attitude toward your Church. I have not the slighted feeling of enmity against it as does not do violence to me or mine, and while its members are true to the doctrines of peace and charity which they profess. As an artist I admire it. Its theology is the only one which still retains binding and implacable obligations of form, consequently, the only one that can inspire high art. I do not count the old Jews, who are rapidly melting away. I am of the reformed Jews."

"You no longer expect the coming of the Redeemer, nor the return to Jerusalem, nor the triumph of your people?" she asked looking at him in astonishment.

"We no longer believe in them," he replied.

"What, then, is left you?" She exclaimed.

He smiled slightly. "I expect and long for the redemption of mankind by the spirit of God, and I believe that truth and charity will prevail, though they may not descend from heaven to become incarnate in one form. The Jerusalem my people will return to is the spiritual city of the children of God. Is it not nobler than the pretty myths which have been wasting our energies and dividing the brotherhood of men into petty clans, all hating each other even while they professed that love was their prime virtue?"

"But sacrifice," she said, "what did you mean by that?"

"We had truth and error mingled. The sacrifice was merely a remnant of heathen customs. Peoples who knew nothing of Judaism nor of Christianity had their offerings and sacrifices. The Jew were the chosen people, finer and more spiritual than any other; and to the souls of the chosen among them the Creator revealed His truths. They renounced all heathenish doctrines, and into the few ceremonies and customs they retained they infused a spiritual significance. As the race deteriorated, this spiritual meaning was misinterpreted, and became more and more literal and gross. The people fell into sin, and for this the Creator punished them by taking away their power and pre-eminence, and by scattering them over the face of the earth."

Honora listened intently; and when he had finished, she uttered but one word. Clasping her hands and lifting her eyes, her heart seemed to burst upward like a fountain, tossing that one word into air, "Emmanuel!"

Not the primeval Creator alone, distant and awful, but God with us! Into this vast and terrible void which had been spread out before her, she invoked with passion the incarnate, the lowly, the pitiful, the suffering God.

"We hold that sacrifice is a practice of divine institution retained from our first parents, not an originally heathen custom," she added after a moment, regaining her composure. "You are, however, obliged to give up your belief in it, or be inconsistent. I can see now that if you hold to the sacrifice, you must hold to the Redeemer; if to the Redeemer, then you must believe in Christ, since the time is gone by for expectation; and if you accept the Christ, you must be a Roman Catholic."

"Precisely!" said the Jew. He had felt a momentary electric shock at the passion of her first exclamation, and had seen with emotion the flush and fire in her countenance. How he smiled at her concise statement of the case.

Miss Pembroke rose, for the last of the procession was passing. The children were called back to their seats in the same order in which they had left them, and a few simple exercises were gone through with at the request of their visitor. All was well calculated to unfold and inform their young minds, but nothing was for show.

Mr. Schoninger blushed for the mistake he had made in fancying that any occupation on earth could be more refined and noble than Miss Pembroke's, when it was conducted in Miss Pembroke's manner. It seemed an occupation for angels. She possessed, evidently, in a pre-eminent degree, the power to understand and interest children, and she used that power to perfect ends. There was none of that personal familiarity which he had dreaded to see, that promiscuous fondness and caressing by which some women fancy they please children, when, in fact, the finer sort of children are oftener than not displeased with it. A kind touch of her fingers was to them an immense favor, and a kiss would have been remembered for ever. But while they treated her with profound respect, they approached her with perfect confidence and delight. They gathered about her, and gazed into her sympathetic face, bright and transparent with love from a bountiful woman's heart. They looked a her as a sky full of little stars may look into a smooth lake, and each saw its own reflection there, and was happy. In her soul all innocent infantile thoughts and fancies were condensed, as cloud and spray are condensed into water, and not only could she remember the process, but she could reverse it at will, could evaporate a thought or truth too strong for childish intellects, and give it in the form of rosy clouds to wide, grasping, childish imaginations.

Only one exercise failed at first. The children were shy of singing before the stranger. All their voices faltered into silence but one, a rather fair voice of a little boy who was perfectly self-confident, and who evidently expected applause.

Mr. Schoninger took no notice of the child. Its vanity and boldness displeased him. "A shallow thing!" he thought; and said, "I see that I must hire you to sing for me. You like fairy-stories, surely. Well, sing me but one song, and I will tell you the story."

His voice and smile reassured them. Moreover, a gentleman, no matter how splendid he might be, who could tell fairy-stories, could not be very dreadful. They exchanged smiles and glances, took courage, fixed their eyes on their teacher, and sang a pretty hymn in good time and tune, and with good expression.

In their first essay the musician had caught a faltering little silvery note, which had failed as soon as heard. In the second it came out round and clear, a voice of surprising beauty. He marked the singer, and called him forward as soon as the hymn was over. The boy came awkwardly and blushing. He was the ugliest and most dingy pupil there. Only a pair of melancholy, dark and lustrous eyes, habitually downcast, and a set of perfect teeth, redeemed the face from being disagreeable. Through those eyes looked a winged soul that did not recognize itself, still less expect recognition from others, but felt only the vague weight and sadness of an uncongenial life. He gave the impression of a beautiful bird whose every plume is so laden with mire it cannot fly.

"You have a good voice, and should learn how to sing," Mr. Schoninger said to him kindly. "I will teach you, if Miss Pembroke approves, and will make the arrangements. Of course it will cost you nothing."

"He needs encouragement," the musician remarked when the boy had returned to his seat; "and he needs to have his position defined before the others. Do you not perceive that they despise him? He has the voice of an angel, and he looks remarkable. And now for my story."

The children's eyes sparkled with anticipation, and the teacher leaned smilingly to listen. Let us listen also, and become better acquainted with Mr. Schoninger.

"Once upon a time, there was a great wrangle in a certain street," the story-teller began. "Five little boys and girls were quarreling, and two dogs were barking. The neighbors put their heads out of their windows, and the policeman stopped. Mrs. Blake put her two forefingers in her two ears, for the noise was near her step, and the five boys and girls were all telling her together what the matter was, and whose fault it was. Then the mothers called their children home, and two went into Mrs. Blake's, for they were hers. This was the story she drew from them: Anne Blake had said a cross word to one of the others, that other had made a face at the next, the third had slapped the fourth, and it went round the circle. So it seemed that Anne started the whole by speaking a cross word.

"'Since you are sorry, I will talk no more to you about it,' her mother said. 'But I wish you to go up to your chamber and sit alone a little while, and think over a Chinese proverb which is written on this slip of paper. You are ten years old, and must begin to think.'

"Anne went slowly up-stairs to her chamber, shut the door after her, and sat down in a little cushioned chair by the window to read her proverb. Its being Chinese did not prevent it from being good. This is what she read: 'A word once spoken, a coach and six cannot bring it back again.'

"The day was warm, and the curtain at the window swung with a lulling motion, giving glimpses of blue sky with white clouds sailing over, and, below, of the top of a grape-vine full of leaves and small green grapes.

"Anne gazed at the sky till it made her feel sleepy—gazing at bright things does make one sleepy—then she gazed at the grape-vine. Presently, she saw something in this vine that looked like a tiny ladder, hidden among the leaves. It looked so much like a ladder that she leaned forward and pulled the curtain aside, to see more plainly. Sure enough! It was the loveliest ladder, or stairway, winding down and down. Its steps were dark, like vine branches, and there was a railing at each side of twigs and tendrils, and it wound down and down, in sight and out of sight. And, more wonderful still, it was no longer a yard, with the city about, she saw, but a great vine covering all the window, and glimpses of a moon-lighted forest down below.

"'I must go down,' says Anne; and so down she went on the beautiful stairs.

"Lights and shades fluttered over her, and the leaves clapped together, and little tendrils caught at her dress in play. And by-and-by she stepped on to the brightest greensward that could be, full of blue and white violets. The trees arched over her, the air was sweet, and there was a smooth, pond near by. The water was so very smooth that she would never have known it was water if the banks had not turned the wrong way in it, and the trees grown down instead of up. A little white boat, too, had another little white boat under it, the two keel to keel. Swans ran down the shore as she looked, and splashed into the water, dipping their heads under, and making the whole surface so full of motion that the up side-down trees and banks and boat disappeared. Words cannot describe how beautiful the place was. There was every kind of flower, and hosts of birds, and the moonlight was so bright that all could be distinctly seen. There were also a great many splendid moths that looked like flowers flying about, and flapping their petals.

"But the most beautiful part was that everything seemed to breathe of peace and love. The birds sang and cooed to each other, the blossoms leaned cheek to cheek, the water laughed at the stones it ran over, and the wet stones smiled back, the gray old rocks held tenderly the flowers and mosses that grew in their hollows, and the mosses and flowers held on to the rocks with their tiny roots, like little children clinging to old people who are fond of them.

"'How beautiful it is to see them so loving,' Anne said. 'They are a sort of people, too; for they look alive. I wish other folks would be as good. I'm sure I try; but then somebody always comes along and says something ugly; and then, of course, I can't help being ugly back again.'

"'Oh! yes, you can,' said a sweet voice close by.

"Anne looked and saw a charming little lady standing beside her. She was so beautiful that words cannot describe her, and she carried a pink petunia for a parasol to preserve her complexion. For she was exquisitely fair, and the moonlight was really very bright.

"'Oh! yes, you can,' she repeated when Anne looked at her. 'You can give a pleasant answer, and then people will stop being ugly.'

"'I could do it if everybody else would,' Anne said. 'The beginning is the trouble. How nice it would be if there were a king over all the world, and he would say, Now, after I have counted three, all of you stop being cross, and begin to love each other, and keep on loving a whole hour. If you don't, I'll cut your heads off!'

"'That would not be love; it would be a make-believe to save their heads,' the little lady answered. 'But there is such a king, and he has commanded us to love each other, and . . .'

"Here she was interrupted by a loud flapping of wings and a terrible croaking, and a great black bird, something like a bat, flew by; and wherever it struck its wings other bats flew out, and the air grew dark with them, and all the beautiful forest was changed. The stones tried to stop the brook, and the brook tried to upset the stones; the leaves struck each other, the swams and little birds began to pull each other's feathers out. All was discord.

"And then there was a rolling of wheels, and a trampling of hoofs, and a great yellow coach appeared drawn by six horses covered with foam. The coachman looked as if he were driving for his life, and there was a head thrust from each window of the coach, telling him to drive faster. All the heads wore caps like dish-covers, and had long braids of hair hanging down their