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JUSTICE AND MERCY;

OR,

THE FEAST OF ALL-HALLOWE.

CHAPTER XIX.

Practical proofs of whether Flora allowed religion to have any effect on her conduct to her fellow creatures and the fulfilment of her duty to God, was to be afforded sooner than herself or the proud zealot, Mrs. Somers, were either of them aware of, and, ere long, that pharisaical dame was obliged to own the unwelcome truth, that, shocked as she had been at Miss Douglas's obstinacy in refusing to own that she was one of the vilest of sinners, and her want of humility to boldly declaring that she would never pray to be despised, she was, nevertheless, a very good person, as the world goes, ay, and rather better than the rest of the world, proud lady! if you would but own the whole truth;—for, without any work of supererogation being performed, or austere fasts, or acts of penance, or long hours given to prayer and meditation, our Flora yet managed to aid her neighbor and give to God His due, without any of that maudlin, pharisaical pretence which we so often meet with in the self-righteous persons we encounter in our path through life.

To little Alice she had become tenderly attached; there was a depth of feeling in the heart of this neglected child, which needed only to be awakened to render it susceptible of the finest emotions; and, as may be supposed, her stepmother's training was far from likely to eradicate any faults which might have occurred in the former training of a child whose disposition and character were naturally proud and sensitive;—and, when stung to the quick by unmerited reproof, when severely corrected for some childish failing, instead of resolving to do better for the future, it not unfrequently happened that the spirit of opposition was raised, and, far from being checked or awed by her stepmother's authority, she inwardly determined not even to try to amend the minor failings for which she was so severely chastised.

On one bright sultry summer's day, long after the return of the family to London, the poor child, for some trivial fault towards her elder half-sister, had been, as usual, punished with severity, and sent to bed without either tea or supper, and had wept herself to sleep in Flora's arms. Gladly, indeed, would our heroine have deprived herself of her own comfortable meal; but the orders of the stepmother were too strict, and she kept, indeed, too sharp a look-out for them to be evaded; and, with a deep feeling of pity for the poor little girl, she could only afford her sympathy and advice, and do her best to nudge, in her private intercourse with her, the effects of the stepmother's unjustifiable harshness.

During the night the child awoke, complained of thirst and heat, also of sickness; and, to her great alarm, Flora found that she was in a high fever. Her first care in the morning was to acquaint Mrs. Somers with the little girl's condition, who treated it lightly, told Flora she frightened herself unnecessarily about the child, whom she was doing her best to spoil; and at length promised her that if she did not mend during the day, she would send for advice by night.

During the whole day Flora kept watch by the little sufferer's bedside, who, with her feverish hand locked to her own, prattled away with the simplicity of childhood of what she called old times, when mamma lived; and this spoke of the arrival of her stepmother into the household.

'I had never seen my stepmother but twice before mamma's death. She had been a widow some time before mamma knew her, but I can remember one morning, when she had been dead about four months, I had gone into the parlor, and was crying over a new book she had given me the day before her death, when my father entered, my stepmother leaning on his arm, and advancing to me, he said:

'Alice, this lady is my wife, and you must call her mother, and obey and love her as such.'

'Perhaps,' continued Alice, 'I did not please her by my looks, for I felt as if my heart would burst when I thought of my own dear dead mother; but I remember I tried to smile through my tears, and said I would do all I could to please her; but, touching the book out of my hands, she harshly inquired if it was that nonsense I had been crying over? Adding, 'If so, this must not occur again. I answered, 'Yes.' It was one of the stories in Madame de Genlis' 'Tales of the Castle' I had been reading, and to my surprise she immediately said to my father—

'Arthur, I shall take this book away from her. I never choose to let young people read any work of fiction that moves them to tears. Let them weep over their faults—not over imaginary

trials.' I felt, Miss Douglas, continued Alice, 'as if my heart would break when she took away my dear mother's gift; but a few days later I was in the garden, and had gathered a bouquet as usual, intending to go and throw the flowers on mamma's grave, beside which I went to pray almost daily. I had just pulled three or four moss roses, and was adding them to my nosegay, when my arm was rudely thrust aside, and I was angrily asked what I meant by daring to pull the flowers without asking permission? I staggered, Miss Douglas, almost stunned by the blow I received as she spoke, and I replied, 'I was doing no harm; I was taking the flowers to lay on dear mamma's grave, as I had always done since her death; and my father knew that I had done so. My stepmother then pulled me to her, told me it was mere sentimental nonsense to do anything of the sort: that it was folly to fancy I honored the remains of my mother by throwing flowers on her grave; adding, sternly, 'Now never repeat this sort of thing again. I fear I shall have hard work, Alice, in getting such romantic trash out of your head; your poor foolish mother was letting you grow up very proud and very romantic, but you must be guided by me in all things. Read no more works of imagination, and become less romantic, and we shall be able to tell your father presently that you have become quite a humble, docile child.' I made no answer, Miss Douglas, for I positively feared my stepmother; but, as I turned away, I inwardly resolved that I would never become humble in her fashion; and as to reading works of imagination, I have the 'Evenings at Home,' and Miss Edgeworth's works, and Mrs. Barbauld's, all in a shy corner which she has never found out—ay, and 'Robinson Crusoe' and 'Tales of the Genii' as well; and I take them to bed and read them before I get up every morning, and hide them before I leave my room.'

'And your morning prayers, Alice, dear—what of them? I hope they are not forgotten,' said Flora, scarcely able to repress a smile at the little girl's enumeration of the books which she had hid so carefully from her stepmother.

'No, indeed,' replied Alice; 'every morning, directly I awake, I jump out of bed, and, kneeling down, say my prayers, as my dear mother always told me to do; then I read, but always lay my books aside before Jimina, or even you, Miss Douglas, have entered my room.'

'And why have you hid them from me?' inquired Flora.

'The naivete of the answer amused our heroine in no small degree, as, looking archly up, Alice replied—

'I feared you might think it your duty to tell my stepmother, and I could not live without my books; but now—'

'Well, what of the present?' asked Flora;—she could not divine the expression which Alice's features then wore.

There was a pause of a few moments. Alice seemed as if she strove to gather strength to speak; then a dark shadow seemed to pass over that still childish countenance; the lips moved, but no sound was uttered; for a moment she forgot, as it were, the presence of her only earthly friend; then the cloud cleared away, the lips parted in a pleasant smile, the white fingers grasped the hand of Flora more closely, and she murmured in a low whisper the words—

'I mind nothing now, because I shall die soon, and be with my own dear mother again.'

To rally the child, Flora felt was impossible; no symptom of approaching dissolution was to be seen, till the child gave utterance to those words with as utter an absence of fear, and seemingly as conscious of her approaching doom as a person three times her age might be supposed to be on feeling the hand of death upon him.

Again the little hot fingers twisted themselves around those of Flora, and now she murmured—

'I feel very ill; but when I get worse, and die, will you promise me, dear Miss Douglas, that it shall be in your arms!—then I shall die so happily.'

'If it should please God to take you to himself so early, Alice, I promise you that I will not leave you,' replied Flora; 'but there is no reason to fear that anything particular is the matter with you.'

An incredulous glance was her only answer, and at that moment the doctor, whom Mrs. Somers had unwillingly sent for, was announced.

'There is nothing of any consequence the matter, I am sure, Mr. Selwyn,' exclaimed Mrs. Somers; 'but Miss Douglas was so very much alarmed, that at last I consented to send for you.'

To the evident surprise of Mrs. Somers, no answer was returned, and with a somewhat grave expression of countenance, the worthy gentleman gave his orders, and, when leaving the sick room requested Flora to accompany him.

not, dear Miss Douglas?' exclaimed Alice;—'you will not forget the promise you have made me.'

'I will be back in a few minutes, love, and stay by you till you are better,' replied Flora, kissing the child as she spoke, perfectly heedless of the signs and evident annoyance of Mr. Selwyn. Following both Mrs. Somers and Flora to the dining-room, his first words were addressed to the latter, to whom he said—

'Upon no account, Miss Douglas, must you again enter the sick-room; this poor child is seized with smallpox, and I fear, from the present state of the symptoms, that the case may prove a bad one.'

'Smallpox?' ejaculated the female Tartuffe and the two rosy young ladies in one breath.—'Heavens! is it possible smallpox is in the house?' the young ladies adding, 'Mamma, we must leave home directly. I vow I could never hold up my head again, were my face marked with that terrible disease.'

'Certainly, my loves, you must both leave immediately, and I must write and tell your father what is the matter with that unfortunate child; a nurse must be provided for her at once. I must not hazard my own life and health by going into that sick-room at all.'

'Poor child! poor child!' said the worthy doctor, with a deep sigh; 'I will look out a nurse for her, Mrs. Somers, for she must be well and carefully attended; and even then I will not answer for her life.'

Flora rose from her seat, and advancing to the doctor, she said, 'Mr. Selwyn, I am very fond of this poor child, and have promised her that I will stay with her till she recovers; danger or not I cannot leave her.'

Mr. Selwyn stared in some surprise at the slight elegant young woman who addressed him, as if he thought she herself needed care; and it might be, too, with a fear lest those lovely features, and the beauty of the complexion of her who spoke, should be marred by attendance on the little sufferer, that he replied—

'But indeed you must not, Miss Douglas; this poor child will soon scarcely know who watches by her, as I fear, the complaint is very severe in its attack. You must beware; your own life may pay the penalty, or if not your life, your countenance may bear the ravages of this dreadful malady.'

'I am in the hands of God, sir,' calmly replied Flora. 'I am quite woman enough to feel such a result as that to which your words point; nevertheless, I cannot resolve to leave this poor child, perhaps to die in the arms of a stranger; I will be her nurse.'

The doctor surveyed with admiration the retreating form of the beautiful and heroic young woman; as she spoke, the Tartuffe, keenly felt the naive reproach conveyed in the almost contemptuous smile with which he bade adieu to her daughters; but she made no observation except—

'Miss Douglas is a very strange young woman, very heroic, and capable of generous actions, as you now see; for I am a great discernor of character, and have long seen this, and wondered, too, that there can be so much that is bright and worthy of admiration in one who is really very proud and holds very peculiar opinions.'

'Miss Douglas is an angel, madam, and an ornament to her sex,' replied the doctor; 'I only grieve that the fine qualities of her noble heart are leading her to throw away the personal gifts with which she is so largely endowed, or perhaps even her life itself,' he added, as he strode laughingly out of the room.'

CHAPTER XX.

At length the dreadful malady which had seized upon Alice, approached the crisis. No one but Flora was with her; she never left the room—her food being left at the door. The young ladies had left the house, as we have already said; the Tartuffe remained, indeed, in compliance with the wishes of her husband, but took special care that not even the servant who was commissioned to attend at Flora's door, as the hour for each meal approached, should be admitted to her presence.

The disease was of the most virulent nature; at length Alice became blind; still the fevered hand was held out to grasp that of Flora, and no complaint, no murmur escaped her lips whilst her friend sat patiently by.

But one day Mr. Selwyn entered, and found Flora looking more languid than usual; the child, too, was evidently near the end of her mortal career; and taking the fevered hand of Flora within his own, the good doctor said,

'You need rest and quiet, you are yourself becoming ill.'

'The blind child heard the words, and clasping her wasted hands together, she exclaimed: 'Leave me, dear Miss Douglas; how selfish have I been to keep you here.'

'No, dearer, be still, and say that short prayer to our Lady which I taught you pester-

day,' replied Flora: 'she will soon be your mother, for you are now going to your eternal home.'

'And when there, oh, how I will pray for you who have never left me through this fearful illness! But papa, where is he? is he too afraid to see his child before she dies?'

'He has not been able to leave his business, love; he has been away several days,' replied Flora, unwilling to own the truth, that even the father feared to enter that infectious room.

Mr. Selwyn went away that evening fully aware that the shadow of death was now flitting over that seamed, scarred face, and conscious too that the beautiful and amiable Flora would, ere many hours had elapsed, be likewise suffering under the malady.

The sun had set, and the moon had risen in all its splendor; it was a lovely August night, and through the parted curtains of the window, Flora could see it sailing high in the heavens amidst countless myriads of stars, whilst beyond the tall tops of trees which skirted the beach (for the family resided at Hampstead) might be seen waving to and fro in the night breeze. It was a night without a shade or cloud to shroud one of the starry host, or the smallest flower of earth, and the glimmer of the wax taper was faintly discernible in the long line of silvery radiance which flooded the room. All in the house was as hushed and still as if death reigned in every apartment, and unperceptibly a sense of awe stole over the naturally strong mind of Flora. 'Yet, why fear?' she said to herself; 'the angel of death is spreading his wings over an innocent child. Would that all death-beds were like unto hers!'

Suddenly a deep sigh burst forth, and the violent convulsion which seized the frame of the child shook the bed whereon she lay.

'Hush!' whispered Alice, when that strong convulsion had passed away; 'it seems to me that I hear mamma's voice calling me, and such bright spirits seem standing around me that I have no fear.' Then she murmured, 'God will protect and bless you, my own dear second mother, for such you have been to me,' and now repeated the words, 'Jesus and Mary help me in this my agony.'

Flora arose, and guided the hand in its effort to make the sign of the cross; it was the last act of expiring nature; the breath grew fainter, and the light gathered still more thickly over the glazed eye, and the angel of death claimed for his own the soul of a child taken, in Heaven's own mercy, from the tyranny of those who should have loved her. One low sigh again broke out, that unearthly silence, and the golden fillet which bound an immortal soul to its earthly tabernacle, was burst asunder, and the spirit returned to Him who gave it.

With reverent care Flora withdrew the arm with which she had supported the child, and rung the bell for a woman who was to be in the house to assist Flora when all was over.—Speedily did they perform the last sad duties, and then Flora requested the nurse to accompany her to her own room, and help her to undress. The symptoms that precede the complaint had, she already knew, commenced; yet, with the fortitude of a courageous woman, she would not relinquish her charge until all was over. Then, telling the woman that she should be amply compensated for any trouble she might occasion her, she offered up her prayers to God, precluding them with a fervent act of resignation to His ever-adorable will.

When Mr. Selwyn entered the house in the morning, he found it, as he truly surmised, the abode both of death and sickness, and he trembled as he beheld the beautiful Flora struggling under this most fearful malady; yet he had hopes—for his experienced judgment detected favorable symptoms, which did not exist in the case of Alice. 'But still the face,' thought the worthy man, 'that beautiful face, will for ever have lost its charm!'

Tenderly as a fond father did he watch over her, carefully noting every alternation in the complaint till the crisis had passed; and then, with real joy depicted in his noble countenance, he one morning whispered to her the words,—

'You are out of danger, most heroic and noble of women; we shall yet, with God's blessing save you.'

Flora could not speak, but only raised her thanks, and pressed more warmly the hand of the good doctor in token of her gratitude.

The next visit, she had regained her sight, and could speak her thanks for his care; but the worthy man could not repress the moisture which sprang in his eyes as he looked upon that altered, disfigured countenance.

A few mornings later she sat up, arrayed in a loose dressing gown, when he entered; and returning with warmth the affectionate pressure of his hand, she exclaimed—

'Doctor I am a very weak, imperfect creature, and am almost ashamed to tell you for what, after a fervent thanksgiving to God for

my recovery, I have prayed very earnestly this morning.'

'Nay, dear Miss Douglas,' replied Mr. Selwyn, 'you have been so good, so much superior to your sex in general, that I am sure you will have no cause for confusion at any avowal you may choose to make.'

'I speak the truth,' replied Flora; 'I have not yet summoned courage to ask for a looking-glass: tell me, my dear sir, am I much altered?'

'Not as much as I feared you would be; yet I may not disguise the truth. Great will be your reward, dear Miss Douglas, for your noble conduct; but—he hesitated—do not, I pray you, make me announce unpleasant tidings; imagine the very worst, and then let nurse bring you the glass.'

Flora covered her hands for a few moments; the doctor saw the eyes closed, and the lips moved as in prayer; then she steadily surveyed her wofully altered countenance in the glass the nurse held out to her.

'Take it away, nurse!' she said, after a moment's pause; 'it is now a plain old face, but God's will be done.'

She sighed. Mr. Selwyn thought it would be natural had she wept. Ah, poor Flora; she thought at that moment of Sir Godfrey, and the wreck of all her hopes; yet, like a true-hearted woman, she did not repeat of what she had done.

CHAPTER XXI.

Steadily, though slowly, poor Flora regained her health and strength, and even Mrs. Somers could not withhold her meed of admiration at the perfect forgetfulness of self which marked her character; and yet—strange perversity of the human heart—she always protested, when in the company of her friends, that she could not understand how so proud a person as Miss Douglas could be so good, adding, 'Poor thing! I pity her when I think of what she was—so really beautiful—and see what she now is; her face so seamed and scarred, all out of love for that unfortunate wayward little Alice, who would have been a sad trial to me had she lived.'

Alas! this wretched worldly woman, who thought herself so good, did not look below the surface of things, and could not see that Flora was actuated by any higher motive than mere human affection.

Cold-hearted and selfish as the whole family really were, they were not so utterly lost to a sense of what was really just and proper as not to give Flora a really warm invitation to make their house her home until she should have thoroughly recovered her health and strength, as also till she had heard of a situation; and, moreover, really treated her as one of themselves. On one fine autumn evening it happened that Mr. Somers did not return home alone, but was accompanied by a gentleman, the tones of whose voice struck on Flora's ear as strangely familiar; yet, the stranger entered the dining-room, she was at a loss to tell when or where she had seen him till introduced to her by the name of Macdonald, she recognized the bluff old gentleman who had rebuked Miss Jerima for the discourteous way that young lady had spoken of herself when on the deck of the steamer on their way to Paris.

The old gentleman rubbed his eyes as though he did not see clearly; the figure, so slender yet so graceful, the auburn hair, and deep blue—as fringed with those dark lashes, were the same, so was the voice; but yet Miss Douglas was so unlike the Miss Douglas who had so charmed him, that he could scarcely believe the same being before him.

Mr. Somers had, however, spoken in terms of uncollected admiration of what he called Flora's heroic conduct; and his friend had no, by the way, forgotten to rally him as to the extraordinary virtues of his wife and step-daughters, who, it appeared, were right willing to let a stranger carry off the palm of heroism, and glad indeed to depute her to serve in their place.—Nervously sensitive, however, and always cautious lest he should give pain unnecessarily, the good old gentleman endeavored to conceal the surprise he felt at the change in Flora's appearance, and merely congratulated her on her recovery; adding that when she felt herself restored to health and strength, he should be glad if she would visit him and a maiden sister who kept house for him at Clapham; and that she might command his services in any way in which they could be made available. Flora immediately begged that he would remember her should any of his friends require a governess; to which he yielded a willing assent, and they parted mutually pleased with each other.

About a week had elapsed when, late one fine September afternoon, a carriage drove up to the good old banker's counting-house in Lombard street. Quite like an old-fashioned maid was Archibald Macdonald—precise and regular in all his dealings; and although he felt the hand of