

PLAYING WITH FIRE.

BY M. GALLAHER.

"I wouldn't do it, Aunt Eliza, for anything." "And I would, so there's the difference. Not many girls need a doll of advice about looking more closely to their own interests. The idea of her giving up that chance to take lessons in German of that German professor, just to give the money to buy books for that half-wild girl, that is no high nor low to Margaret, anyway, and who probably won't amount to much after all!"

"Excuse me, auntie, but we don't know that Margaret's sacrifice has done some good, at least, it has aroused the city to the need of having books furnished by the state, and I am told our city is entitled to this privilege. More than that, it seems to me, Aunt Eliza, that Margaret obtained more spiritual good than all the intellectual good she lost. It is a serious thing to 'play with fire'."

"Humph! Anyone would think you were your mother to the girl, for I believe you are as bad as Margaret, if you are only her step-mother!"

Mrs. Mason flushed painfully. Between her step-daughter and herself there had always been the tenderest relations. Margaret, who could not remember her own mother, had often told about her both by Mr. and Mrs. Mason, the latter of whom had been a dear friend; but neither could bear to have the term "step-mother" used by others.

The conversation dropped, for Aunt Eliza knew she had made a tactless remark. But it worried Mrs. Mason not a little, and she was disturbed by forebodings of what the outcome might be. Aunt Eliza, with her strong, practical nature, had a great influence over the gentler Margaret.

The bright summer days passed away and an imperceptible change came over Margaret. Aunt Eliza had been too wary to come out boldly against her, but she was not slow to consider herself more; but slowly, yet all too surely, the strong nature was leading the weaker one. Mrs. Mason did what she could, but kind words and thoughtful deeds must originate in hearts not in codes. Margaret rarely found time now to read to the sick girl whose eyes troubled her; she forgot to carry the well-read religious paper to a poorer family who could not possibly afford any paper, and little by little more of the inevitable mending devolved upon the not over-strong mother. Money that used to go to missions was added to her bank account, and once or twice Margaret was heard to say something about "looking out for number one." And was the young girl better or happier? Even Aunt Eliza had to admit to herself that Margaret was not quite so lovable as she had been a few months ago, and that nearly so happy. The truth was the young lady felt dissatisfied with herself, and imagined that everyone was criticizing her. Then, too, certain faults and wrong impulses that had been buried in her beneficence came to the surface when her usefulness was dissolved in the turbid waters of self-interest. At this critical moment Margaret was invited to a reception which was to take place Thursday evening. Aunt Eliza had gone to visit to another niece a week or two, and Margaret's mother was taken with a violent headache the evening of the reception. There were the dishes to be done, bread to be put to rise, and father's coat to be mended. But Margaret selfishly thought, "O, mother will get along somehow," and went. At first her conscience troubled her so that she wished she had not come; but she was soon introduced to a handsome, dark-eyed stranger, whose attention flattered her wounded vanity. She did not know that there was only one other sufferer of the hostess, who could not bear to hurt the feelings of a friend whom she felt sure would some day repent of taking up this fascinating stranger. There was certainly a remarkable reader of human nature, and after a few meetings he could play upon Margaret's weaknesses as a musician on the keys of his instrument. Others "saw through him," as they put it, but still Margaret's fascination lasted. While she was none the less selfish, the poor girl labored under the delusion that she was growing better. Compared with dreary average man seems a giant; compared with giants, a pigmy.

Margaret's attendant was but a dwarf in the scale of moral growth; yet, as her own lowered standard of moral law caused her to compare him with dull, uninteresting men of doubtful reputation, she exaggerated and even idealized his good qualities. He had them, oh yes! Everybody has. And those warning young people against unsafe friends are not only very uncharitable not to admit the good qualities of the dangerous persons, but they are very unwise as well. This course arouses a feeling of injustice which invests the quondam martyr with undue interest.

In such cases as Margaret's, even wise remonstrance usually avails little. Margaret's mother knew her too well to attempt it, and could only hope that the fever would run its course with as little injury as possible to the patient.

There were times, it is true, when Margaret's better nature was in the ascendant. One afternoon, in a softer mood, she had sent word over to sick Viola that she would be able to continue with "Hermann and Dorothea," as she would be over to spend the evening. The very thought of the promised visit acted as a

stimulant upon the sick girl, and the poor old mother blessed Margaret in her heart.

The day wore on and Margaret went into the hall to get her wraps preparatory to going to Viola's. She had just glanced in the hall-tree when there came a loud ring at the bell. For once Margaret was not glad to hear that ring.

"Ah, getting ready, I see. I thought to surprise you. The team is all ready, and we can take advantage of the first good sleighing of the winter."

Something in the tone of the speaker jarred upon Margaret. How sure he felt of her going!

"Why, what is the matter?" he exclaimed, catching sight of her face.

"I can't go tonight. I promised Viola I would read to her this evening."

"Pshaw! What if you did? Some other evening will do as well. Think of yourself sometimes, Margaret."

It was the echo of Aunt Eliza's sentiment, "Look out for number one!"

"But I promised!"

"Well, some promises are better broken than kept."

Margaret was sure this one would be better kept, and she didn't like him any better for giving her ride, but the sleighing was really good—the jingle of the bells sounded in her ears as beautifully as the music of the mermaids, and there was no cotton candy to be seen against the whirling tones of her companion—and so Margaret took the selfish course, and for the first time in her life deliberately broke her promise.

It would not be true to say that Margaret did not enjoy her ride, but the very thing (the bells could not drown the undertone of conscience, which kept saying, "I ought not to have come; I ought not to have come." And meanwhile poor Viola, in bitter disappointment, gave up looking for Margaret.

The strain was too much for her, and although she could not have lived long any way, undoubtedly hastened her death.

Margaret blamed herself more than any one else had the heart to blame her. In bitterness of spirit she precluded the littleness of her life during the past few months; and her selfishness seemed actually criminal. She understood at last how, through appealing to her wounded vanity and favoring her weakness, her companion of that never-to-be-forgotten drive had gained his influence over her. And with that perception she felt the influence slipping away as suddenly as snow melts in the sun's new-born spring. All the sorrow she felt at breaking with him was dispelled by his ungenerous manner of receiving the truth. Two weeks after Viola's death, which had changed Margaret into a stranger but wiser woman—a woman stronger even than before the working of the heaven of selfishness—she with whom Margaret had so nearly joined her fortunes, was arrested for forgery! All the wrongs in Margaret's mind at the thought of her intimacy with him, and especially regretted that last ride. What if the arrest had happened then? Worse still, what if she had married him? She would have had no one but herself to thank for it. For she could understand how some good women had married worthless men—they had been driven away from their moments of weakness from high ideals, and when they emerged into strength and life, they found themselves fettered for life. What an escape had been hers! How nearly in living for herself had she lost herself! Truly, "whoever will save his life shall lose it," and just as truly said he, "My burden is light."—The Morning Star.

MAY BE MRS. LEE'S LESSON.

The old doctor buttoned up his overcoat, drew on his gloves, and said: "Good-by, Maude, keep up courage; take plenty of outdoor exercise, and have as good a time as possible, but don't go inside a school-room for six months."

Years of bitter disappointment sprang to Maude's eyes as she watched the old man drive away.

"O, mother," she exclaimed, "how can I put my books away? Why, only six months and I was to graduate! It is too hard."

"It is hard, dear," said her mother, "but if you sweat it bravely you will learn some sweet lessons."

Just then the postman rang, and Maude found a letter bearing a foreign postmark. Forgetting for the moment her own trial, she tore it open, and eagerly read.

Peking, China, December 30.

DEAR NIECE:—You are nearing your graduation, and I think you will be interested in Wen Ling, one of our girls who also graduates in June. She is a dear Christian girl, daughter of our Chinese pastor, stationed in Shanghai, in a heathen village where they never had a girl's school, and not a woman in town to read.

Wen Ling is anxious to open a school when she goes home. I think it would be a beautiful thing if this dear, consecrated girl could gather in the village children and teach them, and every night send them back into their homes to sing "Jesus songs," and tell the "Jesus story."

She is very poor. Her father receives only six dollars a month, and has a large family to support.

Twenty dollars would pay the expense of such a school for a year. Could you not raise it in some way?

I must close hastily to catch the home mail. With an earnest prayer that you

may feel the need of your heathen sisters, I am lovingly,

YOUR AUNT CHARLOTTE.

"Well, I do declare! This is the biggest joke I ever heard of! Why, I am not just going to let Aunt Charlotte have just gone crazy over her Chinese," said Maude.

"My dear," said the mother gently, "perhaps our Father is going to teach you to care for your poor heathen sisters. You think I hard to drop out of school for six months. If you had never been in school a day in your life, would you like to have some one give you a chance?"

"I suppose so, but I never thought of it. Anyhow, I can't do it, so that is the end of it."

"I am not sure of that, my child. Think it over, and ask God about it."

That night Maude lay in bed, and prayed earnestly: "O Father, thou seest how hard this trial is for my dear child. Give her grace, I pray thee, to bear it patiently; and may she learn some precious lesson, which shall help her to earn an earnest, consecrated life. She is thine, O Christ; I only ask that she may be fitted for thy service. Amen, dear Lord, amen."

Meanwhile Maude lay in her own room, grieving over her disappointment. All at once her mother's words, "Would you like to have some one give you a chance?" came to her. Thoughts of the girl in China began to creep in.

Fragments of her aunt's letter came to her mind, and she seemed to see the poor heathen girls as never before, until gradually a great desire to help them sprang up in her heart.

She arose, and went to the little box her mother had given her long ago, and opened it. "You poor forlorn box, I have not thought of you for a long time," she said. "How many pennies have you, I wonder."

She shook them out slowly and counted them. "Fifty-nine! Only two thousand and nine hundred and one more to raise," she said sarcastically. Then came the thought, "If thirty others would do as much, we could have the school!"

"O dear," she said to herself, "I know the girls in my set are not interested. But something seemed to whisper, 'Perhaps you could interest them,' and she answered involuntarily, "Well, I have had a good mind to try it."

Knocking beside the white bed, Maude prayed: "Dear Lord, I have been so careless and thoughtless about those poor girls, and now I begin to feel sorry for them. I want to help them. Please send me now I can do it, and help me to do it."

"Mother," said Maude the next morning, "I want thirty little boxes."

She laughed at the look of astonishment which crossed her mother's face, as she exclaimed in surprise:

"Thirty little boxes?"

"Yes, mother, those Christian girls visited me in the night, and they are going to have a school."

So the boxes were ordered. Maude read over her aunt's letter as never before. She had always declared, "The heathen woman's friend is a dry old magazine," but as she now turned to it for information about the work, she found it a purveyor of life.

The boxes came, Maude humbly confessed.

"Mother, I am learning my lesson. I do feel interested. I seem to know those girls, and my heart is so happy."

The doctor smiled as he met Maude here and there, with a happy look on her face. "She is taking her exercises faithfully," he said to himself. But little did the old man realize that his little school of thirty boxes was to be after all a purveyor of life.

From one to another of her friends she went, and as she pleaded for a school for "those poor girls," many hearts were touched. Her zeal was contagious, and very few refused to take her boxes.

"My boxes are all given out," she said, "and I am going to write to Auntie to have the school opened. Oh, it seems to me to be a great joy to me. I am so happy! Why," she added in a soft whisper, "I can almost thank God I had to leave school."

"Well, we must contrive some way to help you. I will go home now and see Mr. Alton. Do not worry; we will not let you suffer. But what will you do to-night?" asked Mrs. Alton, pausing with her hand on the door.

"O, I'm all right for the night. Sure as Mr. Muldoon will be coming in for a bit, and Mrs. Donahue will be here to-night. I'll be home for gold they do have, and it's glad they'd be to stay with me, but they're like myself. Mrs. Muldoon washes an' Mrs. Donahue cleans cars."

"Well, I must go now, but you will see me in the morning," and Mrs. Alton with a word of parting left the room, brushing against Mrs. Muldoon, who was on her way in.

"I will send her what groceries she will need while she is not able to work, but I cannot spare any money just now. I am collecting every dollar to make my payments by the first of the month. We laid in rather a large stock of groceries, and business has been very dull during the past month."

"I know that," said Mrs. Alton, "and I am sure of my own to spare."

"Why, I thought I heard you boasting of your wealth this evening," said Mr. Alton, jokingly.

"Oh, I couldn't take any of that," said Mrs. Alton, with a surprised look.

"Of course I was only joking," said her husband, as he put on his overcoat. "I am going down stairs for an hour or so. Don't sit up late for me."

After he had gone, Mrs. Alton sat down by the fire, and taking a book from the table, tried to read, but her husband's careless remark echoed to her ears. She frowned impatiently, "I cannot use that for any other purpose; I almost feel as if it were consecrated money," she said to herself. "I know I have set it apart for a holy use."

And as in a vision Mrs. Alton saw herself placing the \$10 bill in the basket, and pictured the look of surprise upon the faces of her companions. She had been so sure of her money before when she had handed in the box with its thirty contents. They had decided to discard

ings, and peace and joy without end; this is the wish of our heart's center. Amen.

And all the black-eyed girls said, "Amen and amen,"—CLARA M. CUMMANS.

HER THANK-OFFERING.

BY MRS. CALLE LARRABEE.

Mrs. Alton closed her pocketbook, and returned it to her pocket with a pleased smile upon her lips.

"Ten dollars," she said softly, "and I have been so long saving it up."

"And now I suppose you won't wear any more modest gloves, or last year's bonnets," said her husband, laughing.

"I don't like old-fashioned things, and I do like nice gloves and shoes, but I was determined that I would have a decent thank-offering this year."

Here the door opened and the children rushed in with more than the usual amount of noise.

"O, mamma," cried the oldest boy, "what do you think? Mrs. Fahy fell— you know how slippery it is around her house—and broke her arm."

"What do you think for us any more," shouted the youngest girl, a child of five.

"Do be quiet a minute," said their mother. "Now, Archie, tell me about it. How did it happen and how did you hear of it?"

"Mike Fahy went past on a run for the doctor, and I hollered at him and asked him where he was going, and he said his mother was carrying a tub of water out, and she slipped where the boys had been sliding past her door, and somehow the tub fell on her arm and broke it. And she's nearly crazy, Mike says."

"Poor soul," said Mrs. Alton. As soon as we get supper over, I will go down and see her. You'll stay in with the children an hour or so, won't you John?"

Mrs. Alton assented, and as soon after supper as possible Mrs. Alton and Archie went down the street, and turned into the court where Mrs. Fahy and her brood of children lived in a couple of rooms, at the back of a large building. The doctor was still there and to Mrs. Alton he addressed himself, knowing that Mrs. Fahy had been her wash-woman for years.

"She can't lie here with no person to look after her. She ought to be taken to the hospital."

"Sure as I'm a man I'm talking of that, at all," interrupted Mrs. Fahy.

"Who'd be after minding the children, an' cooking them a bite to eat?"

"There's no one you could leave the children with, is there?" asked Mrs. Alton.

"You have often spoken of a niece living in Allegheny."

"Och, now, an' is it Biddy Doolan yes do be main? Sure, an' it's the welcome they'd be, if Biddy had staid in' room for them. There's Biddy, an' Dennis, an' Mickey, an' Nora, an' Pat, an' James, an' Barney, an' Ellen, an' Larry, an' the three little ones, an' that's all, bavin the two bairns—an' they do be sleepin' on the kitchen floor. Sure an' there's only three rooms. Dennis is talkin' of buildin' an extension to the place."

"Well," interrupted the doctor, impatiently: "you will have to get some person to look after your little. It will be a matter of five or six weeks at the least."

"And with her arm broken, an' a 'good evening' he took her departure."

"Does he be thinkin' of've a stockin' full of money? Bad cess to him," said Mrs. Fahy. "Sure, an' it's all O.K. in to kase a bite in the children's' mouths. The murd'rin' doctor is to be after blasphem' to a pur widly like that."

"If Mike were only a girl, now," said Mrs. Alton.

"Instad of bein' the awkwardest byes that ever put his hand to a dish," added Mrs. Fahy.

"Have you no money coming to you for washing?" asked Mrs. Alton, after a few minutes of perplexed thought.

"Yis. There's Mrs. Clary out on Highland avenue, an' there's Mrs. Burroughs' house on Park, but they do be so angry with Ol' niver and Mike an' him."

"Well, we must contrive some way to help you. I will go home now and see Mr. Alton. Do not worry; we will not let you suffer. But what will you do to-night?" asked Mrs. Alton, pausing with her hand on the door.

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the boxes this year, and Mrs. Alton remembered this with a thrill of satisfaction, followed by a blush of shame that such an unworthy feeling should have found lodgment in her heart. In confusion she began turning over the leaves, and mechanically read a half-page before the written words conveyed any meaning to her brain. Then with a startled air she read the paragraph before her: "That which is withheld from the needy and suffering brother is unholy in the sight of God, although offered with prayer upon the holiest of altars." The book dropped from her hands, even as the veil of pride and self-righteousness dropped from her soul.

The next day she secured a stout young girl, whose delicate service delighted the hearts of Mrs. Fahy and the much-misused Mike.

When Mrs. Alton deposited her \$10 bill in the basket, several of her friends, who had known of the \$10 bill and its destined use, came and stood in surprise, and perhaps so intensely human are we all—a feeling of regret passed through her mind. It was but a fleeting shadow, for she had read in her morning chapter, "What may please, and I believe may please, but God gives the increase."

And shall we limit His power with our poor human numerals as of one or ten?—UNITED PRESBYTERIAN.

There can be a difference of opinion on most subjects, but there is only one opinion as to the reliability of Mother Graves' Worm Expeller. It is safe, sure and effectual.

It is a fact that you advertise to cure consumption, don't you? Doctor—

"Yes, sir, I never fail when my instructions are followed." Irate Patron—"My son took your medicine for a year, and died an hour after it was last dose." Doctor—"My instructions were not followed. I told him to take it two years."—Tribune.

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