VARIOUS

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MERLE'S CRUSADE

By ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY,
Author of "Aunt Diana," "For Lilias," etc

CHAPTER I.
THE VALLEY OF HUMILIATION

Merle, I may be a little old-fashioned in my notions; middle-aged people never adjust their ideas quite in harmony with you young folk, but in my day we never paused to count fifty at a full stop."

Aunt Agatha's voice startled me with its reproachful irritability. Well, I had deserved that little sarcasm for I must confess that I had been reading very carelessly. My favourite motto was ringing in my ears, "*Laborare est orare*."

Somehow the words had set themselves to resonant music in my brain; it seemed as though I were chanting them inwardly all the time I was climbing down the steep hill with Christiana and her boys. *Laborare est orare.* And this is what I was reading on that still, snowy Sunday afternoon: "But we will come again to this Valley of Humiliation. It is the best and most fruitful piece of ground in all these parts. It is a fat ground, and, as you see, consisteth much in meadows, and if a man was to come here in the summertime as we do now, if he knew not anything before thereof, and if he delighted himself in the sight of his eyes, he might see that which would be delightful to him. Behold how green this valley is, also how beautiful with lilies! I have known many labouring men that have got good estates in this Valley of Humiliation."

"Merle," observed Aunt Agatha, a little dryly, "we may as well leave off there, for it seems that you and I are to have our estate among the labouring men in this very valley."

Aunt Agatha was a clever woman, and could say shrewd things sometimes, but she never spoke a truer word than this; but my wits were no longer wool-gathering.

"What a pity you stopped me just then," I remarked, somewhat sententiously; "we have missed the purest gem of the allegory. 'He that is down need fear no fall; he that is low no pride.'" But here a hand was lifted in protesting fashion.

"Put the marker in the page, child, and spare me the rest; that is in favour of your argument, not mine," for a weary discussion had been waged between us for two whole hours—a discussion that had driven Aunt Agatha exhausted to the couch, but which had only given me a tingling feeling of excitement, such as a raw recruit might experience at the sight of a battlefield. Aunt Agatha's ladylike ideas lay dead and wounded round her while I had made that last impetuous charge.

"I am of age, a free Englishwoman, living in a free country, and not all the nineteenth century prejudices, though they are thick as dragons' teeth, shall prevent me, Merle Fenton, of sane mind and healthy body, from doing what I believe to be my duty."

"Humph, I am rather doubtful of the sanity; I always told you that you were too independent and strong-minded for a girl; but what is the use of preaching to deaf ears?" continued Aunt Agatha, in a decidedly cross voice, as she arranged the cushions

comfortably.

It was true that I was getting the best of the argument, and yet I was sorry for Aunt Agatha. I felt how I was shocking all her notions of decorum and propriety, and giving pain to the kindest and gentlest heart in the world; but one cannot lead a new crusade without trampling on some prejudices. I knew all my little world would shriek "fie," and "for shame" into my ears, and all because I was bent on working out a new theory. The argument had grown out of such a little thing. I had shown Aunt Agatha an advertisement in the *Morning Post*, and announced my intention of answering it in person the following morning.

"NURSE.—Can any lady recommend a thoroughly conscientious superior person to take charge of two children, baby eighteen months old? Assistance given in the nursery. Must be a good, plain needlewoman. Prince's Gate, S.W."

To the last day of my life I do not think that I shall ever forget Aunt Agatha's face when she read that advertisement.

"You intend to offer yourself for this situation, Merle—to lose caste, and take your place among menials? It is enough to make my poor brother rise in his grave, and your poor, dear mother too, to think of a Fenton stooping to such degradation." But I will forbear to transcribe all the wordy avalanche of lady-like invective that was hurled at me, accompanied by much wringing of hands.

And yet the whole thing lay in a nut-shell. I, Merle Fenton, sound, healthy, and aged two-and-twenty, being orphaned,

penniless, and only possessing one near relative in the world —Aunt Agatha—declined utterly to be dependent for my daily bread and the clothes I wore on the goodwill of her husband and my uncle by marriage, Ezra Keith.

No, I was not good. I daresay I was self-willed, contradictory, and as obstinate as a mule that will go every way but the right way, but, all the same, I loved Aunt Agatha, my dead father's only sister, and I detested Uncle Keith with a perfectly unreasonable detestation.

Aunt Agatha had been a governess all her life. Certainly the Fenton family had not much to boast of in the way of wealth. Pedigree and poverty are not altogether pleasant yoke fellows. It may be comfortable to one's feelings to know that a certain progenitor of ours made boots at the time of the Conquest, though I am never quite sure in my mind that they had bootmakers then; but my historical knowledge was always defective. But a little money is also pleasant; indeed, if the pedigree and the money came wooing to me, and I had to choose between them—well, perhaps I had better hold my tongue on that subject; for what is the good of shocking people unless one has a very good reason for doing so?

My father's pedigree did not help him into good practice, and he died young—a grave mistake, people tell me, for a professional man to commit. My mother was very pretty and very helpless, but then she had a pedigree, too, and, probably, that forbade her to soil her white hands. She was a fine lady, with

more heart than head, which she had lost most unwisely to the handsome young doctor. After his death, she made futile efforts for her child's sake, but the grinding wheel of poverty caught the poor butterfly and crushed her to death.

My poor, tender-hearted, unhappy mother! Well, the world is a cruel place to these soft, unprotected natures.

I should have fared badly but for Aunt Agatha; her hardly-earned savings were all spent on my education. She was a clever, highly-educated woman, and commanded good salaries, and out of this she contrived to board and maintain me at a school until she married, and Uncle Keith promised that I should share their home.

I never could understand why Aunt Agatha married him. Perhaps she was tired of the drudgery of teaching; at forty-five one may grow a little weary of one's work. Perhaps she wanted a home for her old age, and was tired of warming herself at other people's fires, and preferred a chimney corner of her own; but, strange to say, she always scouted these two notions with the utmost indignation.

"I married your uncle, Merle," she would say, with great dignity, "because he convinced me that he was the right person for me to marry. I have no more idea than you how he contrived to instil this notion into my head, for though I am a plain body and never had any beauty, I must own I liked tall, good-looking men. But there, my dear, I lived forty-five years in the world without three things very common in women's lives—without beauty,

without love, and without discontent." And in this last clause she was certainly right. Aunt Agatha was the most contented creature in the world.

If Uncle Keith—for never, never would I call him Uncle Ezra, even had he asked me as a personal favour to do so—if Uncle Keith had been rich I could have understood the marriage better, being rather a mercenary and far-sighted young person, but he had only a very small income. He was managing clerk in some mercantile house, and, being a thrifty soul, invested all his spare cash instead of spending it.

Aunt Agatha had lived in grand houses all her life, but she was quite content with the little cottage at Putney to which her husband took her. They only kept one servant; but Aunt Agatha proved herself to be a notable housekeeper. She arranged and rearranged the old-fashioned furniture that had belonged to Uncle Keith's mother until she had made quite a charming drawing-room; but that was just her way; she had clever brains, and clever fingers, and to manipulate old materials into new fashions was just play work to her.

But for me, I am perfectly convinced that Aunt Agatha would have called herself the happiest woman in the world, but my discontent leavened the household. If three people elect to live together, the success of the scheme demands that one of the three should not smile sourly on all occasions.

For two whole years I tried to be amiable when Uncle Keith was in the room, and at last gave up the attempt in despair,

baffled by my own evil tempers, and yet I will say I was not a bad-tempered girl. I must have had good in me or Aunt Agatha would not have been so fond of me. I call that a real crucial test —other people's fondness for us.

Why is it so difficult to get on with some folk, very worthy people in their way?

Why do some people invariably rub up one's fur until it bristles with discomfort? Why do these same thoroughly estimable creatures bring a sort of moral east wind with them, scarifying one's nerves? Surely it is beneath the dignity of a human being to be rasped by a harsh, drawling voice, or offended by trifling mannerisms. Uncle Keith was just like one of my sums—you might add him up, subtract from him, divide or multiply him, but he would never come right in the end; one always reckoned that he was more or less than he was. He was a little, pale, washed-out looking man, with sandy hair and prominent brown eyes. Being an old bachelor when he married Aunt Agatha, he had very precise, formal ways, and was methodical and punctual to a fault. Next to Uncle Keith, I hated that white-faced watch of his. I hated the slow, ponderous way in which he drew it from his pocket, and produced it for my special benefit.

I have said that my detestation of Uncle Keith was somewhat unreasonable. I must own I had no grave reasons for my dislike. Uncle Keith had a good moral character; he was a steady church-goer, was painstaking and abstemious; never put himself in a passion, or, indeed, lost his temper for a minute; but how was a

girl to tolerate a man who spent five minutes scraping his boots before he entered his own door, whatever the weather might be; who said, "Hir-rumph" (humph was what he meant) before every sentence, booming at one like a great bee; who always prefaced a lecture with a "my dear;" who would not read a paper until it was warmed; who would burn every cinder before fresh coals were allowed on the fire; who looked reproachfully at my crumbs (I crumbled my bread purposely at last), and scooped them carefully in his hand for the benefit of the birds, with the invariable remark, "Waste not, want not," a saying I learnt to detest?

I suppose if we are ever admitted into heaven we shall find very odd people there; but perhaps they will have dropped their trying ways and peculiarities, as the chrysalis drops its case, and may develop all sorts of new prismatic glories. I once heard a lady say that she was afraid the society there would be rather mixed; she was a very exclusive person; but Solomon tells us that there is nothing new under the sun, so I suppose we shall never be without our modern Pharisees and Sadducees. The grand idea to me is that there will be room for all. I do not know when the idea first came to me that it was a mean thing to live under a man's roof, eating his bread and warming oneself at his fire, and all the time despising him in one's heart. I only know that one day the idea took possession of me, and, like an Eastern mustard seed, grew and flourished. Soon after that Uncle Keith had rather a serious loss—some mercantile venture in which

he was interested had come to grief. I began to notice small retrenchments in the household; certain little luxuries were given up. Now and then Aunt Agatha grew a little grave as she balanced her weekly accounts. One night I took myself to task.

"What business have you, a strong, healthy, young woman," I observed to myself, severely, "to be a burthen on these good folk? What is enough for two may be a tight fit for three; it was that new mantle of yours, Miss Merle, that has put out the drawing-room fire for three weeks, and has shut up the sherry in the sideboard. Is it fair or right that Aunt Agatha and Uncle Keith should forego their little comforts just because an idle girl is on their hands?"

I pondered this question heavily before I summoned courage to speak to Aunt Agatha. To my surprise she listened to me very quietly, though her soft brown eyes grew a little misty—I did so love Aunt Agatha's eyes.

"Dear," she said, very gently, "I wish this could have been prevented; but, for my husband's sake, I dare not throw cold water on your plan. I cannot deny that he has had a heavy loss, and that we have to be very careful. I would keep you with me if I could, Merle, for you are just like my own child, but Ezra is not young;" and here Aunt Agatha's forehead grew puckered with anxiety.

"Oh, Aunt Agatha," I exclaimed, quite forgetting the gravity of my proposition in sudden, childish annoyance, "how can you call Uncle Keith, Ezra? It is such a hideous name."

"Not to my ears," she answered, quite calmly; "a wife never thinks her husband's name hideous. He loves to hear me say it,

and I love to please him, for though you may not believe it, Merle, I think there are very few men to compare with your uncle."

She could actually say this to my face, looking at me all the time with those honest eyes! I could not forbear a little shrug at this, but she turned the subject, placidly, but with much dignity.

"I have been a working bee all my life, and have been quite contented with my lot; if you could only follow my example, I should be perfectly willing to let you go. I have thought once or twice lately that if anything were to happen to me, you and your uncle would hardly be comfortable together; you do not study him sufficiently; you have no idea what he really is."

I thought it better to remain silent.

Aunt Agatha sighed a little as she went on.

"I am not afraid of work for you, Merle, there is no life without activity. 'The idle man,' as someone observes, 'spins on his own axis in the dark.' 'A man of mere capacity undeveloped,' as Emerson says, 'is only an organised daydream with a skin on it.' Just listen to this," opening a book that lay near her. "'Action and enjoyment are contingent upon each other. When we are unfit for work we are always incapable of pleasure; work is the wooing by which happiness is won.'"

"Yes, yes," I returned, rather impatiently, for Aunt Agatha, with all her perfections, was too much given to proverbial and discursive philosophy; "but to reduce this to practice, what work can I do in this weary world?"

"You cannot be a governess, not even a nursery governess,

Merle," and here Aunt Agatha looked at me very gently, as though she knew her words must give me pain, and suddenly my cheeks grew hot and my eyelids drooped. Alas! I knew too well what Aunt Agatha meant; this was a sore point, the great difficulty and stumbling block of my young life.

I had been well taught in a good school; I had had unusual advantages, for Aunt Agatha was an accomplished and clever woman, and spared no pains with me in her leisure hours; but by some freak of Nature, not such an unusual thing as people would have us believe, from some want of power in the brain—at least, so a clever man has since told me—I was unable to master more than the rudiments of spelling.

I know some people would laugh incredulously at this, but the fact will remain.

As a child I have lain sobbing on my bed, beaten down by a very anguish of humiliation at being unable to commit the column of double syllables to memory, and have only been comforted by Aunt Agatha's patience and gentleness.

At school I had a severer ordeal. For a long time my teachers refused to admit my incapacity; they preferred attributing it to idleness, stubbornness, and want of attention; even Aunt Agatha was puzzled by it, for I was a quick child in other things, could draw very well for my age, and could accomplish wonders in needlework, was a fair scholar in history and geography, soon acquired a good French accent, and did some of my lessons most creditably.

But the construction of words baffle me to this day. I should be unwilling to write the simplest letter without a dictionary lying snugly near my hand. I have learned to look my misfortune in the face, and to bear it with tolerable grace. With my acquaintances it is a standing joke, with my nearest and dearest friends it is merely an opportunity for kindly service and offers to write from my dictation, but when I was growing into womanhood it was a bitter and most shameful trial to me, one secretly lamented with hot tears and with a most grievous sense of humiliation.

"No," Aunt Agatha repeated, in the old pitying voice I knew so well, "you cannot be even a nursery governess, Merle."

"Nor a companion either," I exclaimed bitterly. "Old ladies want letters written for them."

"That is very true," she replied, shaking her head.

"I could be a nurse in a hospital—in fact, that is what I should like, but the training could not be afforded, it would be a pound a week, Aunt Agatha, and there would be my uniform and other expenses, and I should not get the smallest salary for at least two or three years."

"I am afraid we must not think of that, Merle," and then I relapsed into silence from sheer sadness of heart. I had always so longed to be trained in a hospital, and then I could nurse wounded soldiers or little children. I always loved little children.

But this idea must be given up, and yet it would not have mattered in a hospital if I had spelt "all-right" with one "l." I am quite sure my bandages would have been considered perfect, and

that would have been more to the point.

(To be continued.)

THE AMATEUR CHURCH ORGANIST

By the Hon. VICTORIA GROSVENOR

We believe that young people generally have a desire to be useful. Sometimes not an actually formulated desire, but a vague intention which they mean some day shall have a practical issue, when and how they do not quite know, or in what way. It is proposed in this article to point out one means of eminent usefulness—*i.e.*, that of amateur organ playing in our churches. It is scarcely necessary to show what a large field of good useful work is open to amateurs in this direction. We all know that on the one hand parishes wholly agricultural—the other suburban parishes in large towns—are utterly unable to pay for the services of a professional player; while there is nothing so calculated to lift up the heart of the congregations such as these are likely to obtain, as good music. Would it not therefore be a pleasant duty for anyone gifted with musical talent and leisure to qualify in the best manner possible for this ennobling and helpful occupation?

The intending organ-player must ascertain that he or she has a gift for music, and this need not be of the highest order, as even a small portion of the gift can be improved with care, and

fostered into usefulness. A first rate ear can be a snare to those who trust to it too much—although it is undoubtedly the best of servants, if kept in its proper sphere of work. A very ordinary measure of talent, supplemented by calm and good sense, clear power of thought, and determined perseverance, will be a good foundation to start with. Good sense and attention have more to do with the good music of ordinary persons (as opposed, we mean, to remarkably clever ones) than people are apt to think. It was said of Mendelssohn that music was the *accident* of his being; and there are many of whom the same could be said, with this meaning—*i.e.*, that the powers which make them succeed in music would enable them to succeed in other great things if attempted.

We will therefore suppose the case of a young lady possessing a moderate gift for music, desiring to improve it and herself, and to take up organ playing with a view to real usefulness. She should first find out whether her playing on the piano is perfectly correct, taking the easiest possible music to exercise herself upon, and trying whether her musical ear is competent to be her teacher in the matter of correctness. If neither steady attention nor ear enable her to discover mistakes, she had better consider that music is not the talent God has given her to use to His glory. A musical ear may, however, be much improved by its possessor. With even the smallest of voices she should join a choir or madrigal society and learn to sing at sight. She should, when listening to a musical performance, try to guess its

key. She should endeavour to know, without seeing, the sound and name of single notes on the piano, practising herself with her eyes shut. It is good practice, also, to take an easy chant or hymn tune, hitherto unknown, and try to get some idea of its melody and harmony without playing it. When all this is done, one of the most important tasks remains: that of mastering time in all its branches. Slovenliness in this particular is fatal to all music, above all to that for the organ, which is meant to guide and control. A feeling for rhythm and a quick-sighted accurate knowledge of time, may be much improved by playing with others, either duets on the piano, or accompaniments to voice or instrument. The player should compel herself to account for the time reason of every passage slowly, until she is able to do so with rapidity and precision at sight. At this point it may be well to begin lessons on the organ, taking great pains to become familiar with the technical part of the instrument, the names of stops and meaning of these names, mechanism and its use. Then will come the careful practice of pedals, which are at first so absolutely bewildering that amateurs are filled with despair at the apparent impossibilities they are asked to face with hope.

Into the teacher's work it is not our province to go; but we would ask the learner to be armed with courage and perseverance, and to practise patiently. Success is more than likely.

We now proceed with advice to one possessed of some knowledge of organ-playing and some acquaintance with its

technical capabilities. First, we should say—Play on all available instruments, as no two are alike, and the stops are called by many different names, which must be identified quickly as emergencies arise. Then acquire a knowledge of harmony, specially useful in accompanying church music with dignity, and enabling the player to fill in chords which the vocal score (or voice parts) have left thin and ineffective. Volumes might be written on accompaniments; but on this subject we would advise amateurs to consult heart, head, and common sense, and we would recommend them to read Dr. Bridge's "Organ Accompaniment," one of Novello's music primers, which will open out to them many possibilities, on the use of which they must decide for themselves according to their technical ability and the effect they aim at. It may be they can only try to pull a few weak voices through the singing allotted to them—in which case a strong, steady accompaniment of the simplest description is the best.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.