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GRACE.



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GRACE.

A VICTIM to the received system of religious education, I have suffered considerably for so-called conscience' sake. Finding my questions as irritating to my instructors as their answers were unsatisfactory to me, I early sank down into the mould prepared for me, and at nine years old was at the top of the religious class in a school I attended. An excellent memory, a distinct utterance, and a sort of knack of finding out texts with great rapidity, were points in my favour, and as I soon left off asking what were called impertinent questions, it was assumed that the process of thinking had, by the merciful interference of a superintending Providence, been checked ere it had developed into an insurmountable hindrance to salvation. At first I did not think very much, but I thought a little, and to some purpose. I learnt a hymn which contained these lines: "I thank the goodness and the grace which on my birth have smiled, and made me in these Christian days a happy English child. I was not born, as thousands are, where God was never known," etc. I did not sufficiently value my privilege of sitting in a close room learning abstruse texts, and when I looked at the pictures of little negroes in sugar-plantations I did not pity them at all, but thought that they had the best of it.

To check the free expression of thought is an admirable means towards the desired end—the annihilation of thought itself—and had not a counter influence been at work out of school I should, doubtless, have become a “chosen vessel.” As it was, I went about, as numbers do, under false colours, supposed to be very pious, because I had a good verbal memory, a quiet, old-fashioned manner, and great digital dexterity in finding out passages in the Bible. I seemed, of course, like a piece of wax, as all good children should be, ready to receive any religious impressions stamped upon me by my teachers. I was being educated in hypocrisy under the name of religion. The system was calculated to foster conceit, and, until a few years ago, I thought I understood all that is included in the comprehensive word *grace*. I was called a child of grace, I coveted grace, prayed daily for an increase of it, explained its supposed effects to others, pleaded with those who seemed indifferent to it, and mourned over those who had fallen from it. My teachers used grace as synonymous with self-denial, self-control, patience, fortitude, resignation, etc., and I was accustomed to attribute all that is elevating to its influence, and all that is degrading to its absence. But, when a mere child, I had silently observed the supposed effects of grace in those who never resorted to the “means” of it, and before I had attained maturity, I had, when away from the restraints of school, indulged in many a flippant remark as to the inefficacy of grace in those who seemed indefatigable in their strivings after it. I was puzzled and disappointed, but not until many years had elapsed did it occur to me that I had been deceived, deceived by well-meaning individuals who were themselves deceived, and who, I have every reason to suspect, preferred to be deceived, and would have gone on deceiving others, even if they had permitted themselves to be undeceived.

My spiritual masters and mistresses told me that grace was "a supernatural gift freely bestowed upon me for my sanctification and salvation." I was early taught to seem grateful that, while thousands of children were suffered to live and die in heathen lands, where grace was unknown, I had been elected by special favour to be "a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven." I knew that the unbaptized were the devil's children, that God hated them, that they could get no grace because they were not in a "state of grace," and that actions, to all appearance meritorious, were of no avail at all towards salvation unless they were performed in "a state of grace." I was exhorted to thank God repeatedly for the grace of baptism and to look upon the unbaptized with a mixture of pity and horror. But for "prevenient grace," I should, they told me, yield to the suggestions of my corrupt nature and tell lies, give blow for blow, steal, cheat, and become a hardened sinner.

At school I committed to memory a surprising number of hymns. I knew that grace was "a charming sound," that there was "a fountain filled with blood," and that I deserved "his holy frown." But at an early age grace began to lose ground in my estimation. At home hymns were not esteemed; my parents never asked me to repeat them, and of "grace" I never heard, save at school. I had a playfellow, about my own age, named Bobby. Bobby's real father was the devil, but his reputed father was a respectable and respected Quaker who lived close to us, a widower, with two attractive children, whose education was his sole occupation. Bobby was a gentle, manly, intelligent child, the peace-maker in all squabbles, and a great favourite in the play-ground. In the person of this little Quaker, Satan had succeeded admirably in transforming himself into an angel of light, for a superficial

observer might easily have mistaken Bobby for "a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven." I knew better—I knew that he was a child of wrath—that God's holy frown rested upon him, and that unless God in his infinite mercy should call him to the font, his portion would be "everlasting pains, where sinners must with devils dwell, in darkness, fire, and chains." Bobby never was taken to a place of worship; he was taught no prayers, and knew no hymns. He squinted abominably, and it was in consequence of that sad blemish that my childish thoughts were drawn to a common-sense view of grace. He was taken to an oculist, and returned with a most disfiguring glass over one eye, in comparison with which the squint seemed almost an embellishment. Poor Bobby! we laughed at him, pointed at him, danced round him, squinted at him, and called him "old goggle-eye!" I had frequently wondered at the engaging manners and generous conduct of the devil's little boy, but on this occasion he surpassed himself. He turned red, his lips quivered, the well-known "ball" rose in his throat, but with steady voice he said, "You have nearly made me cry; you do not know how painful my eye is; the doctor said crying would make it worse; I promised him I would not cry. See, I have got a shilling, let us go and spend it and play at something else." "I'll tell father, see if I don't!" said Bobby's brother, with fraternal indignation, "and he shall know how that shilling went." "No, you will not," said Bobby, laughing, "for a tell-tale is even worse than a teaze!" Of course we all declared we were only in fun, etc., but I felt keenly that the children of God had not set the devil's little boy a very good example, and I valued my religious privileges less from that hour. I continued committing many hymns and texts to memory, but I suppose I had already "fallen from grace," for though I

recited them with my usual accuracy, they interested me less. I left off begging to be allowed to learn some particular hymns, and many of my former favourites faded unregretted from my memory. My schoolmistress was an Evangelical gentlewoman, and I was one of her most attentive pupils. Hearing me say that Bobby could be good without grace, she looked very grave, and, turning to an assistant-teacher, remarked, "How amazing it is that parents suffer their children to associate with the unconverted!" I repeated her words to my father. Unlike most parents, he spoke very openly, and explained to me in very simple language that he had never observed any moral superiority in the baptized, and that in his own circle of acquaintances he had found more genial characters among the unbaptized. He drew my attention to a gentleman who was a constant visitor at our house, one who was in great favour with all the children who knew him, in consequence of his imperturbable good humour and amiable devotion to their little interests. "That man," said my father, "was brought up among the Quakers, and though he is not a Quaker now, has never been baptized, and I cannot see in what respect he would be a better member of society if he had. The gentleman in question was a great ally of mine, and his children were my playmates. It would have been difficult to find better people than were these who had taken no pains to cleanse themselves from their inherited filth, and it is not surprising that, with such amiable associates, a child under twelve should lose sight of the inestimable privilege of "grace" and cease to attribute virtuous conduct to its influence. I gave up caring about grace. I let it go without a regret, little knowing that a few years later I should give myself wholly to its supposed influence, and suffer exceedingly in mind and body ere I succeeded in wrenching myself from a

grasp which was crushing my individuality out of me.

Before my childhood was quite over an incident occurred which I shall relate, for it made an impression, and preserved me from rushing in after life into certain extremes, towards which my devotional acquaintances tended.

There was a lumber-room in Bobby's house ; books, pictures, ornaments and furniture, which had been undisturbed since his mother's death, were heaped together in dusty confusion. The humour seized Bobby to sort out the objects and put the room to rights. He asked me to help him and we set to work. I caught hold of a mutilated copy of a book called 'The Soul on Calvary,' and my eyes fell upon the following incredible and revolting passage:—

" We will here relate the example of a most heroic patience in sickness and of a most perfect love of God in the heart. Perhaps it may wound the delicacy of some ; but many others will have sufficient *greatness of soul* to be edified and touched by it. A person had fallen into a malady equally painful and humiliating : a great sore was formed, which, in the course of time, had engendered a quantity of worms. This person was eaten up alive by them, and suffered excessive pains ; yet her lively love of God surmounted the violence of her sufferings to such a degree that if any of her worms happened to fall, she picked them up and replaced them in the sore, saying that she was unwilling to lose any part of the merit of her sufferings, and that she considered those worms as so many precious pearls which might one day adorn her crown." From the disgust excited in me by this horrible statement, I never rallied, though I was subsequently thrown into daily contact with people whose religious fervour would have inclined them to go and do likewise.

'The Soul on Calvary' is a cheap book widely

circulated among Roman Catholics, many of whom would not shrink from putting into practice the wild and filthy experiments suggested by the perusal of that and similar fanatical works.

At a boarding-school, to which I was sent for six months for change of air, considerable attention was paid to the religious instruction of the children. I was slowly regaining my strength, after a long illness, and was probably more susceptible to what are called spiritual influences than I should otherwise have been; moreover, I was at the impressionable age of fourteen, and of a grave turn of mind. I was soon "full of grace;" that is to say, I thought and heard of little else; answering Scripture questions occupied a great portion of my time, for, being very weak, I was not required to study much, and it cost me but little trouble to get up all the hymns, catechisms, texts, collects, etc., with which I had formerly been somewhat overburdened. I was soon a great favourite with my teacher, and to "grow in grace" once more became the great object of my life. For a few years I had been neglecting grace, but had not retrograded morally, and was not a whit more unruly than my more persevering companions.

Schooled in grace for the second time, and thoroughly engrossed with self, I should, I imagine, have become very much like the ideal my teacher had in view. She tried hard to work upon the feelings of her pupils, and I have seen a child of seven years leave the class in tears, and retire sobbing, at the thought of her ingratitude to her Saviour; and we were taught to admire the "workings of grace" in her heart, and to deplore our own indifference. Of practical piety I do not remember hearing. Faith, grace, hymns, Bible questions and the Church prayers seemed all in all. We were not encouraged to make clothes for the poor, or to deny ourselves anything for the sake of others; for the *souls* of others we were earnestly

enjoined to pray, but of their bodily wants I never heard. Once, in consequence of illness, I and another girl of sixteen were the sole occupants of a room. I remarked with horror that she did not kneel down before getting into bed. "Why, Emily," said I, "you have forgotten your prayers." "You mean that I have forgotten to kneel down. I never say prayers, but I kneel down in the big room because of the others; I do not mind *you*." "But do you not mind God," asked I, with sincere surprise. "No," said she, "God minds me!" I was too much grieved to notice the drollery of the remark. Presently she resumed, "What do you suppose becomes of the sponge-cakes?" I knew dozens of them were conveyed to the boarders through one of the servants, and now I was informed that they were always devoured during the extempore prayer made every evening by a teacher; it lasted, with other devotions, twenty minutes, and as the girls turned to the wall during prayers the opportunity was favourable to the enjoyment of soft cakes. Emily's revelations saddened me indescribably. Had she been an unprincipled, unruly, low-minded girl, I should have been relieved, but, like the graceless Bobby of my childhood, Emily was superior to the other girls in *moral* worth; she never copied sums, verbs, &c., from her neighbour's slate, and had often surprised me by her readiness to admit ignorance, to offer an apology, and, in short, to act as if this so-called *grace* had taken firm hold of her; but she did not care about grace, she even called it "a hoax," and said that all the religious people she knew were very disagreeable. Her father had yielded to the wishes of his wife in sending her to this school, and as she was soon about to leave it, she spoke, as all girls do under such circumstances, with reckless candour.

Hypocrisy must infect those who are taught so many solemn and startling confessions, creeds, hymns,

and texts long before they can understand them. Emily had discontinued her prayers because she did not assent to the assertions in them. "As God made me," said she, "he must know me far better than I know myself, and therefore it seems very silly to pretend to inform him. I am not going to say 'I have followed too much the devices and desires of my own heart,' because it is not true; if I were to follow those desires I should be off in the morning, in spite of my influenza."

All she said made me feel extremely uncomfortable, —she had given up grace, and yet seemed thoroughly good. However, my six months of school life were fortunately over, and I returned to a home where all that is estimable was inculcated without any allusion to hymns, grace, or any other supernatural means of arriving at the ordinary virtues which should distinguish the members of a civilized community. I do not think my father had a Bible; I never saw him use one, save to look out some disputed text. Having been forced in his boyhood to read the Bible exclusively, he made up for it in his manhood by reading any book except the Bible. Away from the gracious influences which for a brief season had surrounded me, shaken somewhat by Emily's experience, and highly dissatisfied with my own immature conclusions, I soon grew very lukewarm as to prayer and other religious practices, and was actually learning "to be good and to do good" without having recourse to the supernatural. I was, however, ill at ease within, for I had been so thoroughly impressed with the necessity of grace, that I was quite alarmed to find how easily I had let it go and how very well I could do without it. I was afraid of myself knowing, or rather having been taught, that in me "dwelt no good thing," and I was greatly perplexed to find no unholy tendencies arise now that grace had lost its hold on me. I should

have been quite delighted to have been able to detect some moral retrogression, which I should have been justified in attributing to a withdrawal of grace. I ardently wished to believe in the efficacy of prayer and indeed in all the doctrines I had been taught in my childhood, but I was losing both faith and confidence. I pretended I had not lost either. I was afraid to think anything out. About that time I was invited to pass a few weeks with a lady and gentleman at Sydenham. Owing to curious circumstances the lady, though a Protestant, had been educated in a convent, and was quite familiar with all the tenets of the various religious sects. She talked, and apparently thought frequently about piety, grace, resignation, etc., and said she intended to leave a large portion of her wealth to those who had grounded her in religion. She was, as far as I could judge, an essentially worldly woman, and, owing probably to her wretched health, of a singularly trying disposition. In her husband all those virtues, specially intended, where *Christian* virtues are named, shone conspicuously, and I shall never forget my amazement when with the utmost composure he informed me that he was hostile to every form of religion, and that, though it grieved him sorely to thwart his wife, he had absolutely forbidden her to teach his little nephew, who lived with them, any creed, catechism or hymn; she gained her point as to the Lord's prayer, which the boy repeated every night in the drawing-room, beginning thus,—“Our Father charty neaven.”

Full twenty years have passed since the day when I discovered that the man whose character I so much admired, whose forbearance so much amazed me, and whose abstemiousness bordered upon the marvellous, was what is called an infidel! Would that I could meet him now! How readily would I confess to him that “whereas I was blind, now I see,”—see that

I was the real infidel, faithless to my own secret convictions, and faithless to the tenets I was supposed to have embraced. Fettered by formulas, vague fears, and by a feeling of restraint which for years prevented me from daring to be *myself*, I was unable to assimilate the wholesome ingredients in the sensible conversation of my infidel friend, who sought to wean me from useless theological speculations, and endeavoured to direct my attention to things practical. I was then and for years afterwards in the position which Fichte has so clearly described: "Instructions were bestowed upon me before I sought them; answers were given me before I had put questions; without examination and without interest I had allowed everything to take place in my mind. How then could I persuade myself I possessed any real knowledge in these matters? I only knew what others assert *they* know, and all I was *sure* of was that I had heard this or that upon the subject. Whatever truth *they* possessed could have been obtained only by their own reflection, and why should not *I* by means of the same reflection discover the like truth for myself, since I too have a being as well as they? How much I have hitherto undervalued and slighted *myself!*"

My infidel friend was aware that I was by no means blind to his many good qualities, for I was frequently present, to my great discomfort, when he was severely tried, and was forced to acknowledge that he behaved like a saint.

"Well, little lady," said he one day when we were speaking of grace, "I hate the very word grace, I don't fully understand its meaning, and as I can do very well without it, I should consider it a superfluity; but tell me to what you attribute all that strikes you as good in me, for as I am the only *graceless* dog you know, myself must be my subject?"

I had repeatedly asked myself that question, and

invariably winced at my own answer. According to my religious notions he ought to have been conspicuous for moral depravity, but according to my common sense it seemed to me that no amount of grace could make him a more genial specimen of a moral man than he was. However, I said that as he had been baptized and had been taught to pray in his childhood, he must have received many graces, and that his avoidance of great sins was due to God's grace, which had preserved him from great temptations. He smiled as he replied: "I am afraid your surmise will fall to the ground when you hear that I early gave up my prayers. I had a great misfortune when quite a little fellow. I smashed a most expensive and much-valued old china jar to atoms. My thoughts instantly flew to the omnipotent and benevolent Being whose eyes were in every place, and I ran upstairs to my little cot, by the side of which I knelt, and most earnestly entreated God to mend the jar and replace it upon the bracket before my father returned. Down I rushed, fully expecting to find all as I wished, the fragments gone, and the jar in its place. At the bottom of the stairs stood my poor nurse, too agitated to scold me, feeling that *she* would get most of the blame, and dreading the return of 'Master.' No words can convey my bitter disappointment at seeing the fragments where I had left them. I had prayed with faith and hope; but there was no new jar upon the bracket, and never again did I turn with confidence to that omnipotent and benevolent Being who had not helped me out of my terrible scrape."

What good end Providence had in view by throwing me into contact with Bobby, Emily, and this honourable infidel, pious people have never explained to me. "To try your faith," they told me; but seemed at fault when I asked if Providence foresaw that I should lose my faith.

My visit ended, I returned home ill at ease, honestly

doubting, but dishonestly concealing my doubts for so-called conscience' sake. It would, I thought, be awful to become an infidel, and thus expose myself to the just indignation of my maker; but it did not occur to me for some years that my insincerity must long have rendered me odious in the eyes of the searcher of hearts, the God of truth, and that I had been in jeopardy ever since I had dared to use my own judgment concerning grace and its effects.

In looking over the past I can say, with the utmost deliberation, that in my case religion was a hindrance instead of a help, as it is intended to be. While recalling my past experience I feel sincerely sorry for myself and for those who, owing to my devout adherence to sundry New Testament injunctions which I had "grace" enough to carry out, suffered acutely. The certainty that but few have sufficient "grace" to "go and do likewise," is a source of satisfaction to me. Were I not convinced by hard-earned experience of the futility of prayer, I would pray with great fervour that the meaning I discerned in Gospel teaching might be for ever hidden from their eyes lest they should become "converted" and show forth their faith as I did. By nature frank and fearless, I early profited by the lessons taught me by my ghostly counsellors, and learnt, like multitudes of other young people, to conceal what passed within, and to be afraid of my corrupt nature, and of all that emanated therefrom. I was afraid of thinking, of using my own mind, of following my own impulses, in short, of being myself.

Conscious of insincerity, alarmed at the probable consequences of sincerity, siding secretly with what are called dangerous opinions, frightened at my tendencies, confessing with my lips what my understanding refused to digest, clinging to planks which I felt could ill bear my weight, I went on praying that *infidels* might be brought to the knowledge of the

truth, but never realising the melancholy fact that I myself was an arch infidel, for I was a dissembler before God and man ; reciting incredible creeds in the house of the former, and carefully concealing my real sentiments from the latter.

After a while, by dint of pious reading, pious friends, and lonely visits to sundry churches, I shook off for a season some of my most disturbing doubts, and, during four or five years "grace" assuredly triumphed over nature, and, but for the timely interference of common sense, I too might have been discovered magnanimously replacing fallen creepers in their home on my epidermis !

"Grace" prompted me to despise "the world," to keep aloof from my fellow-creatures, to become odiously unsociable, and, in adhering to what I conceived to be the strict line of duty to God, to disregard all the little courtesies and concessions to others as "satanic varnish," deviations from truth, worldly wisdom, &c. Reproaches or remonstrances had the effect of making me persevere still more obstinately in the course I had chosen. I felt like a martyr "persecuted for righteousness" sake, and was supremely happy in the conviction that an unusual amount of grace was bestowed upon me. My spiritual advisers encouraged me in despising all human considerations, and in devoting myself exclusively to my religious duties, assuring me that the world would certainly hate me as it had hated Christ, but that I must "overcome the world." In short, I acted upon the conviction that "the friendship of the world is enmity with God," and that unless I came "out from among them" I was no worthy member of a Head crowned with thorns. I had the sweet approval of my own conscience, and felt sure that God was on my side, so did not fear what man might do unto me.

The requirements of the Gospel seemed to me peremptory and unmistakable, and as long as I re-

mained under the absorbing influence of what is called "grace" I did my best to carry them out; but a change came over me; old doubts assailed me with fresh vigour; they took firm hold of me, and I could not shake them off. During those years of religious zeal I had been undisturbed by misgivings, and had acted with sincerity. I look back upon them with mingled amusement and regret, and rejoicing that I was at length enabled to be as true to my doubts as I had been to my folly and fanaticism. Of course it will be said by many that I had been guilty of absurd exaggeration, and that true religion does not demand that we should fly in the face of the world, that it is possible to continue in "grace" without sternly abjuring "the world," &c.; but such a compromise seemed to me then impossible, and, to be perfectly candid, I am still of opinion that to yield to the dictates of "grace" is to become what I was once, but with my enlarged experience can never be again. "Grace," as understood by the orthodox, had taken great effect upon me; it had done its work right well, and rendered me quite unfit for this world, and, *therefore*, as I was persuaded, a worthier candidate for the other. In my exuberant self-satisfaction, I failed to see that by steady adherence to my favourite Gospel texts I was daily sinking deeper into that slough of selfishness, bigotry, and intolerance, in which the "Lord's people" are wont to wallow. I know many who are "full of grace;" I avoid them, for a "burnt child dreads the fire." Withdrawn from the pernicious influence of "grace," I can now look dispassionately on my former God-fearing self, and see myself in the light in which I must have appeared to those who deplored my "supernatural" tendencies, and despaired of my return to common sense. Released from the fetters which so tightly bound me, and which in my blindness I hugged so fondly, I have now the "grace" to see, and the candour to confess,

that I was the victim of a degrading delusion. I have returned to the miserable "worldlings," who are only doing their duty, and striving to make the best of the only world of which we have any knowledge, and in which I hope I may have "grace" to lead a rational life and set a natural example!

