FACING THE WORLD.

MISS MULOCK

Table of Contents

FACING THE WORLD.

MISS MULOCK

"Glad I am, mother, the holidays are over. It's quite different going back to school again when one goes to be captain—as I'm sure to be. Isn't it jolly?"

Mrs. Boyd's face as she smiled back at Donald was not exactly "jolly." Still, she did smile; and then there came out the strong likeness often seen between mother and son, even when, as in this case, the features were very dissimilar. Mrs. Boyd was a pretty, delicate little English woman: and Donald took after his father, a big, brawny Scotsman, certainly not pretty, and not always sweet. Poor man! he had of late years had only too much to make him sour.

Though she tried to smile and succeeded, the tears were in Mrs. Boyd's eyes, and her mouth was quivering. But she set it tightly together, and then she looked more than ever like her son, or rather, her son looked like her.

He was too eager in his delight to notice her much. "It is jolly, isn't it, mother? I never thought I'd get to the top of the school at all, for I'm not near so clever as some of the fellows. But now I've got my place; and I like it, and I mean to keep it; you'll be pleased at that, mother?"

"I should have been if—if—" Mrs. Boyd tried to get the words out and failed, closed her eyes as tight as her mouth for a minute, then opened them and looked her boy in the face gravely and sadly.

"It goes to my heart to tell you—I have been waiting to say it all morning, but, Donald, my dear, you will never go back to school at all."

"Not go back; when I'm captain! why, you and father both said that if I got to be that, I should not stop till I was seventeen—and now I'm only fifteen and a half. O, mother, you don't mean it! Father couldn't break his word! I may go back!"

Mrs. Boyd shook her head sadly, and then explained as briefly and calmly as she could the heavy blow which had fallen upon the father, and, indeed, upon the whole family. Mr. Boyd had long been troubled with his eyes, about as serious a trouble as could have befallen a man in his profession—an accountant—as they call it in Scotland. Lately he had made some serious blunders in his arithmetic, and his eyesight was so weak that his wife persuaded him to consult a first−rate Edinburgh oculist, whose opinion, given only yesterday, after many days of anxious suspense, was that in a few months he would become incurably blind.

"Blind, poor father blind!" Donald put his hand before his own eyes. He was too big a boy to cry, or at any rate, to be seen crying, but it was with a choking voice that he spoke next: "I'll be his eyes; I'm old enough."

"Yes; in many ways you are, my son," said Mrs. Boyd, who had had a day and a night to face her sorrow, and knew she must do so calmly. "But you are not old enough to manage the business; your father will require to take a partner immediately, which will reduce our income one−half. Therefore we cannot possibly afford to send you to school again. The little ones must go, they are not nearly educated yet, but you are. You will have to face the world and earn your own living, as soon as ever you can. My poor boy!"

"Don't call me poor, mother. I've got you and father and the rest. And, as you say, I've had a good education so far. And I'm fifteen and a half, no, fifteen and three−quarters— almost a man. I'm not afraid."

"Nor I," said his mother, who had waited a full minute before Donald could find voice ed yet, but you are. You will have to face the world and earn your own living, as soon as ever you can. My poor boy!"

"Don't call me poor, mother. I've got you and father and the rest. And, as you say, I've had a good education so far. And I'm fifteen and a half, no, fifteen and three−quarters— almost a man. I'm not afraid."

"Nor I," said his mother, who had waited a full minute before Donald could find voice to say all this, and it was at last stammered out awkwardly and at random. "No; I am not afraid because my boy has to earn his bread; I had earned mine for years as a governess when father married me. I began work before I was sixteen. My son will have to do the same, that is all."

That day the mother and son spoke no more together. It was as much as they could do to bear their trouble, without talking about it, and besides, Donald was not a boy to "make a fuss" over things. He could meet sorrow when it came, that is, the little of it he had ever known, but he disliked speaking of it, and perhaps he was right.

So he just "made himself scarce" till bedtime, and never said a word to anybody until his mother came into the boys' room to bid them good−night. There were three of them, but all were asleep except Donald. As his mother bent down to kiss him, he put both arms round her neck.

"Mother, I'm going to begin to−morrow."

"Begin what, my son?"

"Facing the world, as you said I must. I can't go to school again, so I mean to try and earn my own living."

"How?"

"I don't quite know, but I'll try. There are several things I could be, a clerk—or even a message−boy. I shouldn't like it, but I'd do anything rather than do nothing."

Mrs. Boyd sat down on the side of the bed. If she felt inclined to cry she had too much sense to show it. She only took firm hold of her boy's hand, and waited for him to speak on.

"I've been thinking, mother, I was to have a new suit at Christmas; will you give it now? And let it be a coat, not a jacket. I'm tall enough—five feet seven last month, and growing still; I should look almost a man. Then I would go round to every office in Edinburgh and ask if they wanted a clerk. I wouldn't mind taking anything to begin with. And I can write a decent hand, and I'm not bad at figures; as for my Latin and Greek—"

Here Donald gulped down a sigh, for he was a capital classic, and it had been suggested that he should go to Glasgow University and try for "the Snell" which has sent so many clever young Scotsmen to Balliol College, Oxford, and thence on to fame and prosperity. But alas! no college career was now possible to Donald Boyd. The best he could hope for was to earn a few shillings a week as a common clerk. He knew this, and so did his mother. But they never complained. It was no fault of theirs, nor of anybody's. It was just as they devoutly called it, "The will of God."

"Your Latin and Greek may come in some day, my boy," said Mrs. Boyd cheerfully. "Good work is never lost. In the meantime, your plan is a good one, and you shall have your new clothes at once. Then, do as you think best."

"All right; good−night, mother," said Donald, and in five minutes more was fast asleep.

But, though he was much given to sleeping of nights—indeed, he never remembered lying awake for a single hour in his life—during daytime there never was a more "wide awake" boy than Donald Boyd. He kept his eyes open to everything, and never let the "golden minute" slip by him. He never idled about—play he didn't consider idling (nor do I). And I am bound to confess that every day until the new clothes came home was scrupulously spent in cricket, football, and all the other amusements which he was as good at as he was at his lessons. He wanted "to make the best of his holidays," he said, knowing well that for him holiday time as well as school time was now done, and the work of the world had begun in earnest.

The clothes came home on Saturday night, and he went to church in them on Sunday, to his little sister's great admiration. Still greater was their wonder when, on Monday morning, he appeared in the same suit, looking quite a man, as they unanimously agreed, and almost before breakfast was done, started off, not saying a word of where he was going.

He did not come back till the younger ones were all away to bed, so there was no one to question him, which

was fortunate, for they might not have got very smooth answers. His mother saw this, and she also forbore. She was not surprised that the bright, brave face of the morning looked dull and tired, and that evidently Donald had no good news of the day to tell her.

"I think I'll go to bed," was all he said. "Mother, will you give me a 'piece' in my pocket to−morrow? One can walk better when one isn't so desperately hungry."

"Yes, my boy." She kissed him, saw that he was warmed and fed—he had evidently been on his legs the whole day—then sent him off to his bed, where she soon heard him delightfully snoring, oblivious of all his cares.

The same thing went on day after day, for seven days. Sometimes he told his mother what had happened to him and where he had been, sometimes not; what was the good of telling? It was always the same story. Nobody wanted a boy or a man, for Donald, trusting to his inches and his coat, had applied for man's work also, but in vain. Mrs. Boyd was not astonished. She knew how hard it is to get one's foot into ever so small a corner in this busy world, where ten are always struggling for the place of one. Still, she also knew that it never does to give in; that one must leave no stone unturned if one wishes to get work at all. Also she believed firmly in an axiom of her youth—"Nothing is denied to well−directed labor." But it must be real hard "labor," and it must also be "well directed." So, though her heart ached sorely, as only a mother's can, she never betrayed it, but each morning sent her boy away with a cheerful face, and each evening received him with one, which, if less cheerful, was not less sympathetic, but she never said a word.

At the week's end, in fact, on Sunday morning, as they were walking to church, Donald said to her: "Mother, my new clothes haven't been of the slightest good. I've been all over Edinburgh, to every place I could think of—writers' offices, merchants' offices, wharves, railway−stations—but it's no use. Everybody wants to know where I've been before, and I've been nowhere except to school. I said I was willing to learn, but nobody will teach me; they say they can't afford it. It is like keeping a dog, and barking yourself. Which is only too true," added Donald, with a heavy sigh.

"May be," said Mrs. Boyd. Yet as she looked up at her son—she really did look up at him, he was so tall—she felt that if his honest, intelligent face and manly bearing did not win something at last, what was the world coming to? "My boy," she said, "things are very hard for you, but not harder than for others. I remember once, when I was only a few years older than you, finding myself with only half a crown in my pocket. To be sure it was a whole half−crown, for I had paid every half−penny I owed that morning, but I had no idea where the next half−crown would come from. However, it did come. I earned two pounds ten, the very day after that day."

"Did you really, mother?" said Donald, his eyes brightening. "Then I'll go on. I'll not 'gang awa back to my mither,' as that old gentleman advised me, who objected to bark himself; a queer, crabbed old fellow he was too, but he was the only one who asked my name and address. The rest of them—well, mother, I've stood a good deal these seven days," Donald added, gulping down something between a "fuff" of wrath and a sob.

"I am sure you have, my boy."

"But I'll hold on; only you'll have to get my boots mended, and meantime, I should like to try a new dodge. My bicycle, it lies in the washing−house; you remember I broke it and you didn't wish it mended, lest I should break something worse than a wheel, perhaps. It wasn't worth while risking my life for mere pleasure, but I want my bicycle now for use. If you let me have it mended, I can go up and down the country for fifty miles in search of work—to Falkirk, Linlithgow, or even Glasgow, and I'll cost you nothing for traveling expenses. Isn't that a bright idea, mother?"

She had not the heart to say no, or to suggest that a boy on a bicycle applying for work was a thing too novel to be eminently successful. But to get work was at once so essential and so hopeless, that she would not throw any cold water on Donald's eagerness and pluck. She hoped too, that, spite of the eccentricity of the notion, some shrewd, kind−hearted gentleman might have sense enough to see the honest purpose of the poor lad who had only himself to depend upon. For his father had now fallen into a state of depression which made all application to him for either advice or help worse than useless. And as both he and Mrs. Boyd had been solitary orphans when they were married, there were no near relatives of any kind to come to the rescue. Donald knew, and his mother knew too, that he must shift for himself, to sink or swim.

So, after two days' rest, which he much needed, the boy went off again "on his own hook," and his bicycle, which was a degree better than his legs, he said, as it saves shoe−leather. Also, he was able to come home pretty regularly at the same hour, which was a great relief to his mother. But he came home nearly as tired as ever, and

with a despondent look which deepened every day. Evidently it was just the same story; no work to be had; or if there was work, it was struggled for by a score of fellows, with age, character, and experience to back them, and Donald had none of the three. But he had one quality, the root of all success in the end, dogged perseverance.

There is a saying, that we British gain our victories, not because we are never beaten, but because we never will see that we are beaten, and so go on fighting till we win. "Never say die," was Donald's word to his mother night after night. But she knew that those who never SAY die, sometimes DO die, quite quietly, and she watched with a sore heart her boy growing thinner and more worn, even though brown as a berry with constant exposure all day long to wind and weather, for it was now less autumn than winter.

After a fortnight, Mrs. Boyd made up her mind that this could not go on any longer, and said so. "Very well," Donald answered, accepting her decision as he had been in the habit of doing all his life.—Mrs. Boyd's children knew very well that whatever her will was, it was sure to be a just and wise will, herself being the last person she ever thought of.—"Yes, I'll give in, if you think I ought, for it's only wearing out myself and my clothes to no good. Only let me have one day more and I'll go as far as ever I can, perhaps to Dunfermline, or even Glasgow."

She would not forbid, and once more she started him off with a cheerful face in the twilight of the wet October morning, and sat all day long in the empty house—for the younger ones were now all going to school again—thinking sorrowfully of her eldest, whose merry school days were done forever.

In the dusk of the afternoon a card was brought up to her, with the message that an old gentleman was waiting below, wishing to see her.

A shudder ran through the poor mother, who, like many another mother, hated bicycles, and never had an easy mind when Donald was away on his. The stranger's first word was anything but reassuring.

"Beg pardon ma'am, but is your name Boyd, and have you a son called Donald, who went out on a bicycle this morning?"

"Yes, yes! Has anything happened? Tell me quick!"

"I'm not aware, ma'am, that anything has happened," said the old gentleman. "I saw the lad at light this morning. He seemed to be managing his machine uncommonly well. I met him at the foot of a hill near Edinburgh Castle. He had got off and was walking; so he saw me, and took off his cap. I like respect, especially in a young fellow towards an old one."

"Did he know you, for I have not that pleasure?" said Mrs. Boyd, polite, though puzzled. For the old man did not look quite like a gentleman, and spoke with the strong accent of an uneducated person, yet he had a kindly expression, and seemed honest and well−meaning, though decidedly "canny."

"I cannot say he knew me, but he remembered me, which was civil of him. And then I minded the lad as the one that had come to me for work a week or two ago, and I took his name and address. That's your son's writing?" he jumbled out and showed a scrap of paper. "It's bona fide, isn't it?

"And he really is in search of work? He hasn't run away from home, or been turned out by his father for misconduct, or anything of that sort? He isn't a scamp, or a ne'er−do−weel?"

"I hope he doesn't look like it," said Mrs. Boyd, proudly.

"No, ma'am; you're right, he doesn't. He carries his character in his face which, maybe, is better than in his pocket. It was that which made me ask his name and address, though I could do nothing for him."

"Then you were the gentleman who told him you couldn't keep a dog and bark yourself?" said Mrs. Boyd, amused, and just a shade hopeful.

"Precisely. Nor can I. It would have been cool impudence in a lad to come and ask to be taught his work first and then paid for it, if he hadn't been so very much in earnest that I was rather sorry for him. I'm inclined to believe, from the talk I had with him at the foot of the brae to−day, that he is a young dog that would bark with uncommon little teaching. Material, ma'am, is what we want. I don't care for its being raw material, if it's only of the right sort. I've made up my mind to try your boy."

"Thank God!"

"What did you say, ma'am? But—I beg your pardon."

For he saw that Mrs. Boyd had quite broken down. In truth, the strain had been so long and so great that this sudden relief was quite too much for her. She sobbed heartily.

"I ought to beg your pardon," she said at last, "for being so foolish, but we have had hard times of late."

And then, in a few simple words, she told Donald's whole story.

The old man listened to it in silence. Sometimes he nodded his head, or beat his chin on his stout stick as he sat; but he made no comment whatever, except a brief "Thank you, ma'am."

"Now to business," continued he, taking out his watch; "for I'm due at dinner: and I always keep my appointments, even with myself. I hope your Donald is a punctual lad?"

"Yes. He promised to be back by dark, and I am sure he will be. Could you not wait?"

"No. I never wait for anybody; but keep nobody waiting for me. I'm Bethune &Co., Leith Merchants—practically, old John Bethune, who began life as a message−boy, and has done pretty well, considering."

He had, as Mrs. Boyd was well aware. Bethune &Co. was a name so well known that she could hardly believe in her boy's good luck in getting into that house in any capacity whatever.

"So all is settled," said Mr. Bethune, rising. "Let him come to me on Monday morning, and I'll see what he is fit for. He'll have to start at the very bottom—sweep the office, perhaps—I did it myself once—and I'll give him—let me see—ten shillings a week to begin with."

" 'To begin with,' " repeated Mrs. Boyd, gently but firmly; "but he will soon be worth more. I am sure of that."

"Very well. When I see what stuff he is made of, he shall have a rise. But I never do things at haphazard; and it's easier going up than coming down. I'm not a benevolent man, Mrs. Boyd, and you need not think it. But I've fought the world pretty hard myself, and I like to help those that are fighting it. Good evening. Isn't that your son coming round the corner? Well, he's back exact to his time, at any rate. Tell him I hope he will be as punctual on Monday morning. Good evening, ma'am."

Now, if this were an imaginary story, I might wind it up by a delightful denoument of Mr. Bethune's turning out an old friend of the family, or developing into a new one, and taking such a fancy to Donald that he immediately gave him a clerkship with a large salary, and the promise of a partnership on coming of age, or this worthy gentleman should be an eccentric old bachelor who immediately adopted that wonderful boy and befriended the whole Boyd family.

But neither of these things, nor anything else remarkable, happened in the real story, which, as it is literally true, though told with certain necessary disguises, I prefer to keep to as closely as I can. Such astonishing bits of "luck" do not happen in real life, or happen so rarely that one inclines, at least, to believe very little in either good or ill fortune, as a matter of chance. There is always something at the back of it which furnishes a key to the whole. Practically, a man's lot is of his own making. He may fail, for a while undeservedly, or he may succeed undeservedly, but, in the long run, time brings its revenges and its rewards.

As it did to Donald Boyd. He has not been taken into the house of Bethune &Co., as a partner; and it was long before he became even a clerk—at least with anything like a high salary. For Mr. Bethune, so far from being an old bachelor, had a large family to provide for, and was bringing up several of his sons to his own business, so there was little room for a stranger. But a young man who deserves to find room generally does find it, or make it. And though Donald started at the lowest rung of the ladder, he may climb to the top yet.

He had "a fair field, and no favor." Indeed, he neither wished nor asked favor. He determined to stand on his own feet from the first. He had hard work and few holidays, made mistakes, found them out and corrected them, got sharp words and bore them, learnt his own weak points and—not so easily—his strong ones. Still he did learn them; for, unless you can trust yourself, be sure nobody else will trust you.

This was Donald's great point. HE WAS TRUSTED. People soon found out that they might trust him; that he always told the truth, and never pretended to do more than he could do; but that which he could do, they might depend upon his doing, punctually, accurately, carefully, and never leaving off till it was done. Therefore, though others might be quicker, sharper, more "up to things" than he, there was no one so reliable, and it soon got to be a proverb in the office of Bethune &Co.—and other offices, too—"If you wish a thing done, go to Boyd."

I am bound to say this, for I am painting no imaginary portrait, but describing an individual who really exists, and who may be met any day walking about Edinburgh, though his name is not Donald Boyd, and there is no such firm as Bethune &Co. But the house he does belong to values the young fellow so highly that there is little doubt he will rise in it, and rise in every way, probably to the very top of the tree, and tell his children and grandchildren the story which, in its main features, I have recorded here, of how he first began facing the world.