

## Literature, &amp;c.

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## THE WIDOW AND THE DEFORMED.

BY MRS. CAROLINE H. BUTLER.

But to return. We left Mr. Alfred Oakly gazing upon his brother's sleeping babes. The opening of a door aroused him; he turned and the wan countenance of the widow met his view. She did not look to be more than three-and-twenty. She was tall, and her figure slender and delicate, but her small feet were bare, her garments coarse. On her sunken cheeks there was no trace of color, and the lines of suffering too plainly drawn around her beautiful mouth. Her dark eyes were large, but their brilliancy dimmed by tears of sorrow, and her long, raven hair—that splendid hair that once had been the admiration of all—was now combed carelessly back from her high brow, and concealed by a plain muslin cap. The man of the world was abashed, and the widow the first to break the silence.

'I presume I speak to Mr. Alfred Oakly,' she said.

The gentleman bowed, but had his life depended upon utterance, he could not have spoken. Their mother's voice, though low, at once aroused the sleeping innocents, and springing from their hard couch, they bounded to meet her. At sight of a stranger, however, the youngest, not two years old, hid her face in the folds of her mother's dress, but the elder looked up inquiringly into his face, and then raising herself on her little toes, and putting back her sunny ringlets, said, 'Me will tias you.'

Mr. Oakly did stoop to those little rosy lips, and even lifted the little creature for a moment in his arms; but that was all—he placed her on the floor again, as cold, as unimpassioned as ever.

This little scene overcame the fortitude of the mother; folding both little ones to her bosom, she burst into tears, and for many moments wept bitterly. This gave Mr. Oakly time to recover himself. He said would have believed the tears of the widow called forth for more effect than real grief; but there was something too lofty and pure in her pale countenance to encourage such base thoughts. At length feeling himself bound to say something by way of consolation, in a husky, faltering voice, he began. The words 'we must all die—sorry—death—unfortunate—in heaven—being alone intelligible.'

As if indignant with herself for having given way to her feelings in the presence of one so heartless, Mrs. Oakly instantly dried her tears, and with something of scorn on her features, listened to his lip-language—for well she knew the heart had little to do with it.

'I have come here,' he continued, 'as the near relative of your late husband, to remove you from this miserable spot. You must leave this place, madam; it is entirely too poor and wretched for you.'

'Wretched and poor as it is, on that bed your brother died!' said the widow pointing as she spoke to the low miserable bedstead.

Mr. Oakly was evidently put down. After a moment's silence he added,

'It is my intention, as my brother's widow, to treat you with every kindness.'

'Your kindness sir, comes late,' replied Mrs. Oakly, 'and will prove but thankless. He whom it should have rescued from the grave, is now beyond your cruelty, and to me, therefore, your kindness, as you term it, is little else than cruel.'

The brow of Mr. Oakly contracted with anger, but the object he had in view was too important to be thwarted by a woman's reproaches; so, dissembling his mortification, he continued,

'I wish you to remove from here at once to a pleasant town which I shall name to you, and it is also my desire and intention to adopt your youngest child as my own.'

'Separate me from my children! No, that you shall never do!' cried the widow, pressing them to her bosom.

'Do not be so hasty in your decision, my dear madam,' said Mr. Oakly blandly, 'but listen to me with reason. This child shall be most tenderly and carefully brought up. My wife will love her as her own; and her education shall be the best the city can give. You yourself shall not only live in comfort, but also have ample means to educate your other daughter as you could wish. Nay, more; I do not ask you to give me your daughter without an equivalent. Now,' continued he, drawing his chair still closer to Mrs. Oakly, and taking her hand, 'I want you to listen to me—neither do I wish you to give me an answer to-night; you shall have time to reflect upon my proposition, and to consider well the immense benefit which will result to yourself from conceding to my wishes, or in case of refusal, the poverty and wretchedness which will still surround you and these poor babes, aggravated, perhaps, by the thought that you might have spared their tender frames but would not.'

The countenance of the widow flushed with indignation; she spoke not, however, but turning her full dark eye upon him, prepared to hear what further this man had to say.

'It has pleased the Almighty,' he continued, 'to give me one child, now nearly three years of age; but this child he has blessed with the most hopeless deformity. You have two beautiful children—then give me one, and receive to you; paternal care my poor, blighted Agatha.'

'And are you a father! and can you talk

thus easily of severing the holy bond of parent and child!' interrupted Mrs. Oakly. 'Have you not a wife—is there no mother to be consulted in your most unnatural scheme?'

'Yes—an unhappy mother; but she has already consented. Aware that in perfect retirement her poor child can alone know happiness, she is willing to yield her up to your gentle treatment, and will in return bestow her love and tenderness upon your own babe. Reflect, you will still have one lovely child to console you, while the future welfare of both children will be secured by the sacrifice; furthermore, there will be the heartiest pleasure of knowing that through your watchful care an unfortunate being is made happy.'

'Do you know aught of the pleasures of duty that you talk so feelingly?' said the widow scornfully.

'Nay, reproach me not thus; look at your two children, those little beings confided to your care—can you see their little frames wasted by hunger, or sinking through toil; or, should you die, what then is there for them but a cold and bitter lot of poverty and death—or may be a fate worse than death. You shudder; then why hesitate, when by simply yielding to my wishes you are all made comfortable and happy. I see you are moved. I have but one stipulation to make, should you consent, as I think you will; it may alarm you at first, but upon reflection you will see its propriety. It is this—you are to promise solemnly never to claim your child, but to acknowledge poor Agatha to be yours, and never, on any account or any emergency, divulge this important secret. Do not answer me,' said he, hastily, as he saw the widow was about to speak, 'take time to consider my views—I will call at an early hour in the morning for your reply. Good night!' Then kissing the half-frighted children, the plausible brother of poor John Oakly softly closed the door, and once more entering his carriage, returned to the inn.

It is difficult to conceive the pain and agitation with which this interview filled the breast of the poor widow. Doubts distracted her; and decision either way filled her with dread. One moment she resolved to spurn the offered ransom from poverty, the next, as her eyes dwelt on her helpless little ones doomed by such decision to years of toil and want, she wavered, and almost consented to part forever with her darling Louisa, if by the sacrifice their comfort might be secured. Then her mind wandered to the poor, cast-off Agatha, whom, perhaps, cruelty and harshness might destroy. She had well divined the father's selfishness, and should she refuse the charge, he might entrust her to other hands less faithful—for already she felt her heart warm toward the unfortunate.

Unconscious of their mother's distress, the children had once more fallen asleep. Softly removing the little arm of the youngest from her neck, she carefully placed them on her humble bed, and then kneeling down beside them, she prayed that strength and resolution might be given her that she might decide justly and wisely. Mournfully the wind sighed around that dismal dwelling; the rain beat against the shattered windows—but she heard it not, knew it not. Through that long, long night, without lamp or food, unto the dawning of another dismal day, the widow remained on her knees by the bed-side of her beloved children. Years seemed added unto her by the sufferings of that night.

Her decision was made—made with an anguish that mocks at consolation.

Blame her not, fond mother, as surrounded by all the comforts of life, you fondly circle your own dear babes to your bosom, and think no power but death can separate you from them. Blame her not, that in poverty and destitution, in forlornness and widowhood, to save her poor infants from a lot so wretched, she at length with grief too deep for tears, decided to yield up forever to another, her youngest born—her darling Louisa.

To a pleasant seaport town, many miles distant from the scene of the preceding chapter, and still further removed from the residence of Mr. Oakly our story now takes us. We must allow, too, for a flight of years, which shall be as noiseless as those circling so swiftly around the head of the young and happy.

With the exception of one long street, consisting mostly of mechanics' shops, a few stores, a ropewalk, and a tavern, the dwellings clustered here and there in a most picturesque and delightful manner. The land rising rather abruptly a few rods from the shore, and slightly undulating, gave to each little cottage a distinct and pretty appearance, each with its little garden-plot of bright green vegetables and brilliant flowers, some half-hidden behind the huge brown trunks of forest-trees, others mantled with the vine or honey-suckle. To the south and west, the horizon rested upon the bosom of the majestic ocean; northward towered hill on hill until the blue sky kissed their dark summits; while to the east stretched a beautiful vista of finely cultivated fields and glowing orchards, with the spires of distant villages proclaiming—*God above all!*

It was the hour noon, on a bright June day. A band of happy sportive children were just let loose from school, and with whoop and huzza, with careless laugh and merry song, away bounded the gay young things, happy that the four brick walls of ABC-dom were behind them, yet now and then glancing back with a look of fondness to their school-mistress, as she slowly crossed the play-ground to her own residence. In the path before her frolicked a beautiful girl of perhaps ten summers, the very embodiment of health and innocence, skipping and dancing onward light as a fairy, or with sunny smiles bounding back

with a flower and a kiss for the child her mother was so tenderly assisting. This poor little creature was not only very lame, but was terribly hunchbacked, and otherwise deformed. Although really older than little Ruth Oakly, (for in the school-mistress the reader finds the widow,) she was not taller than most children at five. One little hand was clasped in her mother's, (she knew no other mother,) who, with the most tender care, guarded her steps, now and then, as the eyes of the child were lifted to hers, stooping down to kiss her, and encouraging her in the most endearing terms. The other hand held a wreath of flowers, which she had woven for her dear sister Ruth.

As they entered the gate opening upon the nicely gravelled walk leading up to the cottage door, Ruth ran and brought a little arm-chair on rollers, softly cushioned, and placed it on the grass beneath the shadow of a large apple-tree, whose pendant branches, nesting down amid the sweet clover, thus formed a beautiful bower for the children's sports.

'There, Gatty,' cried Ruth, flinging herself down at her feet among the clover, 'now, let's play the story you were reading this morning. You shall be queen and I will be the little girl that was never happy; would it be wrong Gatty, to play you were never happy—would it be telling a lie; for you know Gatty, dear, I am very, very happy—are n't you?' 'Yes—very happy,' said Agatha, though fully, 'but Ruth, I cannot be queen you know, how I should look! No, you must be queen; and see, I have made this pretty wreath on purpose for you. I will be the ugly old fairy and ma'ma shall be Leoline, that was never happy—for Ruth, do you know I think dear ma'ma is sometimes very miserable. I wonder what makes her cry so; for every night when she kneels down by our bedside I can feel the hot tears on my cheek as she kisses me.'

'And so can I—poor ma'ma!' said Ruth, and both children remained sad and thoughtful, the arm of Ruth thrown across the lap of her sister, whose little hand, still clasping the wreath, rested on Ruth's shoulder. At length Agatha spoke, but her voice was low and broken.

'Ruth,' said she, 'maybe ma'ma weeps for me, because—because—I am not more like you.'

'How like me?' said the little girl, raising her eyes to the sad face bent over her.

'Why you know, Ruth, you are so straight and so pretty, and can walk so nicely, while I—'

'You are a thousand times better than me dear Gatty,' said Ruth, springing up and throwing both arms around her weeping sister—for it was almost the first time she had ever heard Agatha allude to her deformity; 'indeed you are a great deal prettier and better. Oh! how many times I have heard dear ma'ma say she wished I was as good as you.'

'Ruth,' said Agatha, laying her hand on her sister's arm, and looking earnestly in her face, 'I am a frightful looking child, am I not?'

'You, Agatha!' exclaimed little Ruth, 'you frightful! O no; don't every body love you, Gatty, dear?'

'Everybody is very kind to me,' said the child, unconsciously making the distinction—'but then, Ruth, sometimes I hear people say,

'O, what an ugly little thing!' 'Did you ever see such a fright?' and then sometimes the children call me a spider, and say I have arms like an ape, and cry "Hunch-Bunch, what's in your pack?'

'O, stop, dear Agatha!' said Ruth tenderly kissing her, 'don't talk so—pray don't! it is only rude stranger children that say so; it is because they don't know what a sweet, dear child you are.'

'I pray to God every night,' continued Agatha, 'to forgive them, for they don't know what it is to be lame, and deformed, and helpless; and I pray God to make me good and amiable, too, that I may forgive them.'

'Don't cry, Gatty dear,' sobbed Ruth, and then both little heads sunk lovingly together in a paroxysm of tears.

When Mrs. Oakly came to call the children to dinner, she was surprised to find them both weeping and sobbing bitterly. There was never any concealment from their mother; so Ruth, in a simple, earnest manner, related the conversation between Agatha and herself. Mrs. Oakly was grieved to find the mind of her hitherto happy children dwelling on a subject so helplessly calamitous. Raising the poor little girl in her arms, she fondly kissed her.

'My darling,' said she, 'is it not better to be good and lovely in your heart, than to possess the most beautiful form, and yet be wicked, and have no love for God and his commandments? My dear little girl, listen to me; it was the will of the Almighty to strike you with lameness, and to render your frame less pleasing to the sight than that of other children; but reflect how many blessings he has also granted you. Suppose you were blind; suppose you could never look upon the face of your dear little sister Ruth, or your mama's; could not see the beautiful flowers, nor the grass, nor yonder ocean, which you now so much love to look upon, or the beautiful blue sky above you; or, Agatha, what if you were deprived of speech and hearing? Ah! my child do not sorrow any more, for you see how good God has been; you must not let the speech of thoughtless children thus disturb you—will you promise me Agatha?'

'I will try, dearest ma'ma—I must not promise, for I may be wicked again, and forget that God is so good,' answered the child.

Mr. Alfred Oakly had so far fulfilled the promises he made the widow as to remove her from the wretched spot where he had first sought an interview with her to the home

she now occupied. He had purchased the cottage, which was pleasantly located, and presented her with the title deed. He had furnished it neatly, adding also a piano, and a small collection of books, to the other equipments. Half yearly she received a stipulated amount of money, which though small, would with economy, have been sufficient for her support, had she chosen to avail herself of its uses. But this sum she considered sacred to Agatha. In case of her own death, she saw how utterly hopeless and dependent her situation would be, and she nobly resolved not to encroach upon it any more than was absolutely necessary for the first six months. She therefore exerted all her energies to support herself and the children, independent of his allowance. In this laudible endeavour she found the piano one great source. She gave lessons in music, also drawing and painting, and was engaged as teacher in the village school, in which capacity she was much beloved and respected both by parents and children.

Thus years rolled on. Although she still grieved for her darling Louisa, and wept in secret those tears of which none but a mother may know the bitterness, still she was most fondly attached to the unfortunate little Agatha, while the affection subsisting between Ruth and the poor deformed was truly lovely to witness. There could not be much contrast than in the looks of these two children, although their dispositions were in perfect harmony. Ruth possessed a rich olive complexion, with cheeks which might vie with June roses, they were so bright and glowing; her eyes were black and sparkling; and her raven hair closely cut to her beautifully rounded throat, was parted on the top of her finely formed head, and waved over each temple in one rich, glossy curl. Her figure, tall for her age, was light and graceful. The complexion of Agatha on the contrary, was dazzlingly fair, save where dashed by the small, violet veins; her large, deep-hazel eyes possessed that peculiar brightness and intensity which usually designates those who suffer from like causes, long ringlets of light-brown hair, fell around her almost to the ground as if to hide within their beautiful redundancy the mishapen form of their little mistress. But it was the expression of her innocent face which called forth the pity and kindness of every one; that look, so gentle, so confiding, as if pleading with every one to love her, though she knew how hard it would be to take to their hearts a helpless deformed little object such as she was.

Incapable of joining in the sports of other children, Agatha devoted a great portion of her time to reading, of which she was passionately fond; and possessing a retentive memory, she was better informed, perhaps, at ten years of age than most children at fourteen. She had a great taste for drawing and for music; these Mrs. Oakly had assiduously cultivated, knowing what a source of comfort and amusement they would afford her, and also contribute to draw her from dwelling too much upon herself and her misfortunes, which would only tend to sour and destroy her happiness.

From its proximity to the sea, and consequent advantages of sea-bathing, the village in which Mrs. Oakly resided was in the summer season, a frequent and favorite resort for invalids.

There was a certain wealthy bachelor of the name of Sullivan, who for two successive seasons, had made this his place of residence. Every one granted his claim to invalidism the first season, but when with robust frame, and fresh, healthy countenance, he appeared the second, people shook their heads, and talked of *hypocondriacs*. By and bye, it began to be whispered about that Mr. Sullivan was often seen coming from the little cottage of the widow Oakly; and at last it was asserted that he was soon to bear off their good school-mistress as his bride. This was all true. Mr. Sullivan was talented, agreeable, good looking, and rich; one who, in his youthful days, need not fear the frown of any damsel, and who now, in the prime of manhood, might still have won the fairest. But the heart of the handsome bachelor seemed invulnerable, for nearly forty years resisting all the charms of beauty. He came to the sea shore to restore his head, and lost his heart.

'When I said I should die a bachelor, I did not think I should live to be married,' thought he, blushing like a school-girl at his ridiculous plight.

The acquaintance between Mr. Sullivan and Mrs. Oakly commenced by means of the children. He one day met them on the beach as they were gathering shells, and being always interested in children—a sure sign that his heart was good—he stopped to speak to them. The beauty and vivacity of Ruth charmed him, while her unfortunate little companion filled him with deep sympathy and pity. By and bye he found himself thinking less of the children and more of the mother, until in fact he made the astonishing discovery that he was in love.

Mrs. Oakly, now in her thirty-eighth year, had preserved her beauty through all the troubles and vicissitudes of her life. There are some forms and faces we see, upon which time appears unwilling to lay his withering hand—and Mrs. Oakly was one of these. The rose yet lingered on her cheek; her eyes were still soft and brilliant; her mouth had not lost its freshness, nor her teeth their pearly hue, while her dark hair folded over her fine brow was as thick and glossy as in the days of girlhood.

You may be sure the bachelor was not for any long delay in the matter—that 'Happy's the wooing that's not long a doing,' was pre-