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HONOUR WITHOUT RENOWN

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CHAPTER XIV.—CONTINUED

Father Lawrence lowered his own, for the look out him to the heart; he longed to evade it, but it haunted him long afterwards to the destruction of his peace of mind.

"Not to die, Father! It is not that I may be overworked and die that I ask more time. Believe me, there is no one in all this wretched abode who courts death less than I, or who fears it more. No! But though men may fetter the limbs, and bow the body down, yet no earthly power can fetter or cripple the spirit of man when in unison with the will of his Creator.

Father Lawrence felt himself once more baffled. He knew well that hope and faith in God alone had sustained the strong spirit before him, and yet he was aware that the poor prisoner's frame was so weak that any undue bodily exertion might easily prove fatal; therefore he paused ere he answered as cheerfully as he could:

"At least you will allow me to ask a day off for you tomorrow. I hear that water has burst into the cell of the quaries, and the work will be both heavy and dangerous. You cannot object to one day's rest, when you know it to be so essential for your health."

The prisoner bowed his head still lower; he did not wish to meet the kind eyes of his friend; and answered with slow, indomitable persistency: "After tomorrow, dear Father—after tomorrow; then I promise to listen to and comply with your every request. Ah, you do not realize how sweet it is to me to feel the free air of Heaven upon my brow. You have not felt what joy it is to gaze upon the faces of your fellow creatures, to mark the pure innocent look of the children, and to note the pitiful eyes of the women as they fall upon you, and to be able to bless God that they at least, are still free and unfettered. And Father," continued the man, burying his face in his hands, "since you will have my reason (which, however, remember, is sacred between us), there is just a chance that on the way to, or from the mines tomorrow I may catch a passing glimpse of features that are dearer to me than sight, or almost a year now, yearning for the sight once again; you cannot deny me just one more trial. Tomorrow is the anniversary of our wedding day, and I feel certain that my wife will be somewhere near on that day."

With difficulty Father Lawrence forced back the tears that welled to his eyes. Why had he been placed in such a position as chaplain to his poor imprisoned fellow-creatures, to some of whom his heart went out in such overwhelming pity and compassion that he had often no power to eat or sleep? Now, however, he felt that the conversation was taking a dangerous turn; he must not connive at any act contrary to prison rules. Besides the excitement of it was telling upon the weak frame of poor No. 75; he was breathing too fast and heavily, and the perspiration was standing upon his brow. Moving towards him the priest laid his hand firmly upon his shoulder, saying in an abrupt voice, as though the better to recall the man to himself:

defence I did but involve myself the deeper."

"Yes, I remember well that for a long time after your entrance here you were too ill to leave this infirmary; but now can you wait for a moment and endeavour to recall to your mind who it was that visited your apartments, and at what hour of the day or night this visit took place?"

The prisoner crossed his legs, clasped his thin hands around his knees, and looking steadily in front of him, answered calmly: "One evening, the second after my marriage, I took my wife to see a play of Shakespeare's, and on my return my old landlady informed me that during our absence a young man had called, wishing to see me on urgent business regarding my half brother. At the same time he pleaded fatigue, and begged to be allowed to rest a little and wait for us. Good-naturedly enough she consented, and begged him to take a seat in my sitting-room, which opened into the bedroom. In about twenty minutes he came out, and after thanking her for her kindness, said he really could not wait any longer, but, if possible, would call again the next day to see me."

"And who do you conclude it to have been?"

"My one enemy, and my poor brother's evil genius; no other than young Thomas, the lawyer's son."

"But why was not the fact of this visit brought forward at the time of the trial? Your defence ought to have made much of it. Where was the landlady?"

CHAPTER XV

It was late before Father Lawrence reached his humble abode. After parting hastily from the poor prisoner, he left the prison and walked he scarcely knew whither, not noticing even the friendly salutes of the passer-by as they recognized his familiar figure. With head bent forward, eyes lowered upon the ground, and hands buried in the sleeves of his habit, he strode on, his mind perplexed by anxious thoughts. He had walked several miles as he realized the lateness of the hour and the distance he had traversed. Arriving at last at his house, he mechanically drew forth his lock-key, opened the door, and passed at once to his small sitting-room.

pale light of the moon. Not even noticing the cold supper which lay upon the table, Father Lawrence threw himself wearily into an armchair which stood facing the open, uncurtained window; then crossing his legs and throwing his arms behind his head continued his painful reverie. Before him, clearly defined in the moonlight, he could see the well-kept paddocks fenced round by low, thick hedges in their first spring beauty; the giant trees like solemn sentinels moved stiffly in salutation as it were to the night breeze, as it swept amid their branches, rustling playfully their fresh green leaves. The birds had long since ceased their noisy twitter; the cattle and sheep were lying half buried in the soft green meadows, so full now of closed daisies and buttercups. The voices of the children were hushed; all nature seemed at rest, save the heart of the silent watcher. In the blue vault above the stars shone like myriads of twinkling diamonds, whilst the moon—her pale light unobscured—looked peacefully down upon this world of ours, where virtue and vice are so strangely blended.

He knew that soon her gentle beams would pass through the window of that prison cell, and would linger over the features of that innocent man: where would she shine at the same hour upon the guilty brother, he wondered? Where was he hiding? How could he be found? How often, whilst sitting thus in solitude thinking of our absent ones, the longing seizes our hearts, that power were given us to pierce the distance which separates us from our loved ones, and feast our eyes—

"No, it was, Father, everything went dead against me, as you know by reading over a copy of the trial. The very day after this mysterious visit my landlady fell in the street and received a concussion of the brain; this was followed by a long illness. In fact, I have often wondered whether she ever recovered. She was a kind, motherly old soul, but very simple."

"I suppose you have forgotten her name and address?" inquired the priest earnestly.

"No, Mrs. Lawson, King's Street, W. The number I am not positive about, but think it was 17." Father Lawrence drew from his pocket an old envelope, and after jotting down the address replaced it carefully. At this juncture the jailer slid back the panel and peered in, reminding the priest in a gruff voice that it was getting late.

CHAPTER XVI

"All right," he answered cheerfully; but continued in a hurried tone, "Do you think that your brother was cognisant of this man's visit? No, 75 hesitated ere he answered; then looking up sorrowfully, in a slow, steady voice he said: 'I would give much to think that my brother is innocent—but no! I am certain he knew that his friend had altered the cheque. They were both filled with envy towards me, and were determined, if possible, to share my uncle's estate. No, Father: I am morally certain that I am here with my brother's connivance.'

the common. Evidently it is not the first time that they have thus met. Poor, faithful little wife! No one shall deprive me from comforting her at least."

Thus planning, brooding, hoping, and fearing, he still sat until the clear sweet tones of a nightingale suddenly filled the night air with melody. As a harbinger of hope the thrilling notes struck upon the ear of the watcher and roused him from his reverie. Rising hastily, he pushed back his chair and stood listening; then with a feeling akin to hope and gratitude in his heart he reluctantly drew down the window, and discovered that he was both faint and hungry. The little room was flooded with moonlight, and taking out his watch Father Lawrence found that it still wanted sixteen minutes to twelve.

A very few moments sufficed in which to appease the inner man; then, feeling it useless to seek his couch, he opened the door and groped his way to the silent church.

GUARDING THE HEADGATE

Miss Esther Whitney, owner of The Cottonwoods, was sitting at a leisurely breakfast, when Andre, her hired man, came slowly along the path that led from his abode back to herself she said: "If once, just once, he would hurry."

"Good morning, sonorita! The day it is to be a beautiful one," Andre called as he approached the open window.

CHAPTER XVII

So, unconscious of the flight of time and of the chilly night air, Father Lawrence sat busied with troubled cogitations. Sometimes he clasped his hands tightly together and looked sternly out into the night; then, leaning his elbows upon a small table near, he would rest his chin upon his hands, still thinking—thinking.

"You did not leave him in possession? Surely you opened my sluice and closed Smith's?"

"No sonorita. He sat on the headgate, and ordered me off. I come away."

The headgate that controlled the water supply for the two ranches was not far away. As Esther hastened to the dam, she went on across her neighbor's fields to where the distant low mountains shut in the valley. Their bases were heavily wooded, while their heads were crowned with gold-flecked lavender mist.

CHAPTER XVIII

"This is Mr. Smith I presume. I am Miss Whitney from The Cottonwoods."

"See here, madam," Joe Smith leaned forward, his words coming slowly. "That contract's all blamed nonsense. For four years no one has lived at The Cottonwoods. I've kept the reservoir in repair, and last year I put in a new headgate. You might as well understate that I'll use the water as I please."

CHAPTER XIX

"The gleam of Esther's eyes was flamelike as she asked: 'Will you do what I ask?'"

from the well to the garden. The well was equipped with a windmill, and the supply of water was a bountiful one. Jacobs was more energetic than her husband, and she was devoted to Esther.

"The Mexican woman came, smiling. 'Such a help as he is, sonorita! It is Tom Sparks, and the Senor Smith sent him to help us water the garden.'"

"What do you mean, Jacobs?"

CHAPTER XX

"Two days later Esther saw the truth of what the Mexican had told her from the beginning. Watering from the well might keep the vegetables from suffering for a few days, but they badly needed a thorough soaking. Each day Esther rode to Dunstan, to seek advice and aid from Father Vincent, only to find that he had not yet returned."

"Now what's that? It sounds like—I believe it is."

CHAPTER XXI

"The owner of The Cottonwoods. I have spent the night here, Mr. Smith, although I did not turn on the water until I saw you coming. And I shall spend the day here."

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