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GRACE AYTON:

OR, THE YOUNG WIFE'S TRIALS.

A low chamber, dimly-lighted, excepting where the shaded lamps threw a downward glare on a dingy table covered with green baize, sorely stained and much worn; a low chamber, approached carefully, with scouts placed through the passages and against the doors—and they were many—leading to it; a chamber filled with haggard men crowded round the table, and clustered together at the further end, where wine and spirits were flowing like water; and a chamber where the rattle of dice was symphony to the burden of oath and jest, and laughter more hideous still, from the feverish lips of the gamblers—such was the scene from which Herbert Ayton passed to the room which held his dead child, sleeping in its cradle-grave. There he had been all the day, and for many days before, playing fiercely, now with good and now with ill luck; playing desperately, for he was playing with his all. And this had been his home for many months, his office, and place of business—for gaming had become his sole profession now.

'Lost again,' he cried, with a wild laugh, and a desperate oath. 'Here! another glass of brandy! Perhaps that will change the tide of fortune!' and he laughed again in the same reckless manner to his companion who had won his money—a gambler of the real type.

The brandy was brought, and swallowed at a draught; and again the rattle of the dice went on to the frightful sounds that rose from winner and loser; and again men staked their souls and lost them against pleasure.

Doubled stakes—lost; headlong rushing to destruction—the hopes of retrieving something from the present ruin flattering like marsh-light misleading; the last stake but one—then the last of all—saw Herbert a ruined man. He was a beggar, stripped of every farthing, without enough to save himself from starvation, or to give his wife a shelter from the rain. His child might cry for bread in vain—he could not feel it; his wife might ask for a home—he had none to give her. He was emphatically a beggar, who had signed his ruin with his own hand, and of his own free-will declared himself bankrupt and outlawed. He rushed from the house with a frantic exclamation, and for hours wandered through the darkening streets with thoughts of suicide haunting him, and risings of despair maddening. He thought of his wife, but not with love; of his child, without tenderness. They were only burdens on him, and he wished he was free of them. He forgot even the remembrance of his past fondness, which, until now, had preserved his feelings from utter corruption, and steeled his heart against all the recollections which might awaken the slumbering spirit of love. His child was a tie that bound him to poverty and slavery, and his wife were better begging her bread from door to door than lying as a perpetual hindrance in his path. He would go home, and make some arrangements that should release him. He could not support such bondage longer.

These were the thoughts with which he returned to his miserable home, this the spirit which went before him as he rushed through the narrow hall and trod heavily on the creaking stairs. Grace heard him come. She knew by his step that something was wrong; that either he was tipsy—as when was he not now?—or that he was irritated, and probably prepared for some miserable scene of reproach and bitterness. A strange revulsion of feeling came over her for the first time—a kind of indistinct loathing, a dread, a horror, a consciousness of desecration in the presence of that polluted man by the side of that holy corpse.

She rose hastily, she scarcely knew for what, and stood by the side of the cradle. She was deathly pale, her eyes sunk and discolored, her hair pushed far back from her face, and her hand raised as one standing in expectation, yet in terror.

Herbert entered the room roughly, but started on seeing his wife, so ill and wild as she looked. He spoke savagely to her—asking why she was not in bed, and why she stood there like a spectre to disgust him. Had his home so many attractions, that she must keep the balance by making herself the reverse?

His blood-shot eyes and parched lips, his haggard looks and disordered mein, shewed Grace that he had been drinking, if not so as to make him drunken, at least enough to make him sinful. The evidences of this dissipation by her child's death-bed maddened her. She forgot her love, and saw only his crimes; knew only her own sorrow which had borne its last bitter fruit in death, and could keep no terms with peace.

'Shame, shame, Herbert!' she cried. 'Burning shame on you, degraded, brutalized, unmanly as you are!'

She made a gesture of reproach, pacing wildly through the room.

'Go home, if you are tired of me,' said Herbert in a loud voice, startled, yet irritated still further by her voice and manner; 'I shall only

be too glad to get rid of you on any terms. You may go whenever it suits you!'

Grace continued her feverish walk, pressing her hands on her forehead, and sometimes uttering a sharp cry, sometimes a low moan, as of one in extreme agony; yet doing her best still to control herself.

'I tell you, you may go. Go, Grace,' repeated Herbert in the same angry voice, and with a peculiar coarseness of accent; 'I am tired of you—have long been tired of you, and I wish to be rid of you. I married you for your pretty face, and it has palled on me; and for your silly laugh, which had a certain charm of girlish freshness in it then, which it has long since lost. You may go; you have lost all your power of fascination over me. You are only a burden on me, more distasteful every day we live together, and I want to be rid of you—you and your brat.— Curse you both!'

Angry words—drunken words as she thought them—but sharp as steel to the poor young woman's heart. She stood and listened with parted lips and upraised hand, holding her breath with horror as one listening to damning blasphemy, and feeling a heavy agony at her heart, as if it was breaking. She went nearer to him, as if for protection against the strange thing between them; she did not speak, but only crept closer, looking at him with a terrified glance, her pale face turned towards him in wonder and dread.—The very brutality of his words brought back her love. They formed such a sudden and such a frightful contrast with the past, that all minor causes against him were swallowed up in this; and this was something so inoustrous, she could not accept it as a reality. It seemed to be some one else who spoke while wearing her husband's form: she could not understand that it was Herbert who said he loathed her—Herbert who wished her away, and who cursed both her and her child. It was a dream that a struggle would dispel—a spectre that a touch would annihilate.—She came nearer and nearer, still silent, and looking at him inquiringly.

Something in her face and manner irritated Herbert beyond his power of endurance. He was half mad, and that was his sole excuse; but a sorry one at the best. He forgot himself, his manhood and his honor, his rows, his lore; he raised his hand, and struck her once—twice—and cursed her bitterly.

She did not scream nor faint, nor turn to anger nor to tears. She only rushed forward, and threw herself on his breast, crying, 'Herbert! Herbert!—your wife—your own Grace!'

God bless the patient heart of woman's love! God bless the mighty soul of woman's endurance! Of all grand attributes of humanity, these are among the grandest and the best.

The plaintive accent of that voice—the pleading touch of those trembling arms—the patient prayer for mercy in that upturned face! Herbert shivered with agony as the villainy of that blow made itself felt, now that his blood was calmer. He tried to put her away, but Grace clung closer and closer, taking his hand and kissing it as in days of old.

'Herbert! Herbert! you are all that is left to me now; you must not thrust me from you; you must not be angry at my first impatient word.—I have suffered much, darling—suffered where you have been spared, and I thought you might have been more tender to me and more considerate. Look here, Herbert; we are alone now, and you must not hate me or be cruel to me!'

Broken with grief and terror, and exhausted by the unusual passion of her late excitement, Grace sank, weeping, by the side of the covered cradle, sobbing with such violence that even Herbert was alarmed to see her. A pang passed through him; the cold hand of death was before him; he tore off the coverlet, and saw the baby as it lay—a dead pale bud broken for ever.

'It is dead!' sobbed Grace, as she heard his sudden groan. 'It died in my arms to-day, Herbert, and I have had no one to comfort me, or to speak a kind word to me. O, that I were dead too! God, O God! take me to my child!'

To-day!—this fatal day of grief and sin!—While he had been at the gaming-table, drowning thought in loud oath and horrid jest, his child had breathed out its gentle soul in its sad mother's arms, and the last act of his fatal tragedy had been played by that sinless death-bed. What a contrast!—madness, intoxication for him—for her the pale shroud of all her happiness—misery, solitude, and despair! He could not but remember the beauty of their first months; he could not but recall the sunny days and the full hearts which had received this little one—of the mighty love that had baptised it into being; and now all was over! The golden morning had deepened into a twilight of eternal gloom, across which at times flashed streaks of burning fire; the blessed babe, which had come as a flower from the gardens of heaven, had withered on its stalk—too pure to remain near him; the wife, whose smallest tear he once had kissed away, had suffered the agony of death uncheered and unassisted, and

he stood there the sole cause of all!

He raised her gently from the ground, and placed her on the sofa, seating himself by her, but without speaking. Proud, yet touched, he turned away his face sullenly, but left his arm round her. A mysterious kind of remorse, as if he alone had been to blame for this sad fate—as if his mere wish had produced its own fulfilment—made him like a murderer to himself; it seemed as if his unspoken passion had borne a blight which had stricken the helpless little one to the heart.

Grace leaned against him, still sobbing in the same passionate manner. Even the slight return of kindness in the arm left loosely round her could not cheer her; the sight of the dead baby had awakened all her grief, and it was not now the husband who was left her, but the child who was taken away; she had not so much comfort in his forbearance as despair in her desolation. Her heart felt broken; her life seemed darkened for ever; she was in a pathless desert, bleak and bare, without a light to cheer or a star to guide her. Her only star was quenched—her only flower plucked; the sole bird that ever sang without false accents in its notes was hushed for ever, and from henceforth her way must lie in the path of unutterable woe. Her husband—he was but a man left of the glorious truth—a shadow of the adored reality. He was no husband in all that better part which constitutes true marriage.

Did such a thought as this cross Herbert's brain? Or why did he suddenly turn to his wife and strain her to his heart and kiss her pale face again and again? Why did he call her 'Grace, beloved—wife—his love—his dearest?' Why did he whisper words, faint and few, which flowed like living light over his lips, and cleared his bloodshot eyes of their fierce glare and impure fire? Why did he take her hand in his, and lay them both, clasped tight together, on the cold face of the waxen corpse, and swear, in low tones, half lost through the woman's bursting sobs, to be true and faithful to the trust that dead child's mother had given into his keeping—to guard her, love her, protect her, honor—to turn from the sins which had ensnared him to the holiness of remorse, and to cherish in sorrow the purification of repentance? Why was all this, if he did not acknowledge how basely he must have deserted her when she could wish herself dead—not two years married, and married with such love and joy?

'Grace, can you love me again?—can you trust me again? When you know all that I have done in injury of you, can you forgive me, and live with me, and for me, as of old?'

Grace could not raise her face. Her grief weighed down her head like an iron hand crushing her. But though she could not look into his eyes, and smile back her love and assurance, and talk gaily of their reconciliation—though its baptism was made in the bitterest tears a woman's eye can weep—yet she could kiss his breast, and press his hand, and fold herself nearer to him, and lean upon him lovingly, and make him feel that she had forgiven him. Strong as she was, and enduring as she had been, she yet was all a woman in her feelings, and snatched eagerly at the chance of support and love even from one who had so often failed her.

'A beggar, Grace—ruined entirely—without a home, without food for you, work, or character—can you cling to me yet?'

Her sobs were getting quieter. She could speak now, and did.

'I have loved you always,' she said, 'and will never desert you.'

Herbert was trembling, his manhood almost giving way. The reaction had been too sudden for him, weakened as he was with the fever of his late life; the sight of the dead baby, of his wife's despair, of their bitter poverty, all pressing on him as his own work, almost overcame him. He struggled against the choking tears that swelled his heart, and kissed the downcast face again and again. And then he could bear up no longer. His thoughts and remembrances became too painful. With the terrible cry of one wounded, he uttered her name in a prolonged shriek, and fell fainting on the floor. And when he arose again, he did not even know the sweet hands that tended him.

It was a brain fever, brought on, the doctor said, by mental excitement and bodily exhaustion. It seized him like an iron vice, and kept him for long days and weeks between life and death. Without money or aid, Grace must support this new affliction as best she could, herself so wan and fragile that the good doctor more than once sent his own servant with nourishment for her, and drugs, and with orders to divide the labor of nursing, and to sit up with Herbert while the poor wife slept. And then Grace would smile in her faint, melancholy way, and say that her very afflictions were blessings, too, since they brought out the kindness of the human heart, and made her feel that human love left no one solitary in the world.

She had a hard time of it, though, having to work between the hours of her incessant attend-

ance, so that they both might live. She got but poor pay for what she did, scarcely enough to support her in the miserable scantiness which she made sufficient for herself, and to get such things for the invalid as were necessary for his state.—But she worked on diligently and uncomplainingly, doing her duty quietly and steadily, and hoping where she could not realize. Still the dead baby never left the mother's heart. Tending her husband carefully, she was not less a bereaved mother—loving him, if not with the blind devotion of her first love, with the womanly trust of a reconciled and renewed confidence, she was not less conscience of her loss. The dead child's toys were ranged before her eyes on the shelf where they had always stood, and where it could see them, and point to them, and crow for them; its little caps, and frocks, and tiny shoes, were cherished like priceless gems; and, weak as it might be, many an hour of fearful agony was passed in looking at these signs of a departed bliss. Once or twice the thought that Herbert had caused its death started out like a visible shape before her; but she always thrust it back, and turned her heart away from it, and busied herself with increased diligence about that helpless bed.

One cherished remnant of pride Grace preserved amongst all her misery—the concealment of her condition from her friends; not so much, perhaps, from pride for herself as for Herbert, dreading the blame they would cast on him, and shrinking from the exposure of his faults and crimes. A few of Herbert's former intimates had maintained a questionable kind of intimacy with him, while the gaming-table held out some hope of monetary success; but as soon as he was thoroughly broken, they lost their interest in him; and even Frank Lawson, famous for his studies of 'low life,' voted it disreputable to be seen in such a neighborhood, and found out that it was a humbug to be always inquiring after a man's health; for inquiries don't do any good, you know, and only disturb people from their work. Hyde Smith kept his interest in poor Herbert much longer, being impelled thereto partly by a coarse admiration of Grace, which yet was a good-natured, doggish kind of feeling. But Grace had such a profound horror of these two men, that had she been starving, she would rather have hidden in the first tomb that was open, than have accepted life from their hands. She looked on them as so immediately the cause of Herbert's first disasters—these, again, engendering his subsequent sins—that they became at last the very embodiments of her evil fate, and she shrank from them as birds from serpents, or children from the evil eye? And as she was pale and thin, and all her heavy chestnut curls plainly braided under a kerchief, and as the girlish laugh was stilled, and the girlish glance subdued, Hyde reconciled himself more easily to the 'cut,' and vowed that 'Mrs. Herbert had grown jolly plain all at once.'

Grace's best friend was the doctor. Medicines, food, clothes, and even money, he pressed on Grace; always in such a fatherly way, that she could not feel offended. And if she drew back her hand as he pressed his gifts into it, and shook her head, while tears of wounded pride and gratitude together rose up into her eyes, the doctor would end the contest by pointing to the sick-bed, and saying gently: 'I do not ask you to accept this for yourself; you can work, and earn enough for your own wants; but his—'

And then Grace would yield between many a smile and many a hope of 'being able to repay the loan' when brighter times should come. The most painful thing that she had to suffer were her husband's ravings. Often in the dead of night, when she was sitting there alone, her dim candle throwing but a ghastly light on wall and floor, and forming a thousand fantastic shapes from the waving of the curtains and to fro—often then, as she sat there, painfully watching the sick man, or wearily working at her eternal needle, he would suddenly utter shrieks and cries that startled her till she shook for fear; fearful words would drop like burning lava from his lips; and terrible accusations would chill her blood to listen to, spoken though they were in the mockery of fever.

One night, she had been sitting by him working for a long time in silence. He was dozing lightly, and, excepting the restless head tossing on the pillow, and the hot hands heaving the air, and the feeble voice groaning heavily and sighing between, not a sound broke the sepulchral stillness of the room. Worn with many days and nights of incessant care, Grace was half yielding to the soothing influence of that respite of quiet. Still awake, but in that kind of tranquil dreaminess which leaves the senses free, but shuts out painful thoughts, a thousand indistinct sensations rather than visions floated before her; and for a time her mournful existence took back something of its former loveliness. Flowers seemed to wave before her, and the pleasant songs of birds sounded in the distance; the old cottage, with its gable roof and jessamine porch, its profusion of roses and multitude of thrushes, seemed to stand in the twilight far off, but not unattainable; and

she heard the laughter of children on the grass, and saw them play among the lambs in the meadow; and it seemed as though she had gone back into the pure country again, as merry and as blight as in the times that had passed.

Suddenly a cry echoed through that enchanted silence, and shook her sweet vision to the ground—a cry which shot to her heart with a vague sentiment of worse than pain to come—of dread, of horror, of agonizing terror. She started and looked up; her upraised hand met her husband's, clenched and fiery.

One hand holding back the curtains of the bed the other raised as if menacing, at the same time that it repelled; his pale face, livid with horror, thrust forth from the opening; his eyes fixed and bloodshot; his open lips black with fever and crisp with fears; his terrible cry that came as a death-shriek from his heart; all the concentrated agony and despair which a guilty conscience mixes in with the fierce fancies of delirium, made Herbert at that moment such a thing of horrors, that Grace for the first moment shrunk back from his eyes and from his hand, terror overpowering every feeling of duty or compassion.

And then burst forth the most fearful flood of words that had ever blighted the air of heaven; then accusations of unnumbered crimes revealed the trouble of the blabbing conscience, though they betrayed also the shattered mind; then descriptions of ghastly sights froze the heart's blood of the listening girl; and passionate denunciations, made up of oath and invective, caused her to place her hands over her ears, shocked and terrified at what she heard. Then all the past came up in review, but deepened into monstrous shapes, and mingled with fantastic fancies; then Grace was bid to look upon him, a murderer, and that was summoned to avenge the slaughtered child; then hosts of fiends were told of gathering thick about the bed, and one, the most dreadful of them all, hovered over him ready to clutch his soul and carry it to an eternal condemnation; and at this the wretched man shrieked anew, while his face took a deeper expression of agony and fear; and shrieking still, calling on Grace to shield him, he fell back on the pillow in strong convulsions, which resisted all the girl's efforts to subdue.

In spite of herself, she must have the doctor. Though his attendance was gratuitous, and it was now the dead of night, she must demand his aid, and not suffer her husband to die before her eyes. Calling up one of her neighbors to watch while she was away, she prepared to set out for the house of the medical man. This was her first walk in the mid-night streets; and had she been less absorbed in her anxiety for Herbert, she would have been terrified for herself. It was so strange, and she felt so desolate, and tales of unimaginable horrors came before her brain, jarred as it was with the frightful scene she had just gone through; and her nerves were shattered and her strength decayed; but still the brave heart triumphed over all these obstacles, and the woman's love subdued the woman's weakness. O the great heart of love! O the life giving power of a woman's tenderness and pity! There is no mountain which these, like faith, will not remove; no rock which these, like fire, will not consume. They make eagles of doves, and lions of the hare; they change the very elements of being, and transform the very characteristics of nature. Alchemists of humanity, what gold have they not brought forth from dross!

Grace met nothing to annoy her, and only her own thoughts to terrify her. A few policemen eyed her scrutinizingly, as much from idleness as from suspicion; and one or two straggling men wished her good night as she passed. The doctor was soon ready; and as he insisted on her waiting for him, and obliged her to swallow more than one glass of wine, she found the walk back in the cool night-air refreshing and invigorating. She had no cause for fear now, and nature was therefore open to her without any veil between.

When they arrived, they found that the paroxysm had passed, but had been succeeded by another; and Grace and her good friend entered just as the sick man's screams were echoing through the room. The doctor shook his head. 'Medicine,' he said, 'will do its work for a time; but another physician besides an earthly one is wanted here. Drugs may soothe your husband's body, my child; I fear my repentance can alone restore his health of mind!'

'Flush, flush, my Herbert,' cried Grace, trying to recall her husband's senses by the touch of her gentle hand on his forehead, and the touch of her little lips on his cheek. But he thrust her from him, while calling on her to see how his Grace was lying there in her shroud, and how he had killed her too, by cruelty, and cold and hunger.

It was a fearful scene! and the doctor said truly when he told poor Grace, that more than drugs and human skill were wanted here. For wild as were those ravings, and false as were the