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A MOTHER'S SACRIFICE; OR, WHO WAS GUILTY?

By Christine Faber, authoress of "Carroll O'Donoghue."

CHAPTER IV.

Hubert Bernot began the study of the law, and as he had said to Margaret, he applied himself to it with a vigor of heart and mind...

It had been Margaret's custom to use the carriage in going to church on Sundays, but on the Sunday succeeding her cousin's return he requested her to walk, saying: "I shall tell you why when we reach the church."

Great was the surprise of John the coachman, when the usual Sunday morning order for the carriage was countermanded, and he scratched his head in a perplexed way...

"Faith, its a queer way the world has; them that has carriages not wanting to use them, and them that can't have them not content because they have to use their feet at all!"

But a half hour after, when he caught sight of Hubert—tall! lithe, handsome fellow that he was—and pale, lovely Margaret arrayed in her plain, dark, but charmingly becoming costume, he declared to Annie Corbin that it would be a pity to shut such a pretty sight in a carriage.

When near the church, to which streams of people were hurrying, Hubert bent and whispered: "The reason why I would not have the carriage is, I shall not enter with you—I feel as if I were banned by God for my crime, and I dare not enter His temple. But do you go in, Margaret, and pray for us both. I shall wait for you somewhere here."

She stopped short, looking at him in horrified affright. He drew her arm through his own, and forced her on. "You will attract notice," he whispered. When she recovered herself she sought him to alter his determination; but he was as flint to her passionate appeals.

Hubert was waiting for her, after Mass, at the door of the church. The homeward walk was silent and dreary.

Every Sunday the same course was pursued, even on stormy ones; Hubert giving out that it was but proper, something should be endured in the service of the Lord; at which the coachman and the cook held up their hands and praised God there was so much goodness in the rich.

"Why go at all?" Margaret said to him once, a little impatiently; for her own remorse of conscience was so sharp. He answered: "To avert the suspicion of the servants—they are very sharp sometimes." And she silently acquiesced.

The patient, long-suffering invalid, whose eyes had turned so often and gazed so long on the sacred picture near her, that they had acquired something of the expression which the painter had depicted, worried in her gentle way about the monotonous existence led by her son and niece.

"I am afraid I have been very selfish," she said to Margaret one day when her niece was tenderly bathing the helpless hands. "I have kept you so long attending to an old woman's whims. I thought that when Hubert came home to remain, he would be your passport to society; but he is almost as great a recluse as I am, and I have fancied, Margaret, that you were suffering."

The girl bent low over the vessel she held, that her sudden start might not be noticed. "The invalid continued: "That you are not well, and fear to tell me lest it may make me anxious. You look pale and sad, my poor child; you have looked so for a long time. Is there anything the matter?"

Margaret forced herself to look up and to meet those calm, passionate eyes. Oh! how she yearned to be able to tell that there was something which was eating her very life away—to lean her head against that tender breast and sob out the grief with which her heart was breaking. As it was, it required a mighty effort to keep the tears from bursting forth. She looked sadly into the face before her.

"I am not ill," she said, "but I do not feel quite as well as I used to feel—I am unaccountably depressed in spirits." "Ah! I see how it is. You have associated so long with suffering, my poor child, that you have grown to suffer yourself. But I must remedy this in some way. Tell Hubert to come to me, and you return with him. No; call Kreble to remove that—as Margaret was about to remove the vessel she had been using.

Margaret put her mouth to a speaking-tube which led from her aunt's apartment to the attendant's room, and in a few moments a large, formed, coarse-featured, but kindly-mannered, German woman appeared to take her place by the invalid.

Hubert kept his promise. He went abroad that very day, and returned with a couple of jovial fellows the ring of whose mirth could be heard through the house. He had taken them to his own room first, and had despatched a message to Margaret to meet them in the parlor. She was in her aunt's apartment when the request was brought, and Madame Bernot, smiling, said: "And I insist that you will change your dress, and make yourself as pretty as possible. Come, I want obedience now."

Margaret went slowly to her room, donned as plain but a less sombre costume than the one she wore, and gave a careless brush to the curls which clustered so thickly round her head and neck. She cared very little for the impression she might make. Her one thought, her sole care, was for the miserable creature whose image was shrouded in her heart. It made little difference to her that this was an unusual way of being introduced to fashionable society—that Madame Bernot in her life of suffering and retirement, and Hubert, in his little knowledge of the conventionalities of fashionable life, had raised the usual mode of introduction. She only knew that the one object of her life was Hubert's welfare, Hubert's happiness.

The grand state-parlor which had never been used for the reception of company since it had been in the possession of the Bernots, looked grim, and in a slight measure awful to Margaret when she entered it—she had so rarely visited it, and the two last occasions on which she had done so were intimately connected with the gaunt secret that she carried.

She paused a moment to remember more distinctly the features of the man who had given her the card with the strange inscription, and then with a shudder she tried to dismiss the painful thoughts which the memory evoked.

An indistinct sound of the merriment in Hubert's room was wafted to her ears, and once she fancied that his voice was raised in mirthful tones. She bent forward, clasping her hands in her eagerness, and murmured: "Already they are doing him good."

She was not mistaken, for his door just then opened and his voice sounded in loud and mirthful protest against some proposition urged by one of his companions, as the three began to descend.

A sudden cold dyed her cheeks, and never, perhaps did she look lovelier than at the moment that her cousin entered with his friends; but the color faded as suddenly as it had appeared, and she stood as motionless as the marble image just in her rear, for she had recognized in one of the strangers Mr. Charles Plowden, the young lawyer who had held so prominent a position in the recent murder case.

He too, seemed embarrassed, and looked appealingly at Hubert; but Hubert said, gaily: "My cousin is slightly startled, gentlemen, at meeting again one to whom she became known under very peculiar circumstances; but there is nothing very strange about it, Margaret. I was introduced to Mr. Plowden in Mr. Delmar's office," placing his hand familiarly on the shoulder of the other of his companions, a tall, rather delicate-looking young man, "and we have found out each other's good qualities in a marvelously short space of time, clasped hands in right good fellowship, and I now present him to you as my friend."

He caught Margaret's cold, listless fingers and placed them in Mr. Plowden's warm grasp. She strove to return the hearty pressure of his hand, and to respond pleasantly to his few low words of regret for having first met her under such distressing circumstances, and his thanks for the favor of this introduction; but she experienced a nameless terror which did not leave her during the whole of the visit.

For Hubert, he seemed indeed to have cast aside his wretched burden, and to have entered into the spirit of the hour with all the abandon of a youth just released from the trammels of college—reminiscences of college days at which Margaret forced herself to laugh, and interesting items pertaining to the fashionable world, and told with a masculine gusto by the delicate-looking Delmar, were intermingled with the deeper but more charming conversation of the handsome Plowden.

Before they departed Delmar arranged for the introduction of Margaret to his mother and sister—by whom, he said, she would be properly chariponned into society; and on the exchange of a few more friendly speeches they took their leave.

Annie Corbin, descending from Madame Bernot's room, met them in the great hall—standing face to face for a second with Mr. Plowden; if he remembered her as one of the witnesses whom he had examined, he did not evince it by either sign or look, but she started slightly, and hurried to acquaint her fellow-servants.

"What odds, as long as they're good friends?" said John McNamee, "though it's queer that Mr. Hubert would receive one that was trying to cause his arrest."

But Hannah Moore looked puzzled, and seemed in deep thought for the rest of the day, saying to herself when assured that she was alone. "It can't be that he's doing this to get on the scent—God help them, if he is!—for he's sharp and cruel."

Hubert had gone to the stoop with his visitors, and he stood on the marble step exchanging adieus, while Margaret waited in the parlor doorway.

He saw her, there white and motionless when, having closed the street door; he turned to ascend to his room; he changed his course and went into the library instead, motioning her to follow. She did so, and he did not speak till he had closed and locked the door; then he turned to her, his face wearing that same appalling expression of suffering. "The mask is off now, Margaret. I wore it well did I not? And now I can be myself—the murderer that I am."

He clenched his hands and set his teeth together, while great drops of perspiration stood on his forehead. Margaret was helpless; she could only look at him in that dumb agony that found no vent even in tears. The pitiful expression of her face seemed to touch him at last, and he said, sorrowfully: "For the future I must not permit you to witness my agonies; and life will be brighter for you henceforward, so that in time you can forget you have been the murderer's confidant."

"Never, never," she moaned; "and since I cannot relieve your suffering I shall at last try to share it."

He said, sadly: "I believe you, Margaret; and know this, that but for you I think I should have gone mad, the chains I wear are eating so into my vitals—but, knowing that I have dragged you down, I know also that I must undo, as far as I can, what I have done in your life. I must in some way secure your happiness before I go to meet my eternal doom; but seek not after this to know things about me which I would conceal even from your eyes—things which must be known only to my Maker. Be patient, Margaret, and God, if He has no pity on me, will have pity on you."

"But," she burst out almost incoherently, "why inflict so much torture on yourself? Why bring home that man to-day when you knew from accounts in the papers how important a part he played on the trial?"

"Ah, Margaret! that was one of my policy strokes. He was in young Delmar's office when I called, and Delmar introduced him to me as his particular friend. Every circumstance of that inquest was revived by Delmar himself, who of course knew of Plowden's connection with it, and the part which my name bore in it; he revived the facts more minutely, I suppose, because it was the first time Delmar had met me since my return from college, and he had but recently made Plowden's acquaintance; but the friendship between the two was thus warm because of some valuable service which the lawyer had rendered Delmar."

"I had already assumed my mask, and I had so stealed every nerve, that I even entered into close and critical discussions regarding the unknown criminal; I sifted the evidence which had been given at the inquest, and which Delmar with an astonishing memory recalled; I balanced with acute precision the verdict of the jury; men who had not penetration enough to discover that they had the murderer just within their grasp, and I concluded by clasping hands with Plowden over Delmar's 'old port,' and vowing a friendship for him as warm as that evinced by my friend. I fancied I was acting grandly—it was, it would be, for my admirable training to be often in the presence of this man who was so near to discovery of my secret crime—who would probably even yet weigh my words, and construe my actions. In order to compel his acceptance of my invitation to return home with me, I accompanied him to his hotel, while Delmar went home promising to wait there until we rejoined him. Immediately that Delmar left us I resumed our conversation about the strange murder. Something impelled me to it, to see to what limits I dared go of a subject which was so full of danger for me; but he sought to get away from the topic, and as often as I returned to it he began to talk of something else. I found him pleasant and genial, with a charm about his company which I could not resist."

"Oh, Hubert!" Margaret broke forth, "he will charm you to your ruin; that very fascination will make you betray yourself."

"There is no danger, for when my mask is on I have perfect self-control; and now, Margaret, I shall go to my room, for I am tired and need rest."

He opened the door for her, and she went heavily forth to change her dress again and to descend to Madame Bernot.

TO BE CONTINUED.

The Hail Mary.

St. Dominic taught the "Hail Mary" the measure and the melody of the rosary of the incarnation; St. Francis the congratulation of her seven earthly joys; St. Thomas of Canterbury her seven heavenly joys; St. Philip Benittus the condolence in her seven sorrows. All through the 1,900 years of the Church the "Hail Mary" has been pouring forth its sweetness and its valency like a long strain of endless harmony.

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