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EUSTACE; OR, SELF-DEVOTION.

CHAPTER XI.—Continued.

At such an act of unnatural cruelty, my very soul sickened; and it was a relief to me when Margaret entered the room, accompanied by Eulalie and Eugene.

We were preparing to depart, but at length yielded to the pressing invitation we received to prolong our stay till evening, when Madame promised that a man-servant should accompany us home. I felt convinced that poor Eulalie was the songstress of the previous evening, and I half reproached myself with cruelty at the pleasure with which I anticipated listening to a performance which would certainly cause her excessive pain.

Eulalie, go to your harp and sing these ladies a song," said Madame, after the tea had been removed. The unfortunate girl had been chatting and laughing gaily with Margaret and her half-brother but a moment before; but I saw a shade pass over the face as she rose from her seat; and her stepmother added: "but do not commence with a song—play this first," she said, taking up a long and very difficult piece, by one of the first composers of the day.

Eulalie took the music, mechanically seated herself, and placing her hand on her forehead, paused as if in thought. I heard a sigh escape her; but the next moment her fingers swept over the chords, and she began to execute the piece in a brilliant and masterly manner.

When I say that she played also with the most exquisite taste and feeling, I by no means exaggerate; but as I listened entranced by the sweet sounds she drew forth, my heart bled when I thought of the long years of torture that young girl had endured ere she could have arrived at such perfection.

The piece was laid aside, and Eulalie now took up a song, the words of which I have, as on a former occasion, rendered into English:

There is for every woe a balm, For every cross relief; For every pang a soothing charm, 'E'en in the wildest grief;

If seeking patience from above, We strive new strength to borrow; If in the hearts of those we love We pour our secret sorrow.

But are there none to dry the tear, To check the rising sigh, To whisper hope, to lull our fear: Then better 'twere to die.

Ah! had I wings of happy dove, I'd fly to you bright shore; In those bright realms of life and love To dwell for evermore.

The voice of the songstress ceased, and she was about to move, amid our warmest thanks for the pleasure she had afforded us. Every word that fell from the lips of that fair girl had struck home to my own heart, for I felt certain the words she sang were the expression of her own feelings; even as I thought thus the voice of Madame de Villecourt, which could be attuned to a siren's softness, exclaimed—

"Now, Eulalie, let your next be something of a gayer character, child; let us have a lighter and more cheerful strain;" and turning over some loose pages of music, she produced the following more spirited air, which was set to a somewhat livelier strain:

Welcome, welcome, dawn of day, All in nature seems to say; 'E'en the feather'd songsters' throat Warbles forth a cheerful note.

Cheerily, on yon blue sky Day's first golden glories lie; Each dew-besplangled flower of morn Welcomes in another dawn.

Down in yonder valley fair With flowers I will wreath my hair; There, where fairy footsteps roam In yon green glade I'd choose my home.

Eulalie ceased, but the fingers still swept tremulously over the chords. I heard a sigh, then a sob escape her. Madame approached her, drew her arm within her own, and led her towards the door. As she passed me I observed that the face was frightfully convulsed, a dark circle appeared beneath the eyes, and a hysterical shriek burst from the lips. Having given her to the care of an attendant, Madame de Villecourt returned to the room, loud in her complaints at her stepdaughter's ridiculous nervous affections. I felt much pain at being present at such a scene; and intense as was the disgust I felt at the cruel conduct of this woman, I determined to dissemble before her; and, meanwhile, to lose no opportunity of cultivating her acquaintance by every means in my power during my short sojourn in France. When Margaret and I were once fairly seated in our own chamber, we had much to say respecting the events of the day, Margaret having quite as much to tell me as I to relate to her: for my reader will be good

enough to remember that during my long interview with Madame de Villecourt, my sister was absent from the room.

To my surprise, she then told me that this unfortunate girl was tenderly attached to the child of the woman who was evidently acting the part of a most cruel enemy; that the boy, in his turn, was equally devoted to her, much to the annoyance of the mother; and Margaret then told me how, with tears, the unhappy girl had corroborated all the stepmother had said, which I will give, said my sister, as nearly as possible in her own words—

"Mamma was very ill. Child as I was, I knew that she was dying, and I felt so angry with Miss Vivian, that she would keep me so much from mamma's room; for Madame de Villecourt was my governess then. (Oh, madam, if you were aware that we already knew the secret you have striven to conceal!) And she was very strict as to my studies, particularly that of music; when I complained that my head ached, or that I felt ill, she would say I was only idle; and on one sad occasion, which I have never forgotten, about a fortnight before mamma's death, I was conning over my lesson in the library, against orders; for that time I ought to have been in the schoolroom. However, I had transgressed, and when I had been there about half an hour I heard my father's step, and also that of Miss Vivian. I did not wish them to see me, and I hastened to secrete myself behind a large folding-door, which led to an inner room. I heard my name mentioned by her as if she was in anger, and my father replied—

"Do not keep her too hard at her studies, Catherine, (I remember thinking it so odd he should call her by her Christian name); she is not in good health; do you not agree with me?"

"No, I do not," replied Miss Vivian; "it is nothing in the world but a plea for idleness. You have promised me the most perfect authority over Eulalie; she is headstrong and obstinate; how am I to acquire control over her when I shall hold her mother's place, if I am restrained now?"

"My heart turned sick with terror as these dreadful words struck upon my ear; she, then, was watching for my mother's death; she was to hold her place. I thought I would leave the room by another door, lest they should discover me; and I was softly hastening away, when my feet slipped, and I fell against a large piece of furniture which lay in my way. I was insensible, I know, for many hours, for the sun was going down, and I found myself in bed when I recovered. I felt faint and weak from the loss of blood, for my wound in my head had bled very much; no one was with me but my governess, and when I asked for my mother she replied: "She cannot leave her bed; you know she is far too ill to come to you; be very quiet and good, and you will soon get better; and I think," she added, with a significant glance, "this will be a lesson to you not to listen again to conversation not meant for your ears." I would fain have told her that I did not go there to listen, only to escape from the room without a scolding, but I was too ill and faint to speak; and I remember I sobbed myself to sleep.

"When I recovered, I was never after suffered to see my dear mother alone. My father or Miss Vivian were sure to be in the room, and, under a pretence that I should disturb her, I was always obliged to leave the room before they took their departure. I knew they were afraid to suffer me to be alone with her, lest the sad secret pent up within my baby heart should be disclosed; slowly she pined away, and one morning my father came and waked me very early, saying these few short words:—

"Eulalie, your mother is dead."

"I sprang up in the bed mad with grief and despair, and it was long ere my father could reason me into a calmer frame of mind. When I had dressed myself, I implored permission to visit the death-chamber; but, oh, how I shrank from the touch of the hand which led me to it; for I knew that hand had been plighted to my father, even while my beloved mother yet lived. I entreated to be left alone; and long, very long, I knelt and prayed beside her corpse, which I visited frequently until the day of interment.

"I must tell you I have never perfectly recovered the effects of my fall on the morning I have alluded to. I have ever since suffered severely from pains in the head, and often, after suffering under any excitement, find that I have fallen into a state of insensibility, preluded by a sort of hysterical affection which I have vainly endeavored to shake off. One of the greatest tortures of my life has been the odious music.—In childhood, my stepmother was relentless in the long hours of practice which she exacted; and she it is who has inspired me with an absolute detestation for an art beautiful in itself, but which has become so disgusting to me that the sight of the piano or the harp fills me with horror."

"Here," said Margaret, "the unhappy girl burst into tears; and then it was that I first became acquainted with the depth of affection that subsisted between herself and the child of her stepmother, for he threw his arms around her neck as he sat beside her on a bank a small distance from the chateau, and I heard him whisper in the simple words which a guileless child should use—

"Do not cry, my own dear Eulalie! When I grow to be a man you shall be so happy, and never touch music any more."

"Dear, dear child, the only comfort of my sad weary life!" replied the girl; and turning aside she whispered to me, "I sometimes can scarce imagine it possible that Eugene is her son; this child and I love each other so dearly, too dearly to please Madame."

"Such, Minnie," continued Margaret, "is what I have to tell you. I would now wish you in your turn to tell me all that passed within the chateau whilst this poor girl was becoming so confidential with me without."

I then narrated to Margaret all that Madame de Villecourt had told me, adding: "I have resolved on letting no opportunity escape for increasing our intimacy with her, with a vague, undefined hope that sooner or later we may be of use to her. Has she said anything to you concerning any relations she may have on her mother's side?"

"She has none," replied Margaret; "her mother was an only child and orphan. Thus she is wholly in the power of our cruel countrywoman, whom her besotted father has constituted her sole guardian till she is twenty-one years of age." Margaret stood at the window as she spoke, and looked out on the fair scene which slept in the pale moonlight. Far in the distance appeared the white walls of the chateau, which stood on an acclivity, its half-ruined turrets rising far above the trees which stretched far and wide around, looming gloomily in the distance; for many leagues on either side extended the lands of the Villecourts; and, as my sister gazed, the fearful thought which had crossed my own mind took possession of hers, and she said—

"Look around, Minnie, and say, is there not an incentive to temptation in such wealth as this; what if that sickly, unhappy girl were to die, into whose hands would all this property fall?"

"Into those of Madame de Villecourt," I replied, "our once needy acquaintance Catherine Vivian—her son would inherit the whole of the property."

CHAPTER XII.—RETRIBUTION.

We soon became very intimate with the family of the Villecourts, and contented ourselves with an occasional day's sojourn to the neighboring towns, in order that our intimacy might ripen.—We were now happier than we had been for many years. We had heard from the Maxwells that Edgar had been seen in Asidue; that he had made inquiries of the neighbors as to the place to which we had removed; and that they had told him we intended to settle on the continent, whither we had already gone. The letter ended with expressions of warm affection, of hopes that the spring would not fail to witness our return, and that then Margaret would hasten to fulfil her engagement with Eustace. From Arthur we had also heard, and his letter informed us that he had not seen or heard of Edgar since the time that he discovered the forgery he had committed. Our minds then were more at ease, Maggie was gradually regaining her health and strength, and we were both playing a part which we hoped would turn to the advantage of Eulalie. One thing, too, was quite certain: this unhappy girl had evidently formed a strong attachment to Margaret, and possibly a still stronger one to myself. At present I had a half-formed idea in my head, vague and indistinct.—I should soon loose Margaret,—what if Eulalie and myself could be a mutual comfort to one another.

We will pass over the winter months, in which there was nothing worth recording, save that scarcely a day passed in which I failed to see indubitable proofs that Eulalie was the object of her stepmother's hatred. I had to play my cards carefully, for I was dealing with an artful, ambitious woman; and I was aware, that if she imagined I considered Eulalie an object for pity, we should no longer be welcome guests at the chateau.

One thing, however, I could not pass by,—this was to beg that she would not insist on Eulalie playing for our amusement. Yet, how has my heart often ached when I have heard, on spending occasionally a whole day at Madame de Villecourt's, the piano or the harp for very frequently three successive hours, sometimes longer; and have caught the words of that stern imperious woman, commanding the daughter of the late marchioness, who, if report spoke correctly, had been one of the kindest of friends to her, imperiously issuing forth her mandates, en-

forcing such or such a time for practice, according as her stern will directed. Not unfrequently too would one of these sad scenes recur, which I have already noticed, when Eulalie's spirits would give way under the exercise of this cruel tyranny and one of the fits to which she was subject would then ensue.

I have placed my hand on my heart when sitting alone, and my ear has caught the war of words which waged on the part of Madame, when occasionally Eulalie would venture to rebel. I have bit my lip till the blood has almost started, as I heard her foot approach and have forced a smile lest I should receive my *congé*, were my sympathy with the hapless girl detected.

But take courage, daughter of adversity, neither you nor myself suspected that the day of retribution was near at hand.

It wanted but one fortnight of the time appointed for our return to England. It was a beautiful evening in May; if anything could be wished for it would be that the weather had been less oppressively hot; as it was, we had passed almost the whole day out of doors. Madame's temper had sorely tried the patience of her stepdaughter, yet she seemed to bear it with such unparalleled sweetness that I could fain have folded her in my arms, and bless her for the bright example she gave to me, so much her superior in years, so greatly her inferior in sweetness of temper.

Woman, when she stoops to play the tyrant, is generally a far more petty tyrant than man. I could not help noticing a slight circumstance that occurred that evening. My very heart rose with indignation at the thought that Eulalie, almost a woman in years, should be subjected to the caprice of this creature, who would place her beneath her own child.

I saw Eugene approach his mother, I heard him whisper a request, but I failed to catch the exact words he uttered, but Eulalie's name was mentioned. The answer was sharp and quick.

"I shall not suffer Eulalie to enter a boat this evening. Go and tell her she is to remain at home."

"But it is I who want a row this fine evening," replied the boy, "not Eulalie, who does not even know that I asked you to let me go."

"That is quite another thing, *mon cher*," replied the mother, parting with a proud look that beautiful boy's golden tresses, and kissing his forehead as she spoke. "Go and tell Francois to get the boat ready, and give you a row on the lake for an hour."

"But I do not intend to go unless my sister is with me," replied the child, with a tone and air which showed that he had already learned to rebel.

"Of course Eulalie may go with you," replied this tyrant woman; "tell her so at once, you have no time to lose."

My heart swelled within me, I was about to dare everything, and point out to her the flagrant injustice she was guilty of; but stop, Minnie, there is one greater than thou, who is waiting and watching, too.

"Coming events cast their shadows before."

An uneasy feeling took possession of my soul as I beheld the brother and sister seated in the boat, which had been moored to in the lake, which extended far beyond the chateau; yet not an idea entered my imagination as to the fearful calamity which would take place that night.—The little party had been gone nearly an hour, when suddenly the sky became dark, and a terrific gale of wind arose; it was the precursor of a truly terrible storm, the more dangerous because unaccompanied by rain. The lightning's flash gleamed with a bluish tint, as it illumined the face of the angry waters, which surged and roared in the distance, while peal after peal of thunder reverberated amongst the distant mountains. It was a time of agonising suspense to all. Where was the little bark, with the delicate, unhappy girl, and beautiful boy, so strangely united with the strongest bonds of affection? Ah, Eulalie, I murmured to myself, if the bosom of the deep this night receives thee, angels will bear thy soul to the footstool of the Eternal.

But watch that almost maniac mother! See with what rapidity she delivers her orders, for night closes in, and darkness cometh on, and the face of the deep is seen only by the pale flash of the forked lightning. A dozen servants are sent forth with lanterns in various directions; a large boat is manned, and a heavy amount, offered to each who will dare brave the fury of the night; she has directed all with energy, promptitude, and clearness; her servants have gone forth, and she stands alone on the brink of the angry waters; an imprecation on her own head, for having let her boy go forth, falls from her lips,—she madly shrieks, "my child, my child," but Eulalie's name never crosses her lips; for her she has no thought.

methinks I see her now, as I beheld her that terrible night, deaf to all expostulation and entreaty, the ghastly whiteness of her face, and

throat relieved by the black satin dress she wore the superb beauty of that haughty countenance distorted by fear;—methinks I see her as I then beheld her kneeling on the bare ground, with clasped hands, madly calling on that Heaven whose justice she had derided in her hideous tyranny. But soft, a shout is heard,—another, and another; lights are seen advancing, the plash of an oar rises faintly above the lury of the gale, and Maggie hastens with her to the borders of the lake: we listen, but the oar is heard no more; but a shriek breaks on our ears—another, and another; the small boat could not live in the fury of that awful tempest; but the larger vesicles triumphant on the face of the angry waters; we see two brave men place their own lives in danger, if they can but have a chance of saving those young and helpless ones; now from the mother's lips rises a shriek of agony; gallantly do those men bear themselves with their burdens; but oh, the waters closes over them, they cannot bear up,—will all be lost! One instant of terrible suspense, it seemed an age; again they appear, but only one has his burden to support. Now, speaks out the mother's heart—she shrieks "Is it my child that is saved?" for, again rising high above the fury of the waters, swims that gallant spirit; one moment more, his strength would have failed; but he has gained his point, and breathless, faint, and exhausted, he sinks senseless to the ground beside his unconscious burden.

With one bound Madame de Villecourt reached the spot. The darkness of the night had concealed from her till now which of the two were saved, the hated stepdaughter or the dearly cherished child.

She gazed with a bewildered look of intense hatred on the insensible form of Eulalie, she spurned it with her foot, she called down imprecations on her own head as the destroyer of her boy, and uttering a long, wild shriek, such as none but maniacs utter, she fell senseless to the ground.

Ah, God! Thy judgments are, indeed, terrific! In that hour, the hand of Thy justice was felt. When Madame de Villecourt was raised from the ground, a stream of blood fell over the hands of those who supported her—she had burst a blood-vessel: life did not, however, become extinct for some hours. By the prompt use of the restoratives usual in such cases, Eulalie was soon restored to consciousness, and Margaret determined on watching by her that night, and I retired to my room; but not to sleep. Oh, no; sleep did not visit my eyes; the wretched acquaintance of my childhood had been brought home unconscious and dying. I had committed Eulalie to the charge of my sister: I now went to Madame's apartment to render any assistance that might be required. With that dark crimson stream life was ebbing fast away,—the stupor still continued; will consciousness be restored only for one moment—will she die "and make no sign?" Two hours have crept away, the physician has been in, he shakes his head and retires, his art fails him here, it draws near midnight, and the sands of life slowly ooze away. Suddenly the white hand is raised, the ghastly pallor of the countenance grows yet a shade deeper, and those delicately-cut features assume an expression yet more rigid. The lips move, and when I bend very low, I can catch such words as these—

"I acknowledge the justice of God—I beseech—His forgiveness—tell Eulalie to forgive—and pray—for me. Be merciful to me—oh—my God!" I heard no more. Death had snatched away the soul. I gazed on features fixed in the last long sleep of the grave, whiter than monumental marble, contrasting strangely with the dark stain which bedewed the pillow and the sheet whereon she lay. I assisted to close the eyes, and to stretch out those poor limbs, a few short hours since so full of life and vigor; and then, sorrowful and weeping, I returned to the room in which I intended to pass the remainder of this terrific night.

I could not sleep. I wanted the presence of some living thing near me; the ghastly tenant of the adjoining chamber was present to my mind's eye; and I pictured to myself that beautiful boy cradled in the bosom of the deep; the wild winds, and still wilder waters singing a requiem to his untimely fate. I could not bear the intense and almost fearful quiet; my nerves were unstrung; and taking my lamp in my hand, I stole stealthily through the corridor which separated me from the room tenanted by my sister and Eulalie.

I opened it gently, shading my light with my hand as I entered. Eulalie was asleep, but occasionally she uttered a few incoherent phrases, then would awake and ramble as though in delirium; the frightful scenes she had passed through evidently present to her memory; "Madame is dead," I whispered, "let us pray for her and this poor child." A thrill of horror ran through Margaret's veins as I spoke. We knelt, and prayed for our-