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PAYING THE PRICE

By Agnes C. Mitchell

CHAPTER I.

Sir Anthony Garrick, M.P.

A wild storm was sweeping over London. Fierce gusts of wind were driving the rain against the windows with a rattling noise; the water channels were overflowing; the wet gleaming pavements gave back the reflection of the lighted lamps. Few pedestrians were about; the cabmen were reaping a harvest, but even their wit seemed damped, and they were indulging in more swearing than chaffing, as their horses slipped and slid on the streaming roadways, and they themselves struggled to keep their lofty seats.

In a street near Piccadilly, in a luxurious flat, high above the noise of the traffic, a woman lay dying. For years she had been one of the stars of the footlights; the most beautiful and one of the most gifted women on any stage, her admirers declared enthusiastically; but the curtain had been rung down on her career now.

Only a week ago a great crowd had thronged forth its applause when her evening's work was finished, and had quitted the theater talking of her grace and power, her rumored refusal of a certain earl, who was ten years her junior, speculating regarding her private life, and saying she was growing younger and fresher every season. And even as they gossiped she was being carried to her brougham; the doctors who had been hastily summoned to her telling each other gravely that she would never face an audience again.

It was a common enough story. A sharp attack of influenza, a feverish anxiety concerning her work, which had made her go out too soon, and now for her the work was over.

That morning her doctor had told her gently that the end was near, and all day she had tossed restlessly, battling with vain regrets, and trying to make plans for those she must leave behind. So the weary hours of the afternoon had passed in silence and in waiting. She had given her maid a lengthy telegram to dispatch as the doctor's visit, and until the reply came she could do nothing more. All her plans depended upon it.

"He is in London—the papers cannot be mistaken." She had given herself that assurance at least twenty times, she had reiterated it as she stretched out a weak hand for a newspaper lying on a table by the bedside, and, drawing it toward her, turned it over.

"Yes—here it is; he spoke in the House last night." And yet—Oh, surely he cannot have gone away today!

The thought caused cold beads of perspiration to break out on her forehead; she passed her handkerchief across her face, and despite the warmth of the room she shivered and drew the coverlet closer. From another column of the paper, the name of the man she was thinking of stood out as if in letters of fire, and, reading the printed words, her doubt was set at rest.

"Sir Anthony Garrick, M.P., of Fleet-hill, the well-known philanthropist, is at present attending to his parliamentary duties, and is to visit St. Thomas' Hospital today, and doubtless the institutions at Fleet-hill and St. Ockley's Rest, both of which owe so much to his generosity, will benefit from what he learns there."

"Thank God!" Gladys Beresford closed her eyes for a moment, and heavy tears ran down her cheeks. He would get my telegram at all events—I can be certain of that now; and if he does not choose to come—well, I shall have justification for breaking my word. It is the only way. I will give him another hour, and then if he is not here I shall send for Tom and Margot myself."

She lay very still, endeavoring to think what she must say should she have messages to dispatch, and presently she fell into a doze, and was still sleeping when a man who had driven from Westminster rang the doorbell and was admitted to the cosy hall. He had dismissed his cab at the corner of the street, and his progress from there had been both slow and disagreeable. He muttered a word of thankfulness as he took off his wet overcoat and muffler.

"Mrs. Beresford is expecting me," he said to the servant. "Is anyone with her?"

"She is alone just now, sir. The nurse has not been well, and has left, and we are not getting another one till tomorrow."

Helpful Advice to All Needing Better Health.

Call the doctor—what does he do first?

Examines your tongue. If it's pale, flabby-looking and coated, he knows the activity of your stomach is lowered.

Your overworked stomach is on strike. It refuses to secrete pepsin enough to act upon the food. Refuses also to secrete acid enough to enable the pepsin secretion to do its work. What's the result—dyspepsia, headache, sick all over.

How do you expect to be well, to look well, to sleep well, if your system is impaired?

Better patch up the weak spot. Give to the stomach the assistance it requires—in other words try Dr. Hamilton's Pills which cure more weak stomachs than any other medicine you know of.

Dr. Hamilton's Pills put the kind of life into a weak stomach that enables it to digest and assimilate all kinds of

"And who is attending to your mistress?"

"Martin her maid, is to sit with her tonight. Will you come this way, sir?" she said. "I was to take you to her whenever you came."

Sir Anthony Garrick looked about him curiously, as he followed the girl's trim figure along the softly carpeted passage. His eye was quick to note that Mrs. Beresford had not grudged money in the gratification of her tastes.

The servant opened a door and stood aside and he passed into a large room. The lights were turned low, but he could see the flash of silver and crystal on the toilet table, the gleam of long mirrors and silken hangings.

His entrance roused the sleeping woman, and she stirred.

"Is the post in, Mary? I seemed to hear a bell," she said, weakly. "Oh! it is you."

Her voice changed as she recognized Sir Anthony, and the gentleness died out of it. Long ago this man had turned the gladness of her life to bitterness; because of him she had suffered much, and been forced to lie under suspicion, and Gladys Beresford was slow to forgive. Her breath came quickly, her thin fingers clenched on the lace-edged sheet, and Sir Anthony, as he approached the bed, saw she was trembling, but her eyes had an expression of scornful contempt as they met his.

"I received your wire, so of course I came at once," he said smoothly. "How are you tonight? I was sorry to hear of your illness, but I hope you will be better very soon."

"The dying woman's lip curled.

"You would be sorer if you believed that I would be better soon," she scoffed. "Turn on all the lights, please. It is so long since we saw each other that we must both want to have a good look at least. I do."

"The glare may hurt your eyes," he urged.

"And, of course, you would not have me hurt for the world! How very kind of you! It is rather late in the day to debate the question, but if you go on to show so much concern for my welfare, you will make me wonder whether you might not have made a model husband, after all. Perhaps as great miracles may have happened, though one can't grasp the possibility. Put up the lights, please."

She raised herself slightly and gazed searchingly at his cold, passionless face. He was a man of about 50—handsome, well set up and well groomed, his gray hair and moustache the only signs of his advancing years.

The moustache, his sharp, cunning lines about his mouth, but nothing could altogether rid his eyes of their crafty, calculating expression. He was on his guard now, however, and met her scrutiny with apparent frankness, while he mentally noted the ravages time and illness had made upon her face.

Her brilliant eyes were sunken, the color in her thin cheeks was dangerously bright, and there were blue shadows round her lips which filled with an anticipation not wholly free from dread. She had been right when she wired to him that she was dying, and what her death would mean for him was a problem which he had come here to try to solve.

You look as if the world had gone very well with you," she said slowly, lying back again on her pillow and stifling a sigh. "We don't all get our deserts in this world—more's the pity! And you have got a knighthood, too, much to his generosity, will benefit from what he learns there."

"Thank God!" Gladys Beresford closed her eyes for a moment, and heavy tears ran down her cheeks. He would get my telegram at all events—I can be certain of that now; and if he does not choose to come—well, I shall have justification for breaking my word. It is the only way. I will give him another hour, and then if he is not here I shall send for Tom and Margot myself."

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broken our bargain? Not much, I fancy.

She was watching him keenly, and she saw him wince. The fear that she might proclaim herself his wife had haunted him since the day, nineteen years before, when he had stood by her side in a dim city church and endowed her with the name which even then he had been resolved she should never bear openly. Later, he thought he had found a way to safeguard himself, but the dread had never been wholly overcome, and since he had been able to prefix that magic "Sir" to his name, the terror that it might tempt him to defy him had haunted him constantly.

He had crossed his legs and settled his trousers carefully, avoiding her eyes as he spoke. "We made our bargain hard and fast," he said, "and you stood to lose as much as you could gain."

"Yes, you saw well to that," she thrust her hand beneath her pillow and drew out a folded paper. "Do you know what that is?" she asked.

He took it and glanced at it. It was a copy of an agreement which he had made her sign when they finally separated a year after he married her. There were twin babies then—a boy and girl, and in the deed she had agreed that if ever she divulged the fact that she was his wife, or used his name, she would give up all claim to the children, and they would pass into his custody. He had relied on that agreement for many years, but now that the boy and girl were grown up, he knew it was not worth the paper it was written on. "Well?" he queried shortly. "What is wrong with this? We have kept its terms."

"You had none to keep to; all the restrictions were laid on me. But I see now the wrong I did when I signed that; I have seen it for a very long time. I hadn't any right to cheat my children out of their name, and I—I must have the wrong righted before I die. You must right it."

The blood went surging up to the man's brain, but he kept a firm hand upon himself.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked quietly.

There was a moment's pause, then she answered him, in a tone as quiet as his own.

"I want you to acknowledge them. Bury me in a nameless grave if you will, but take your son and daughter to your home and let all the world know that they are yours. I will not be denied. You must do it."

CHAPTER II.

Free.

"Bury me in a nameless grave," she said. "I don't want his name for her—self then. The gaily dressed woman consent to go into the unknown without smirching his irreproachable character or casting a shadow on his reputation. And she was going very soon. He hugged that thought to himself. A few hours more, and if he was careful, his nightmare of years would be ended."

"Why should you desire this?" he asked. "Now don't excite yourself. Gladys—there is no need. I simply wish to understand my position and then before I commit myself. If they have been brought up in ignorance of me, what good is it to do to enlighten them now?"

"Because it is their due." The excitement which the doctor had warned her against was making itself painfully manifest now. "I cannot prove every limb," and I—I cannot prove for them," she panted. "I wanted them to have the best of everything, to have a good time, and I have spent my money as I earned it—I never thought I would be taken so soon. There won't be a penny for them—It will take all that is in the house to pay things after I am gone."

"But they are in ignorance of who they are?" he asked.

Her cheeks burned.

"Yes, that has been the worst of it all—they have never asked. I have been thinking, only God knows. But I am to tell them before I die. I cannot go out of the world without looking into their eyes and telling them there is no shame attached to their birth. They will forgive me for agreeing to this, and they will know that it was love that drove me to do it."

"Where are they?"

"Tom is at Cambridge; Margot is finishing at a school at Paris. You will not have cause to blush for them; they can take the place beside your first wife's son and daughter any day."

A satirical smile touched his lips. His first wife's son was a very thorough in his flesh.

"Possibly," he said drily. "Have you sent for them?"

"No, I waited for you; I wanted to have your promise first. She came up again and wrung her hands beseechingly. "Anthony, you will not say no! They will have no one when I am gone; whatever hatred you have for me, don't visit it on them," she pleaded, pitously, the tears coursing down her thin cheeks. "Oh, with all your money, with everything your heart can desire, you cannot imagine what it is to know that death is coming and there is nothing but poverty and loneliness for those you are leaving behind! I don't ask you to tell any one who their mother was, but I am content to be ignored if you will only give them their due. Many a man has had to own he has been married without the knowledge of his friends—you will not be the first; and it need never be hinted that your wife was a gaily dressed actress."

"No," he agreed coolly. "It need not. But if I refuse—what then?"

"What then?" Her eyes blazed; with one hand she caught his arm, with the other she snatched at the coverlet, pitously, the tears coursing down her thin cheeks. "Oh, with all your money, with everything your heart can desire, you cannot imagine what it is to know that death is coming and there is nothing but poverty and loneliness for those you are leaving behind! I don't ask you to tell any one who their mother was, but I am content to be ignored if you will only give them their due. Many a man has had to own he has been married without the knowledge of his friends—you will not be the first; and it need never be hinted that your wife was a gaily dressed actress."

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heaven I swear you shall not get off free!"

She would keep her word, though it should cost her her remaining spark of life—there was no questioning that, Anthony Garrick saw. He was in a corner, and her silence must be purchased at any price.

"So you have been planning it all," he said, with a tolerant laugh. "Well, you might have saved yourself the trouble, Gladys—where should my children go but to my house? It is the most natural place for them, is it not? You might have known I would not refuse."

The suddenness of his acquiescence, the abrupt removal of her fear, robbed his life of speech for a moment, and she lay back, trembling violently, her eyes fixed upon him. Then her white lips framed a question.

"You will take them both to—Abbotsdale?" she asked half incredulously.

"Yes."

"And own them as your son and daughter?"

"You promise faithfully?"

"On your honor?"

"On my honor."

She closed her eyes; the relief was almost too great to be borne, and he stood looking down at her, noting with satisfaction the darkening purple shadows round her mouth and the fitfulness of her breathing. The doctor who had given her only a few days to complete her journey had not known of the ordeal through which she would have to pass.

Garrick was watching her when her eyes unclosed, and she smiled up at him.

"You cannot guess how happy you have made me," she said in a low voice tremulous with gratitude. "I was harsh when you came in, but I could not help it; the anxiety had got on my nerves." She glanced across at an invalid bureau near the fire and indicated it with a motion of her hands.

"You will get telegraph forms there; write to the both to come, without a moment's delay. Tom can be here this evening, and Margot will be in time to catch the night express. I will see the close of another day, please God."

He obeyed without demur, and brought the forms to her when he had scribbled the messages. He would go out and dispatch them himself, he said, as he took down the addresses, and he hurried from her and down to the street, thanking fate for playing into his hands. She might last till morning, but she would never see another night, he felt sure.

He made his way through the blinding rain to the nearest telegraph office and sent off two wires—one to a man with whom he was engaged to dine that evening, the other to his valet, leaving the time for his arrival and expected at his hotel; but the forms addressed to his son and daughter he tore into fragments and scattered to the winds.

The dying woman counted the minutes as the train from Cambridge was due, but the time for his arrival came and passed, bringing no word of Tom and as hope gave way to disappointment she grew feverishly impatient. At 11 o'clock her maid gave her a sleeping draught, and Sir Anthony leaving at room, beckoned the woman into the passage.

"You might kindle a fire in the dining room and I will wait there in case anything should be required before morning," he said. "If your mistress awakes she will be glad to know that I am still within call."

He left the door ajar when he was comfortably seated in an easy chair by the dining room hearth. From where he sat he could command a view of the hall and no one could leave the house without his knowledge. Should any doubt of his good faith disturb his wife, it would be an easy matter to intercept any fresh message she might endeavor to send, he told himself complacently.

But if doubt crossed Gladys Beresford's mind, she did not express it. Between two and three o'clock she awoke, so much worse that her maid ran in alarm for Sir Anthony and the doctor was telephoned for in hot haste. The grave-faced physician came and stayed with her till morning, then went away, and for her the valley of the shadow had come. There was nothing more he could do, he said.

"It is time for Margot now, isn't it?" she asked Sir Anthony when they were alone in the pitiful, panting voice that had weakened to little more than whisper. "Is that a cab I hear?"

He crossed to the window and drew aside the blind.

"There is nothing there," he said. "The storm is as fierce as ever. The boat would have a bad crossing."

"There might be delay, you think?" Her eyes sought his in agony. "Anthony, I must see Margot—I must! She must be here! I won't be still in my grave unless I speak to her before I die!"

"Is Tom not as much to you?"

"Yes—yes; but I must see Margot."

She plucked at the quilt with feeble fingers, and looked at him doubtfully. "If—if she is not very late, I'll be able to hold out," she whispered. "I'll try to sleep and harbor my strength. Send another wire to Tom; he could not have got the first, else he would have been here."

Anthony Garrick turned from the window and answered her slowly, deliberately choosing his words.

"I was cured of rheumatic gout by MINARD'S LINIMENT. ANDREW KING, HALIFAX."

"I was cured of acute bronchitis by MINARD'S LINIMENT. LIEUT.-COL. C. CREWE READ, SUSSEX."

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"Some of the wires are down—I knew that last night," he said. "I hoped the messages might get through, but I could not be sure. Ah! I thought as much."

He crossed hastily to the bed as she gave a choking cry and her head rolled over on the pillow, her face growing ashen. Martin ran in from the next room, and together they restored her to consciousness, but it was evident to both that it could be for only a brief spell, and the maid stole away, weeping, when her mistress motioned to her to go.

"They won't come, I know that now," the dying woman murmured. "Not in time for me at any rate—that prayer has been denied me. Open the top drawer in that bureau—there are my keys—and bring me a silver-bound box that is in it."

The box was of oak, oblong, and strongly clasped with chased silver bands. Sir Anthony carried it to her, and she put it back in his hands.

"It is for Margot; the papers in it are for her. Promise you will deliver it to her."

"Have no fear; she shall receive it. I trust you." Her words were coming haltingly, her breathing was growing fainter. No one would break a promise to a dying woman, and I—I leave my dear ones to you. Give them my dear, dear love. Tell them I died thinking of them."

Her last words were spoken. Before another minute had passed her spirit had gone, and Anthony Garrick was free.

He locked the door, took the dead woman's keys, and opening the drawers in the bureau went swiftly and methodically through her papers. There was no written line anywhere to connect his name with hers, and when at last he summoned the servants and quitted the house—the silver-bound box in his pocket—he walked with the jaunty step of a man who has thrown off a great burden and revels in his freedom.

Three days later Gladys Beresford was carried to her grave, and her son and daughter, done the desolate house, asking each other helplessly what they were to do, were surprised to receive a letter written from Abbotsdale, Fleet-hill, and signed "Anthony Garrick." And when they had read their amazement knew no bounds, for it was an offer of a home from the North of England, colliery magnate, who stated he had known their mother before she went on the stage.

By the same post Sir Anthony had sent a check for £5,000 to the Fleet-hill Hospital, and next morning the lad and the girl read the newspapers' lavish praises of his generosity, and echoed every sentence. Such men were very rare, Margot thought, her heart going out to him in gratitude.

And Sir Anthony, cutting out the press notices and carefully pasting them in a book, recalled what Gladys Beresford had said. The world had gone very well with him, and it was going better now than ever.

CHAPTER III.

Conynslea.

"Isn't Jack here, Edith?"

"No; I have not seen him since lunch. Come and have tea; it is ready, and I have been wishing you would come in and keep me company. Lady Sutton won't have any. Do you particularly want Jack?"

"No; but when he left me at the kennels he turned toward the house, so I concluded he was with you."

David Renton, the head of the great shipbuilding firm of Renton & Bryce, Fleet-hill, took his cup from his wife's hand and drew a chair close to the dainty tea table as he spoke.

"Now that I come to think of it," he said, "I remember he knew that Lady Sutton and her children were here, so I daresay he has steered clear of you on that account. Those spoiled little brats of hers are a pest to everybody who is unlucky enough to come into contact with them."

A shadow crossed Mrs. Renton's gentle face. For the sake of one little one who had been taken out of her life, all children were dear to her, but her endurance had been sorely tried that afternoon.

"They are very tiresome," she said, quietly. "They upset that table over there, and smashed my big Salsburg bowl before they were ten minutes in the room."

"Ev on earth did they manage that?"

"Trying to climb up. And their mother never seemed to think they did wrong—they were a couple of restive darlings," she said. It was a Sevres vase they finished for me the last day they were here."

"Say you're not at home the next time she brings them," Mr. Renton advised, helping himself to a sandwich. "I like a wild boy, but I draw the line at untamed little savages. What was the best of her lady's news?"

"This new departure of Sir Anthony Garrick's—it is quite true that he is to adopt a boy and a girl. Lady Sutton had been at Abbotsdale before she came here, and Isobel Garrick was telling her all about it. They are the son and daughter of an old friend of his who died lately, and left them quite unprotected."

"And Anthony Garrick is taking them on that account? Um!—perhaps! He wouldn't be Anthony Garrick if he had as clean a motive as that! Another piece of self-glorification—that's about it. Are they children?"

"I don't think so; I gather that they are grown up. Lady Sutton talked as if the girl is, at all events. I am more surprised about the girl than the boy."

Mrs. Renton added thoughtfully. The boy can always do something for his living; Sir Anthony may intend taking him into his business, but it is different with the girl!"

"He will have to give her everything, you mean?"

"Yes. But perhaps we are too hard on him. No one is wholly bad, and this is a generous action—there is no getting away from that. There may