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## JUSTICE AND MERCY; OR, THE FEAST OF ALL-HALLOWS.

### CHAPTER XII.

Two years and a half have passed away. Inez de Lara has long attained her majority, and consequently has become her own mistress. She enjoyed having her own will, and she used the power she now possessed against herself; for, turning a deaf ear to all remonstrances, she married a needy adventurer, took an elegant mansion in Belgrave, and the handsome Mrs. Fortescue was looked upon by all who knew her as the acknowledged beauty of the season.

But let us take a view of Inez when weary with the fatigues of the day—fatigues we call them, because attendance in the ball-room and the opera bring their own peculiarly weary moments. Languid, heart-sick even of the adulation she has lately received, she reclines on her soft couch, and longs in vain for that peace she shall never find. Four summers have passed away since she plotted and planned to ruin her cousin—four summers since she learned to hate, because she fancied she possessed a rival when there was no cause for rivalry; still in the fresh years of womanhood, she is most unhappy, and the poisoned chalice she had meant for the lips of another is turned to her own.

Inez still called herself a Catholic; but her religion consisted only in her hearing Mass on a Sunday. This duty discharged, all was over for the whole week. She scrupulously gave to the Almighty the morning of each Sunday, and gave to herself and to the world the remainder of the day, and the whole of the six days which followed it.

There were moments too, when, even in the gay throng amidst which she moved, the small still voice of conscience would make itself heard. Then she thought of the gutless days of her youth, of her Spanish home, her peaceful life in the convent school; of her arrival in England, and her anxiety to return to Spain; then of her meeting with Eustace Vere; of the attachment she had formed, buried in the secret of her own heart, and which caused her, after a short time, to relinquish every wish of ever leaving England; of her subsequent hatred to Flora, the slanders she had raised against her; of her abandonment of her religious duties; and now the life of reckless dissipation in which she lived, seeking to stifle the whisperings of conscience, which, nevertheless would make itself heard.—Times, too, there were, when she would ponder over the past, and think she could feel happy could she but glean some information respecting her cousin; and often, when reclining on the soft cushions of her carriage, and looking out on the crowded streets of the West-end, did she scan with anxious glance the countenances of the passers by, in the vain hope that she might see a fair pale face which was ever in her mind's eye by night and by day. And yet, again, when the uprings of her conscience sent her to moisten her pillow with her tears, would she strive to stifle its voice, and exclaim mentally—

‘Why did she cross my path, and, by her affectation of superior virtue, lead him to think slightly of me?’

Then, at times like these, she hardened her own heart, and rushed more madly than ever into the vortex of folly and dissipation, until the name of Mrs. Fortescue was heard, night after night, in the ball-room, the concert-room, the opera, and at the card-table. Dreadful, indeed, is the remorse of those who have been virtuously trained. They see, they know—as the utter worldling does not see and know—the evil of the path they are pursuing—the depth of the precipice down which they had fallen; and yet, though stung by remorse sharper than others know, they have not the power to retrace their steps; thus sinning, not blindly, but deliberately, their punishment—the punishment of the sting of conscience—is sent to them in time; and whilst it is tenfold greater in eternity.

And what of Flora? Those four years have been passed by her in the dull, monotonous drudgery and toil of which the life of a daily governess is composed. It is true, she had only been able to support herself very humbly; but still she had never felt the pressure of want till now, that, having lost her situation through the removal of her friends from England, she had been unable to hear of another.

She is lonely and in tears. Every effort has failed, and for a few moments, she loses her accustomed resignation to the will of Heaven.

Her last coin is changed, and her fortunes seem as dark as is that black November day—no ray of sunshine gleaming over her—scarcely a hope, however faint, to support her. She asks herself shall she address Sir Robert—but no.—‘Why?—he is so good, so benevolent, true; but pride steps in, and says:—

‘Wait—ask not the benevolence of others whilst there is the slightest avenue of escape—

die sooner than humble thyself to receive the alms of another.’

Alas, poor Flora! she had suffered, but was not yet in her utmost need, or she would not thus argue with herself. Well, thus she sits, on that drear winter evening, without a fire, the tears stealing down her cheeks, when she hears a low tap at the door of her room; and, on opening it, Monica Seymour, now a girl of eleven years of age, rushes forward.

‘Miss Douglas,’ she exclaimed, ‘my mother is ill—nay, she is dying; and I have come to ask if you will stay with me to-night.’

It was not in Flora's nature to refuse; and hastily throwing on her cloak and bonnet, she sallied out into the bleak night air—and, on her way to the cottage, gleaned from the child that, roused to anger by a quarrel with her husband, the unfortunate woman had burst a blood-vessel.

A sad scene indeed presented itself to the eyes of Flora. Too much exhausted to speak without a violent effort, she yet managed to raise herself in bed, and exclaimed—

‘Miss Douglas! the man to whom I am unfortunately united is the cause of what I am suffering. I never cared for him, and I hate him now. I have often threatened him that I would tell you who my husband is. Now I will own to you that he is the elder son of Lady Harcourt, and has been your dearest enemy.’

The color forsook Flora's face and lips as these words were uttered, and she clung to the child for support, and the woman resumed—

‘Did it please the Lord I should recover, I would immediately write to her ladyship, and tell her that she had to thank her dear son for the robbery some years since. It is only my holding out this threat that has made him allow me what was necessary for me.’

‘Hush, hush, Mrs. Seymour,’ exclaimed Flora—for she observed the gray shadow of death passing over the face of this unhappy woman.—‘Time will soon be no more for you; employ, then, the little that remains in praying for that forgiveness you yourself need, and leave your husband to God.’

‘I have prayed, miss,’ resumed the wretched woman, though in accents so broken and so low that Flora had to bend forward to catch the words as they fell from her lips. ‘I have prayed, and the goodly minister of Rehoboth meeting-house, which I have for years frequented, has encouraged and consoled me, and told me that all will be right with me, as I die in a blessed faith in the Lord Jesus. If sin be pardoned, I'm secure; death hath no stings for me.’

‘I am full of the right faith,’ she added, ‘and am thus strengthened by a blessed certainty that my passage from this life will be but a stepping-stone to heaven.’

‘And you think,’ exclaimed Flora, much shocked, ‘that your having this faith alone, without repentance, without a single act of contrition for the sins of your past life, is sufficient to admit you into that presence before which nothing defiled shall enter?’

‘I do,’ said the woman; ‘I have held, with all the elect and called ones, that faith in the Lord Jesus will save the soul of the believer. I felt all my life this great truth, that justification by faith is alone necessary: that penance, and fasting, and all things of that sort, are but so many dirty rags; and in this belief it pleases the Lord that I die happy.’

Flora turned away deeply disgusted, for she remembered the guilty life the miserable woman had led, and her known habits of drunkenness, and would fain have left the spot, had not Christianity withheld her. Suddenly, she was roused from her reverie by the deep groans of the self-righteous Mrs. Seymour, whose last hour was evidently at hand; and, at the same moment, a low tap was heard at the door, which on Monica opening, a young girl, perhaps about eighteen years of age, entered, and, addressing herself to Flora, observed—

‘I heard, miss, that Mrs. Seymour was dying and that her husband was not here. I have come to see if I can be of any help; though, to say the truth, I fear my presence may not be liked, as that poor dying creature and my mother have had words together.’ Then approaching the bed, the young girl bent her head low, and whispered: ‘My mother wishes to see you and ask your forgiveness for any offence she may thoughtlessly have given you.’

‘I cannot see her, Lucy Ashton,’ replied Mrs. Seymour, the flame of expiring life again burning as it were brightly, as the candle in its socket sends forth still a few bright sparks before it finally dies away. ‘I do not wish my last moments disturbed by the sight of a person with whom I had once bitter words. The Lord deals merciful with me; I am about to be received into his tabernacles; I wish not to see my husband again, and hope he will not return, and I will not see your mother.’

Slowly, faintly fell these words on the ears of the two young women; and though the dark

eyes of the wretched being were already glazed with the film of death, yet it seemed to them as though the fire of anger still beamed within them.

Lucy moved aside, and, taking a rosary in her hand, prayed with fervor and devotion for a soul in such a spirit about to appear before its creator, whilst Flora and the little girl supported the head, and wiped away the heavy damp dew which hung upon the face. A moment more, and all was over. One long, loud gasp, and the spirit of the unhappy woman had passed from its mortal coil.

‘Not every one that saith to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven,’ was the sentence of Holy Writ which entered our mind on being told by one of the Independent sectarians that a young woman, whose death-bed she had attended, had refused to grant the earnest petition of her own mother, with whom she had quarrelled, to see her in her last moments. We involuntarily exclaimed, shuddering at the time we uttered the words, ‘How very dreadful to die in so unforgiving a state.’

‘Oh, all is right,’ replied the person to whom we spoke; ‘Julia had faith in the Lord Jesus; so she has gone straight to heaven.’

Oh, dreadful—most dreadful error! never to be corrected till time is past and eternity begins,—an error which daily drags souls to irrevocable misery; an error which leads them to believe that they may sin on with impunity—which tells them that so long as a mere doctrinal point is held, all is right; no matter how black their sin—no matter how deep a dye—how bad their lives as wives, husbands, sons or daughters. Let them believe in Jesus, they shall be saved. What a loophole, indeed, is there not opened for the commission of any and every crime that can disgrace humanity!

Oh! blessed doctrine of the Rock of Ages—of the Church Catholic! Oh! blessed belief in Purgatory—in a middle state of souls—belief alike consonant to reason and religion—belief which rests alike on both the justice and mercy of our most holy God, in whose sight the angels themselves are not pure, and who cannot endure iniquity; a belief which carries with it balm to the survivor's wounded feelings, for he can be of infinitely more service now than he was to his departed friend whilst he abode in this land of exile; belief which bids us not despair, so long as the lost one has died in sentiments of repentance and in the bosom of his Church; a belief fraught with consolation to the dying and to the survivors; for a golden chain connects together the Church militant and suffering; not one link is broken nor shall be dissolved till time shall be no more and the glorious day of eternity begins.

On the other hand, what a fearful amount of spiritual pride is engendered by the contrary doctrine. Few, however great their sins may be, we think themselves sufficiently bad to deserve eternal torments; and, as they die with the holy name upon their lips, where is the friend who thinks it? There is then only heaven left, and God, who is essentially just, is thus made to dispense Himself of one of His first attributes; for, according to this most erroneous belief, the saint and the sinner, the self-righteous and the repentant, the creature, mayhap, whose life has been cut short ere yet it had grown to maturity, and the hoary-headed wretch whose days have been one long scene of wickedness,—each meet with the self-same reward.

But return we from our digression. Lucy Ashton held up her rosary as the last breath passed from the body of the wretched woman, and dropping one of the beads between her fingers, she uttered that most beautiful aspiration used in the Rosary for the dead—

‘Compassionate Jesus, have mercy on the souls of the faithful departed, and grant them eternal rest,’ each decade beginning with the ‘Our Father,’ and ending with ‘Eternal rest give to them, O Lord, and may they sleep in peace.’

And then said in a low voice, ‘I wish, Miss Douglas, we could offer up this consoling prayer for that soul, which, with such improper feelings, has passed out of this life.’

As to Monica, her state was most distressing. Knowing little of a mother's care, and still less of a mother's love, she could not be supposed to feel very sincerely a mother's loss. Yet she stood in the awful presence of death; her father away, she knew not where; and now, at the solemn midnight hour, she wept and sobbed, shrank and covered close beside Flora, whose hands were busily employed in performing the last duties to the remains of one of the elect of Rehoboth, whose call its minister confidently asserted had been given to her many years since.

‘Miss Douglas,’ said Lucy, ‘when they had drawn a sheet over the corpse, it is now too late for you to return home. I like not this place! the presence of death at all times is solemn; but really this death seems so unallowable, that I shall be glad to return to my mother,

who lives in the adjoining cottage, with you and Monica. Come with me, and spend the remainder of the night with us.’

Thankfully Flora accepted the offer; and, locking up the house until the morning, she accompanied Lucy to her home. An air of neatness and domestic comfort reigned around; the fire burned brightly in the highly-polished stove; and a clean white cloth was spread on a little round table, on which were laid the necessaries for a plain substantial meal; whilst, in an easy chair, beside the fire, reclined an elderly woman, whose prepossessing countenance was shaded by bands of hair white as snow.

Flora noted well the affectionate embrace of mother and child when Lucy entered—the fond kiss of the mother, as she exclaimed—

‘Poor child, you have done violence to your own feelings to-night. So, then, poor Mrs. Seymour died in that unforgiving state. Well, God be merciful to us all!’ said the aged widow ‘but I could scarcely have believed that she would have so resented an offence for which I have asked her pardon.’

‘Speak of it no more,’ dear mother,’ said Lucy, now introducing Flora: ‘but let us take a little refreshment, and say our prayers, and retire to rest; for I candidly own my nerves have been rather shaken to-night. The next question must be what is to be done in the morning, should Mr. Seymour not return, which, Monica tells me, was his last threat to her mother. The minister of Rehoboth will doubtless be here in the morning, and perchance, as there are articles which may be converted into cash, should the husband not make his appearance, the holy man will not object to give interment to a deceased sister in the faith.’

We had forgotten to mention that, ere these remarks were made, poor little Monica had been put to rest in Lucy's own comfortable bed; and Flora then mentioned her surprise that Mr. Seymour was connected with a family of some rank in that part of the country which she had visited and her hope that something would be done for the child.

As they had suspected Mr. Ephraim Cadman—or the Rev. Ephraim Cadman, as he was styled—expressed himself perfectly willing to charge himself with the interment of the deceased woman: paying his expenses, by the way, out of sundry notes which, to the astonishment of her neighbors the Ashtons, were found concealed in the leaves of her Bible; and there being a surplus still of a few pounds, Lucy and her mother agreed to take Monica into their own family until news could be gleaned respecting the father of the little girl.

### CHAPTER XIV.

A traveller, foot-sore and weary, for he had walked many a long mile, reached, towards the close of a dark cold day in December, the little town of E—. He was hungry, faint, ill-clad; his cheeks were hollow; his whole frame trembled like that of one with an ague-fit; yet still he pushed on—one only end in view. Old thoughts seemed to revive in his mind as he wandered down the streets of the little country town; old thoughts and remembrances of things he had long since forgotten now returned. Was there one bright speck in his misspent life? Yes, there was; but the wayfarer had to go back to the days of his early youth to find it; later on, when the youth had merged into the man, and when years stole on one after the other, there was no green spot to be found, all was a dark tissue of vice and injustice; and on that one bright, fresh spot he rested, for it was as an oasis in the desert of his heart.

The village clock had struck ten, yet still he journeyed on with a languid, jaded step, his purpose being to reach the Elms, if possible, that night; but the powers both of mind and body seemed failing, and he at length crept into an empty shed which belong to a farmer in the outskirts of E—.

Hour crept on after hour, the stars gleamed brightly in the heavens, and the wind swept with a piercing, freezing blast through the openings in the shed.

The teeth of the traveller chattered with the cold: his limbs became numb; a heavy drowsiness, which he had not the power to resist, stole over him; he knew that, were he to yield under its influence, he might awake in eternity; and trusting his hand in his bosom, Seymour—for he it was—drew forth the crucifix on which he had extorted the vow from Flora, and, pressing it to his lips, exclaimed, with sentiments of penitence, ‘From sudden and unprovided death deliver me, O Lord!’ Then the hand grew more stiff and cold, the limbs more rigid, the eyelids closed, no longer able to resist the sleep which pressed upon them, and the half-frozen man sank into the torpor which, the persons so circumstanced, usually precedes dissolution.

The thin, gray light of the winter morning pierced faintly through the open shed ere relief was at hand, when two of the farm-servants entered, and discovered the wretched man to all

appearance perfectly deprived of life.

It was long, indeed, ere the efforts of the good people at the farm proved of any avail; but at length, though faintly, signs of life were discernible; then returning consciousness rewarded the good people for their trouble; but they could not fail to see that, although saved from being frozen to death, he appeared in such a state as to be marked out shortly for its prey. As soon as he could speak, Seymour beckoned to the farmer to approach, and then, drawing from his bosom a silver crucifix, murmured—

‘My good friend, grant the prayer of a dying man; I think I may recover sufficiently to drag my limbs to the Elms; let me lean on your arm for I must place this crucifix in the hand of Lady Harcourt.’

‘Shall I not take it for thee, with a message to her ladyship,’ replied the farmer; ‘thou art fit for nothing but a bed, and must not leave it either till to-morrow, at earliest.’

‘No, this may not be,’ answered Seymour.—‘The sun is now rising, and ere it sets I must be at the Elms; attempt not to dissuade me, my worthy friend, my business does not brook delay.’

Surprised at his determination about a trifling point, which the farmer could not imagine would be of any consequence, whether delivered by himself or a stranger, he yielded the point, merely observing—

‘I cannot let thee walk, for thou lookest, man, as if thee were not fit for anything but to lay thee down and die; but if thou wilt stay quiet here till evening, one of my men will take thee in a cart, and save thee some rough walking on stony roads.’

Many thanks did the honest farmer receive for his kindness, and at length, under the influence of a strong cordial which had been given him, and thoroughly warmed by the large fire before which his bed was placed, Seymour sank into a heavy slumber, which lasted for several hours. On awaking, he found himself alone, and drawing out the crucifix, the emblem of the long forgotten Redeemer, he reverently pressed it to his lips. Large tears fell from the eyes of throw penitent sinner; the tongue, so long used to profane the holy name, now uttered words of penitence and love. Past years—long years of crime—rose up before him; and anon, sins which he had trodden as nothing beneath his feet now appear like fiery serpents, deeds of darkness and of crime, of theft and wrong.—Crimes of the blackest dye rose up against him, and the words of love which had hung upon his lips, now turned to those of fear and despair; it seemed to him as if those outstretched arms were extended not to receive him, but to banish him from his presence; and he already seemed to hear the dreadful words, ‘Depart for ever!’ ringing in his ears.

‘Yet, why despair?’ a voice seemed to say, which surely was that of his guardian angel; ‘thou hast been saved for repentance: Was there not a thief upon the cross, and was he not saved? One saved as his last hour drew nigh, one only, that none may despair; one only, that none may presume.’ Again, a ray of hope illumined the recesses of this hitherto dark heart, as faintly at first, then more vividly burst upon his mind the early teaching of the Church.—Again he is a child lisping his prayers at his mother's knee; then a youth, docile, gentle, with good dispositions, hearing the doctrines of the Church from the village priest of E—; at his feet breathing forth, in the sacred tribunal, the then venial sins of a really innocent life, recurring at his hands the bread of angels; but as years go on, and the youth merges into manhood, a dense, dark cloud rises up before his mental vision—his first fall a bad companion's example; then follow long years of profligacy, crime, and irreligion, theft, and wickedness of almost every sort that can disgrace humanity.—Still, though long hardened in crime, with somewhat of the feeling perhaps with which the Italian bandit bears around his neck the image of the Madonna, so did Seymour bear the crucifix which his mother threw around his neck when parting with him on his first leaving home, as a midshipman.

It surely was not superstition, but rather a latent feeling of reverence for the religion which he blasphemed, which led Seymour to wear it as a precious talisman, and never, even at moments when starvation, in consequence of his misdeeds stared him in the face, even to contemplate for an instant parting with it for temporary relief.—Hope again cheered him with its benign influence: ‘There is a stepping-stone, betwixt heaven and hell,’ he cried. ‘A long, long account have I to settle, of sin uncancelled, of debts unpaid, sullied with almost every crime that can disgrace humanity. I dare not think that I now on the borders of the grave, however efficacious my repentance, can expect to be admitted into the realms of everlasting bliss. How, consoling, then, to me is this belief in purgatory,