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GRACE AYTON:

OR, THE YOUNG WIFE'S TRIALS.

Herbert was out one day when two men called. They were rough-looking men, familiar and uncouth in their manners, and asked insolently for the misses. One of them pulled out a paper that had an ominous look in it, even to the servant-maid, and began reading the heading. Grace came down stairs. 'What is it?' she said wonderingly.

'Sorry, misses—must do our duty—little matter left unsettled—master promised to pay, and hasn't—very sorry, missis; but must put an execution in.'

'An execution!' Grace started at the word. 'It was so sudden; could they not wait until Mr. Ayton came home?'

They laughed—the grim bailiff laugh. 'Why, bless ye, Mr. Ayton made no difference. They wanted his sticks, not himself.'

Grace, whose only ideas of an execution were inextricably involved with prisons and dungeons, had much ado to keep up her courage. 'At least you will wait,' she said, 'until I can send for Mr. Ayton? I do not understand these things, and it has taken me by surprise.'

They pulled out their watches, and consulted together; and finally agreed to give her two hours' delay, that she might send for her husband. Grace thanked them courteously, and gave them an extravagant sum for beer; they spent it in gin instead. She then called the servant, and sent her to the office; and if Mr. Ayton was not there, to Mr. Smith's, and Mr. Lawson's, and Miss Merriman's; to Mr. This, the actor, and That, the musician; and to all his favorite haunts, so far as she knew them. She wrote the names and addresses on one of her own cards, and hurried the girl off in a cab.

The minutes flew like wild fire. One hour passed in the apparent space of a quarter; the half of the second chimed, when the servant came back, bringing no tidings of Herbert. She had found traces of him at several places, but had finally lost sight of him at Miss Merriman's. He had been there in the morning, and had gone out with a large party in carriages, but no one knew where. They were a large party, and had gone out in three carriages, she said, down somewhere into the country for the day.

For a moment, Grace was overwhelmed, paralyzed, stricken, heart-wrung. She felt deserted by all the world, and insufficient for her trial.—The servants were more ignorant than herself, and with even more superstition about the matter. They could not therefore help her; unless indeed the sight of their ungodly terror, by calling up her pride and self-command from the force of contrast, might be called an indirect aid.

'Missis, time's up,' said one of the men, bawling down the kitchen stairs. She had gone down as the girl came through the area.

'Can you not wait until to-morrow?' she asked, coming up.

'Impossible, missis; we've stayed too long already,' grumbled the men; and they began to talk with each other in an under tone.

'It must be done,' at last said the one who seemed to have the management of the affair.—'I'm very sorry, missis; but duty's duty, and must be done by them as is paid for it. Here, Jem, call a cab, and let's be done with the job.'

'What will you do?' said Grace. She was now trembling much.

'Take a few sticks away, missis; the bill's only a matter of fifteen pound, and we needn't take a vast deal. You'd better go up stairs, ma'am, out of the way of the door; you look cold, and maybe the draught will make you worse.'

There was a rough kindness in the man's manner that destroyed all Grace's stoicism. She thought nothing of the men—nothing of the knot of idlers gathering round the door, as the dining-room furniture was being carried out to a cab—she cared nothing for her dignity or ladylike composure; but, covering her face in her hands, with all its chestnut curls drooping over her fingers, she burst into such tears of speechless desolation and childish terror, that even the bailiffs were moved, and did their best, in their uncouth way, to comfort her.

Telling her between whiles to be of good heart, and not to take on so badly, the men went on removing the furniture; joking with the mob outside; thrusting into and upon the cab, chairs, and lamp, and clock, and sofa, and the dear old furniture brought from the country home; consoling Grace as they passed, and carrying on the work of demolition with business speed and alacrity.—At last all was done; the dining-room was completely stripped; the hall lamp was taken as well; and the hall chairs of carved oak, which Grace had hunted up in Wardour street, were first handled, then consulted over, and finally heaved into the second cab chartered for this melancholy work. And then the men, with fresh demands for drink, took their departure, leaving Grace in the deserted dining-room the most miserable creature under that beaming summer sun.

This would not do; this prostration was not the way by which to gather strength for the great trial of life; this weakness was not the appointed mode of bearing up against disaster. She must control herself—get patience, nerve, and trust, and go up to her God for consolation and support. She went into her own room, and flung herself on her knees by her baby's cot; and long prayers of passionate pleading for comfort went up through the stillness of her ruffled home, as symphonies of holy music in the service of the dead. And angels came down from the Mercy-seat above, and bent over her lovingly, receiving her as their sister, and carrying up her prayers, like the light of the morning sun borne upward by the white clouds.

Herbert returned late. He came in the most delightful spirits. He had passed a most delightful day down at Cheshurst, with a party of friends all life and spirit, and had never felt on such good terms with himself, or so charmed with his lot in life. The blank look of the hall struck him, but he did not stop to consider what it was that was so unfamiliar. Always glad to return home to his beautiful wife, though too easily lured away from her, he bounded joyously up stairs, calling her name in that quick, clear accent, and coupling it with precious words of fondest love, which always showed that he was happy.

Grace came out to meet him. Though she smiled, and held out her arms as of old, a strange atmosphere was round her, which Herbert could not choose but see.

'In the name of Heaven! my Grace, what has happened?—what have you heard?—where is the boy?'

'Don't tremble so, Herbert dear. Baby is quite well. Not much has gone wrong.'

'Not much, Grace?—what!—how! Quick, my darling! my brain is on fire.'

'Herbert, how wild you look! Come into the drawing-room, and sit down. Indeed, it is not much, dear! That bill you owe the livery-stables' man—don't you know? It is for fifteen pounds, and the man sent for it to-day. At least, he sent two men, who—'

She hesitated.

'Who were insolent to you, Grace?' cried Herbert, passionately clenching his fist.

'No, dear, quite the contrary; they were very civil, and only did their duty. But they were bailiffs, and took away the dining-room furniture, which they said was letting you off very easily.'

'Grace, an execution in my house!' cried Herbert, in a tone of agony.

'Yes, dear. I could not prevent it. I sent to several places for you, but you were not to be found; and as I had no money in the house, I was obliged to let the things go; for what could I do?'

Herbert felt something rise in his throat that choked him. The picture of his patient, girlish Grace left all alone to encounter such horrible degradation and sorrow, while he had been away in the midst of the most intoxicating gaiety, rose up vividly before him. He saw her terror and her shame; he counted the agonized tears in her downcast eyes, and heard her melancholy voice pleading for mercy and delay; while he who ought to have been her protector had deserted his post, and given to pleasure what belonged to virtue and love.

'And it was for this I brought my Grace away from her quiet home!' he cried, in a tone of despair, straining her to his breast. 'O Grace, what a villain thoughtlessness has made me! how folly has deepened into vice, and vice gone near to blacken into crime!'

Something overcame him; it might be the sudden transition from the day's excitement to such blank desolation. He could not hold up his head, but, kissing his wife's chestnut curl, she felt the hot tears stream down her throat like rain. All her love welled up afresh at the sound of those stifled sobs; all her woman's tenderness, and mercy, and sweet forgiveness of wrong; all her new-born strength and maternal courage. With arms pressing him to her, with a sad fondness that went to Herbert's very heart, she spoke high words that sank like gentle rain on the dry sand. There was a power in her he could not withstand: for with all his faults he was as impressionable for good as for evil. His error was his want of constancy in keeping, not his obtuseness in receiving, virtuous counsel. He kissed her hands with a reverential love that seemed to honor the worshipper as well as the worshipped, and made many and solemn promises for the future—which he kept for a time—living the quiet, orderly, sober life fitting to his profession and estate, and giving Grace a blessed shelter from the waste of her melancholy, wherein she might say with truth that she was happy.

Those quiet evenings, how peaceful and holy they were! Grace looked forward to them with an ardor of expectation more intense than any happiness which she had yet known in her married life; and under their influence she grew more beautiful—Herbert more noble—every day. But

they lasted only for a moment. The old spells were worn round that fickle heart again; the old way of life, which had been abandoned, was entered on with fresh vigor; the dropped acquaintances were renewed, the former habits re-adopted; and Grace had once more to mourn in solitude a husband who possessed every charm but the one of constancy to duty, and of truth to his nobler self.

Baby had been fretful all day, and Grace was tired. She went to bed early, leaving the door on the latch as usual, and lights and supper prepared for Herbert. He never came home, but the hour what it might, without finding all sorts of little luxuries for him, which Grace always took care of herself, decking the table with flowers, and placing a favorite book by the side of the plate, as it was one of his pleasures to read at meals.

It was a clear, still autumn night; the young moon was in her first quarter, and the stars were out in myriads. It was such a night as calls us back to the religion of our childhood, and seems to lift the soul nearer to Heaven. It was such a night as softens down the asperities of the world, and calms the spirit troubled with much serving in the courts of men. Even in the crowded city it spoke of good things to come, and of peace beyond the feverish temple of humanity; seeming to call men, with angels' voices, from the ranks of Mammon to the service of God.

Grace stood by the window, and sighed as she prayed for such influence as this on her husband; but sighs break no spells, and Herbert still sat in the room of tipsy mirth, and talked loud boisterous talk, and drank glass after glass of the rare old wines, all the same as if no stary sky preached eternal sermons to mankind, and sifted good from evil in their measures.

At last Herbert found himself at his own home, but in a state of intoxication so helpless and painful that Grace felt debased to be obliged to see him thus. She did her best for him though, attending to him and helping him; and at last he reeled into bed, where he was soon in the sound bestial sleep of a drunken man. Grace drew her child's cot from the side of the bed with a shudder. Her baby should not breathe the same air which her husband's fiery breath polluted.—She placed herself between the cradle and the bed, and sat—in nothing but her night-dress—till the clock struck two; and then she fell asleep, sitting where she was.

Something woke her; a cry, a noise, a strange sensation, an oppressive smell. She started up, bewildered at first, and unable to define anything that surrounded her; and then a loud knocking was heard at the door, and the terrible cry of—'Fire!' was raised through that sleeping street. She rushed to the window, and threw it up to look out. A broad glare of light was immediately below her, streaming from their house and reddening the deep sky.

The policeman, who had been trying to rouse the sleeping household for some time, shouted to her as she looked out, telling her to lose no time, that the house was all alight, the lower rooms blazing, and that they must escape while they might.

The mother's first thought was for her child. She snatched it from its cot, and then opened the door to call for help for Herbert, as he was incapable of action himself; but the flames burst inward from the staircase, and filled the whole place with smoke and sparks. She closed it, half suffocated, and endeavored to rouse her husband.—'In rain; the sleeping man only groaned. Once he opened his eyes, and swore a sullen oath; but his senses were closed for all rational understanding.'

'Fire!' cried Grace, her voice ringing through the room.

That terrible word startled even the drunkard. He made a clumsy attempt to rise, and at last succeeded.

'Fire?—fire?' he said. 'I see no fire—where is it?'

'Here—upon us!' said Grace, with frightful calmness, pointing to the door.

Part of the panel had caught, and small flames pierced through the openings by the hinges and the floor, while the loud crackling outside told of a worse enemy lurking behind. The sight sobered Herbert to knowledge, if not to power.—'The floor was getting hot; the boards immediately by the bed were beginning to give way. Death, hopeless and agonizing, awaited them if they lingered here much longer, and yet there seemed to be no way of escape. Grace went again to the window, and looked out. The street was alive with people gathered, though in the dead of the night, thick as swarming bees. They crowded in dense masses as far as the eye could reach; and pale faces looked out from the windows of the houses opposite, the light of the burning falling clear and sharp on every feature.

'Make haste, or you are lost,' came up the cry from the street.

'Is there a fire-escape?' asked Grace.

A moment's pause, and then a deep 'No!'

sounded like a funeral knell from the thousands standing there. Alas! alas! to be within the sight and sound of so many fellow-creatures—to be but a few feet parted—and yet to perish for lack of aid.

The bedroom door was now one mass of flame, the fire reaching its long tongues for some distance into the room. Herbert had sunk on the floor in drunken dismay, and his groans mingled painfully with the roaring of the flames.

'You must come with me,' said Grace, going to him, and speaking very calmly and distinctly.

'With you, Grace?—to death?' sobbed the unhappy man, shrinking from her.

'No, Herbert, to safety. Come, we must lose no time.'

He rose at her bidding, though mechanically, and followed her to the window. She had tied the child round her, slung at her back in a large woollen shawl; but, excepting this, neither she nor her husband wore any other clothing but the ordinary night-dress. She stepped on the window sill, then dropped down about two feet. She was holding Herbert's hand. 'Come,' she said, 'come with me.'

'Grace, you are mad!' he shrieked, seeing where she stood. It was a narrow wall-ornament about a foot wide, slanting outwards, and running across the house, as is often seen in London houses below the second floor windows.

'We can do it, Herbert, dear!' she said.—'Come—come! have faith in me, and courage. Come!'

But he struggled with her, and endeavored to force her back; and only by wonderful courage and strength was the girl enabled to resist him, and hold her perilous footing. The crowded street was hushed, as if the hand of death had passed over it. Not a breath, not a murmur, not the faintest whisper. The mass of upturned faces looked ghastly in the flaming light, as if a crowd of watching spectres had gathered there.

The flames were flashing nearer; the floor was hot to the foot. Should he stay where he was, death could not be fought off longer; the perilous way chosen by his wife at least held a chance of escape. Like one in a dream—safer because of his blunted senses—Herbert got out on to the wall-band, holding his wife's hand as she slowly led the way.

The crowd below swayed and moved, but still all was silent. Only one voice said, in a low whisper, heard through that awed stillness as distinctly as a trumpet would have been heard, 'God be with them!' That small low whisper shot the strength of a blessing in the heart of the young wife; it was like the voice of an angel sounding.

Slowly, painfully, their bare feet clasp the slanting band, and their hands against the wall steadying their frightful foothold, the two went on until they came to the window of the next house. It was shut, and the house deserted; the people had left it at the beginning of the fire. Grace was foremost, and must open that window. It was fastened within by a hasp, and she could not stir it. She dashed her hand through the glass, and undid the hasp. She threw it open, and entered with her husband. Oh, then the shout that burst from the swarming crowd!—Never, to their dying day, would Herbert or Grace forget it. It was as one large sob from an oppressed heart—a sudden relief from mad-dened anxiety. It claimed all who watched and they who strove in one band of brotherhood by sympathy, and greeted that escape from death as brothers only could greet. Grace felt her heart swell with gratitude for their sympathy, which seemed to remind her that they had not lost their all while earth held a human heart that could love or pity its kind.

And yet they had lost very nearly their all.—The house was unsmoked. Herbert had been going to insure ever since they married, but it had never been done yet; and now the fire had settled the question for all parties. Their furniture, books, treasures, wardrobes—all were now a heap of charred rubbish; only each other and their precious youngling left. Herbert gave way to despair. He had a terrible recollection brought back on him with all the definiteness of a daguerreotype, of having left the candle, which he had lighted at the lamp, among a mass of papers and linen on the drawing room table. He had made a fire in the grate in his drunken, clumsy way; he remembered the merry blaze as it roared up the chimney, and he remembered seeing some sparks dancing like stars before him as he staggered out of the room. But he never confessed this to Grace, but bore about in silence the consciousness that he himself had been the sole cause of all this ruin. He had no need to confess it; Grace knew all, keeping her knowledge also in silence, lest its participation should grieve her husband.

This was the first secret that had sprung up between them. It was a strange feeling on both sides, that a truth was known, yet uncommunicated. With Grace, as the motive of her concealment was most worthy, so was the effect noblest,

leading her simply to greater tenderness, and a grave, sweet melancholy, that did not sadden so much as it sanctified. With Herbert it was far otherwise. Ashamed, sorrowed, disgusted at their dingy apartments and with the poverty of their arrangements—unable to front all the misery he had called up, he flung himself into the vortex of vice, with despair now added to weakness, and gave himself up to every species of dissipation he could gather round him. And of a lower character than anything he had before indulged in; losing gradually the acquaintance of his better friends, while retaining that of men unworthy in every way to be classed among his associates; exchanging the sparkling poetry of the champagne-feast for the coarse debauchery of the gin-palace; falling lower, learning baser lessons than ever, and losing all that he had of good and beautiful.

In the midst of all this the old partner died. He had long been failing and unable to attend actively to the office; and Herbert's idleness and indolence completed the ruin of a first-rate connection—to avert which ruin he had been expressly taken into partnership. However, all that had been lost as yet might easily be regained, for Herbert was a good man of business in all that regarded promptness of action, and a keen perception of weak points; and was personally beloved also—a great thing even in a legal office. And at first, as so many times before, Herbert applied himself to work manfully, meaning honestly though acting foolishly, and failing before he had well begun the initial chapter of his unwritten work of reformation. Failing utterly—sinking lower—more reckless as he was more poor—at last he was obliged to abandon even the dingy rooms he had hired, for cheaper lodgings in a worse neighborhood. Two small dirty rooms, for all purposes of household living, were the latest transition. How rapid, yet how inexorable had been that transition. First, the clean, fresh country cottage, emowered in roses and ivy, for her bright girlhood; next, the pretty London house, with its handsome stone facade and elegant furniture, in the beautiful dawning of her married life; then the dull rooms, still in a decent neighborhood; and now these small, stifling, unwholesome dens, with vile associations, all about, vile sights and sounds and smells, in a horrid neighborhood crowded with all impurity, and haunted by the lowest of the outcast population—such as these witnessed the ending of that bright marriage-day, the closing of the painted promise of the past.

Yet not a word of murmuring or impatience ever crossed Grace's lips. She bore all these painful conditions bravely like the heroine she was—received him with her old smile whenever he chose to catch it from her eyes, and her tender kiss whenever he cared to gather it from her lip; which was but seldom now. Only once Herbert saw her falter, when he abruptly remarked that the child looked ill, and asked what was the matter with him.

'He has been drooping for some time,' said Grace quietly.

'And you never told me, Grace?' he asked, with much bitterness.

'No, love. You could do no good; besides, he may recover. Then why should I give you needless sorrow?'

Herbert said no more, and did not again notice the pining looks of the little one, scarcely ever caressing it, and staying at home as little as possible; though Grace tried hard, by every woman's art and wifely tenderness, to make his squalid home pleasant to him. She had even hired a piano out of the proceeds of certain needlework done in the long day-light, and she would sing to him all his favorite songs—the songs he loved so much when they were only lovers; and she never failed in her supply of fresh flowers, and never suffered the worst side of their misery to be uppermost. But gentle lures failed, like rosy baits thrown out to a wandering kite; and high-souled words fell dead on the dulled heart that heard them; her manful endeavors passed unnoticed; her angel's prayers died away unanswered; Herbert flung off all the sweet ties that love and virtue wove for them, and bound himself helplessly within the giant net of degradation and of evil. From morning to night he was away from his wife—deserting business as well as affection—leaving Grace entirely alone and in utter ignorance of his life, excepting what his haggard face and bloodshot eyes revealed; and these told sad tales of sufficient misery.

The baby began to pine more and more.—From a fine beautiful boy, such as all young wives dream of and expectant mothers pray for, it dwindled into a pale weakling, emaciated and fretful, with nothing but its big blue eyes left of all its former beauty. Day by day, slowly sinking like a flower, at whose root a worm is busy—lying now helpless on her arm, with its feeble breath fluttering round its lips as the spring air about a dead bird—scarce able to raise its tiny hand or open its glassing eyes, the baby at last