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FATHER CLEVELAND; OR, THE JESUIT.

By the Authoress of "Life in the Cloister," "Grace O'Halloran," "The Two Marys," etc., etc.

From the Boston Pilot.

"Maids, matrons, nay, the secrets of the grave This viperous slander enters."—Cymbeline.

CHAPTER XIV.—(Continued.)

The face of the sufferer was deathlike in its palor, yet a bright hectic flush was on the cheek, resembling the delicate tint of an Indian shell; long fair hair streamed over the neck and shoulders; the lips were parted; one hand thin and attenuated, lay upon the breast, the other was tightly closed.

Bertha Ainslie, for she it was who was the one attendant in that sick chamber, spoke to the priest, but he replied not; and she almost started as she watched him, so ill could she define the troubled expression which flitted across his features; he withdrew his hand from the light, scanned the pale face more attentively, and then raised a ruby cross which was suspended around her neck by a silken cord.

Bertha watched him intently; his countenance grows pale; the hand shakes which bears the lamp; strong man as he is, he staggers as he moves from the bed; he beholds in far away Canada the well remembered face of one of whom all trace had been lost. It was given to Father Cleveland to meet with Aileen Desmond in the arms of death.

By a powerful effort he recovered himself, and beheld the eyes of Bertha fixed upon him in mute astonishment.

"I shall have much to say to you later, Madam—much to ask of you. At present, it will be sufficient for me to tell you, that I have known Miss Desmond from her earliest childhood."

Bertha bowed assent, and then said, that on the last visit of the medical attendant, a few hours since, he had declared it his opinion that Aileen might die at any moment, though, at the same time, it was extremely probable she might linger for some weeks; that Aileen, feeling more than usually ill after his departure, had expressed a wish to see a Catholic priest; and that, alarmed by an evident change for the worse, she had lost no time in complying with her wish by sending to Fernside; and that, after her messenger had left, she had sunk into a state of insensibility, from which she was striving to restore her when he arrived; but that all her efforts had been fruitless.

"How long have you known my poor young friend?" inquired Father Cleveland, adding, "I find you, indeed, performing the office of a ministering angel; alone, at this late hour, nursing one, to whom you are not bound by the ties of relationship, and who is sick even unto death."

Bertha blushed painfully at this unqualified praise, and simply replied:

"I have been acquainted with Miss Desmond, or rather Miss Lascelles, by which name she was known at Toronto, about two years."

"And her occupation? I understand from friends in England, that she filled a situation as musical governess in a family at Quebec.—Does she reside in this place alone?"

"She did hold such situation; but anxious, for the sake of her parents, to increase her gains, she resigned it, and has sung at concerts. She also had many pupils of wealth and distinction; but—"

Here Bertha burst into tears; her emotion became so great it was impossible for her to proceed.

An expression of intense pain passed over the features of the Priest. Aileen was alone, evidently residing in a small house, with no declared protector—this lady, still young, her sole companion. A terrible fear took possession of his soul—a fear which he dared scarcely acknowledge even to himself. "Had the fair flower been plucked, and rudely cast aside, to wither and to die?"

His voice was husky, when, after a pause of a minute, which seemed an age in its duration, he again said, with something of sternness in his manner.

"Speak on—tell me all, and tell me quickly; she was loved by all who knew her?"

Bertha raised her eyes to those of Father Cleveland, they were still full of tears, the tone of her voice seemed to deprecate resentment, as she replied—

"Be patient, Father, and I will tell you everything. Behold that crushed and faded creature; she is spotless as an angel, pure as new-fallen snow in the sight of Heaven; but her fair fame was blackened and traduced by one of her own sex. She lost the patronage of those who had called themselves her friends; their daughters

were removed, her patrons closed their doors against her, and she was left to marvel at the change, when one fatal day, one who, more indiscreet than all the rest, but who called herself her friend, yielding to the importunity of this poor Aileen, disclosed the hideous truth, and there—there is the result. But, Heaven be merciful to me!" said the excited Bertha, talking on her knees, "for, as I hope for mercy, Father, I anticipated not such misery as this. My bridal day was fixed, but I heeded it not, resolving to atone for my indiscretion by daily watching by her side till this most unhappy, yet most virtuous Aileen should have passed away."

A convulsive spasm shot across the features of the Priest; he glanced first on the bed and its unconscious burden, then at the prostrate form at his feet, and for a moment his handsome features assumed again the stern, cold expression they had worn before; yet Bertha's fault had not been deliberate, and she had made all the atonement in her power, for her most guilty indiscretion; so, extending his hand, he raised her from the suppliant posture she had assumed, saying:

"Be comforted, and let the sad consequences of your indiscretion be to you a memorable lesson for the future. Now aid me in the task of restoring suspended animation."

Father Cleveland had, during his sojourn in India, learned something of the art of medicine, so that he not unfrequently acted in the two-fold capacity of bodily as well as spiritual physician, especially when attending the poor.

Thus it happened that he rarely left his home without some trifling medicament or restorative about his person, to be used in the case of need, and he applied a powerful stimulant at once to the invalid, at first ineffectually, but gradually consciousness returned, and Aileen opened her eyes; the hand so tightly closed, relaxed, and met the warm gaze of the Priest, while the other held the silken cord from which hung the cross, now raised in mute thankfulness to her lips.

"Bertha, love, what means all this?" she said. "I have been very ill; then her eyes wandered to him who held one hand within his own, and pressing the other to her forehead, as if to recall some memory of the past, she strove to raise herself in the bed, exclaiming:

"You have come, I knew you would come, to soothe my spirit in its flight. Long years have passed since I bade you farewell. A mournful passage of coming misfortune! ay, of some dire calamity about to overwhelm me and mine, then lay heavy at my heart; yet, I know, friend of my early happy youth, I felt assured that we should meet again, that you would shield me in some peril; hidden from me by the veil which screens the future from my sight, and now I know, I see it all; your lips will speak to me those words which shall bring consolation to my sorrowing soul; your hands will administer those saving rites which shall fortify and strengthen me to meet my God; and you will convey to those I love so well, the announcement, that in death, as in life, they were never forgotten."

"My dear child, my Aileen, there may be hope yet."

"Nay, there is none, my best of friends, rest assured of that; a little, yet a little while, and I shall tread the valley of the shadow of death—be it your task to strengthen me in my parting passage. How strangely have we met again—you, the Priest of God; I, unhappy, ay, most unhappy, Father, in my combat with the world; Nay, weep not, Bertha, yours was not the voice which robbed me of all that life held dear; and my poor, poor parents, they will suffer even more than I, for in me the staff of their old age will be for ever gone; but, my poor unhappy Bertha, you have cared for me, do not weep so bitterly."

"Yes, when my indiscretion had laid you prostrate on the bed of sickness, Aileen, far better had you been left in ignorance of that great wrong: for can I ever forget that away from Canada, in some distant spot, you might have met more faithful friends, and still have led a happy and useful life."

"No more, speak not of the past again, my Bertha; it has gone and can never be recalled; it was all for my purgation here; but my poor parents. Oh! my parents, the thought of you disturbs these my last days on earth."

"Fear not for them, Aileen," said Father Cleveland, deeply moved; "rest assured I will see them, and will arrange some means by which, if only in a humble way, their future shall be cared for. I can testify, my child, to the causes which induced the concealment of your name; and even here, in far away Toronto, Catholic hearts, hearts of all Catholic matrons, shall beat when the story of the maiden shall be told, who left her country to save her helpless parents; the hearts of the young shall be inflamed with generous sympathy, when they hear this most sad tale; and it may even be that your most unjust maligners, some of whom I myself will face, may yet be brought to a sense of their in-

justice, and learn a useful lesson from these terrible results. And for you, my child," he added, for Bertha was still in tears, and he feared the effect of her excitement upon Aileen, whose thin white hand rested carelessly on the shoulder of her friend; "you have, doubtless sorrowed long and deeply for the share you have borne, by the repetition of this slander to ears which should have been the last to hear it; take, then, some comfort to yourself, and let it be to you a memorable lesson. Now leave me a few moments: I shall administer the last Sacraments, my child, to-night."

In the silence of the midnight hour, he, to whom Aileen's heart had turned in the days of her early girlhood, ere she knew of the sublime vocation which had called him from the world, now received the confession of a soul free from the more grievous sins inherent to our nature; for frail mortals are not angels. She had on her recovery from the alarming state into which Bertha's rash announcement had thrown her, relapsed for a time into a state bordering on madness; her traduced character, the thought of her aged parents, her day-dreams, all so rudely dispelled; this, at first, seemed a cross far too heavy to be borne, but a few short hours over, and the struggle against self was more than half accomplished, not one word of reproach to Bertha had ever escaped her lips, though the latter would often shudder when, on Aileen's becoming somewhat better, she would sadly listen in the room beneath the weary, continual pacing up and down of a heart ill at ease, in which highly nervous persons are prone to indulge.

The full, overburthened mind was now at rest, its sorrows, its trials, and its frailties were revealed in the tribunal of penance, and laid at the foot of the cross, and the poor oppressed heart was at peace, and words of consolation and encouragement, bidding her look to an eternity of happiness, sustained and cheered her. And then, Father Cleveland having rung a small hand bell, Bertha again returned to the sick chamber, and having hastily lighted a couple of wax candles, and spreading a clean linen cloth on the table, the Priest prepared for the administration of the sacraments of Extreme Unction and the Holy Eucharist; after which he returned home between one and two o'clock in the morning.

CHAPTER XV.—REMORSE.

Sufficient food for reflection presented itself to the mind of Father Cleveland, so strange, not to say providential, did his unexpected meeting with Aileen appear. His first thought was to ascertain the present whereabouts of her parents, who doubtless had removed, through the failure of their accustomed remittances, to some cheaper habitation that they might recently have occupied; and for this purpose he immediately wrote to his sister, Maud, aware that she would use every effort to help him in his search.

On the second day after his visit he returned to St. Croix, resolved to see Aileen every alternate day, as long as the unfortunate girl's life should be spared.

She was reclining on a couch when he entered the room, a bright smile passed across her countenance, reminding him forcibly of what she was ten years before, during these few brief meetings he had held with her at Alverley.

Her bright flashing eyes knuded with pleasure at seeing her old friend again, and the flush upon the cheek might almost have been mistaken for an omen of returning health, but that Father Cleveland knew well the insidious nature of the malady under which Aileen labored. The old times were spoken of, the change in her father's affairs, her return from Paris, and the little minutiae he so much wished to hear, that had led her, lonely as she was, to resign a resident situation in the family of honorable persons, which insured a protection to young ladies whom a stern fortune decrees shall be compelled to earn a maintenance amongst strangers, for the risk, and possible danger attendant upon forming a solitary home. The good Priest needed none to tell him, that much had been encountered in a spirit of the most courageous self sacrifice; for that which will suffice for the wants to one will not do for three—it requires no very wise head to understand this—and he also saw clearly that but for those dear aged ones, far away in England, the virtuous and heroic Aileen would have been perfectly safe.

Ah! what a hard, hard world it is. You see, it was quite sufficient for Aileen to be pretty and accomplished to excite first the envy and then the ill-will of many around her. This ill-will was followed, as it often is, by slander, which seldom spares those it envies; and then, too the unfortunate oozing out of the name of Lascelles being assumed, presented a *bonne bouche* too sweet to be suffered to fall to the ground, so that these causes, combined with that of her desolate condition, offered an open field for the belief and utterance of the most slanderous tale or insinuations that could cast a blight on the fair face of woman, and in the case of the heroine of our tale

—no fictitious one, be it remembered—hurried her to an untimely grave.

"Ah, if the heedless ones amongst us would but think a little before they utter the unkind remark, for we speak not now of the heinous sin of slander, they would surely pause, and not inflict a fresh wound on the hearts of those whom, mayhap, a chilling contact with the world has already seared."

We speak of those struggling ones, and their name is legion, who, like Aileen, gird themselves up bravely, and, fresh in their youth and in their innocence, resolve courageously to do battle with the world; often, very often, as was the case with her, not for themselves alone; and so things go on, you see, and they wear away their fresh young lives, and the beauty of their innocent girlhood passes; and still this rough encounter continues the same, yet not quite the same, because the hope of youth, so sanguine in its day-dream, has become less sanguine; and disappointment has chilled full many an effort, so that they see nothing before them but this ceaseless never-ending strife; and it goes on, too, till the brightness of the cheek has faded, and the once glossy hair, through care and anxiety, rather than the hand of time, has become wreathed with many a silvery thread; and the reckless ones, proud in their youth, flustering as it is, or those whose age ought to have taught them wisdom, but who were reckless and selfish in their day, with the hateful 'number one' principle actuating them, even if they did not openly boast that they squared their own conduct by its maxims, are the very first to be satirical—to point the venomous shaft at those whose heroism they have never cared to practice; and for this they unsparingly attack them, their age, their single state, ay, even their personal appearance—any thing will serve their purpose or their turn.

Little by little, then, he drew from Aileen all the circumstances attendant on her efforts since she left England, and he was still listening to her pathetic story, when he heard the voice of Bertha in the landing without, evidently in the tones of expostulation and entreaty.

"Miss Desmond is not alone," he distinctly heard her say; "the Jesuit Father of Fernside is with her; he was an intimate friend when in England; pray do not go in."

"Let me pass, Miss Ainslie!" exclaimed another voice, "if I do not shrink from speaking to Miss Desmond before her friend; you need not mind my doing so."

At this moment the door opened, and a tall and handsome woman, fashionably attired in a velvet mantle, heavily trimmed with sable, burst into the room, took no notice of Father Cleveland, but rushing to the couch on which Aileen reclined, threw herself on her knees, exclaiming:

"Aileen Desmond, tell me, oh! tell me, that they speak falsely, when they say that you are dying; tell me that there is hope; relieve me of the torture I endure!"

Father Cleveland had observed with some alarm that Aileen's cheek had paled the moment her visitant had entered the room, and also had noticed the nervous tremor which shook her whole frame, when the lady thus addressed her; a painful thought flashed across his mind—"Was this the wretched being who had destroyed her every hope, and condemned her to an early grave?"

Once, twice, Aileen strove to speak; the parted lips, however, emitted only an inarticulate sound, but the outstretched hand grasped that of the stranger, and a sweet expression on the still lovely features told a tale of forgiveness and peace.

"I must beg of you not to say anything that will cause excitement to Miss Desmond, madam," said Father Cleveland; "her mind is now at rest, thinking of nought but the glorious eternity which, I hope, awaits her in the better world to which she is hastening."

"Nay, nay, you but mock my distress, Reverend Sir," said Augusta Seton, for she it was, who in the depth of penitence and sorrow, had rushed to Aileen.

"You tell me this, perchance, to rouse me to repentance for the wrong I have inflicted upon her, but my sorrow-stricken heart needs no such incentive. Speak yourself, Aileen; your cheek has yet a hue of health, your eye is bright; ah! by all your hopes of heaven, say they do not tell me true. Oh! live, for my sake live!"

Aileen, with the assistance of Bertha, had raised herself upon the couch. Speech had come at last; the sweet tranquil face, calm as that of an angel, assured the Priest that he had nothing to fear; the countenance is the index of the soul, and there was no war of stormy contending passions on that of Aileen.

"Be calm, Augusta," she replied; "I have nothing now to fear; ah! I would not barter my present hope of a joyful eternity for all this fleeting world could offer. They tell you truly, when they say that I am dying."

"No hope! Ah, is there, then, no hope? And I have murdered you. I, yes, I; as surely

as if I had raised a poisoned chalice to your lips, so surely have I caused your death. Oh! God, be merciful to me!" she added.

"Aileen, will you believe me when I say I have not had a happy moment since I knew the full extent of the misery my slanderous tongue had occasioned; and that when, after many delays, Bertha's letter reached me in New York, I felt crushed beneath the magnitude of my guilt? I then hurried here, hoping, hoping to find that Bertha was not correct in her statement; but your own lips confirmed the fatal truth."

She rose from her knees, and paced the room in all the wildness of despair—then facing Father Cleveland, she exclaimed—

"Tell me, you whose office it is to counsel and instruct, what shall I do; how atone for the misery I have caused?"

"Repent and amend," replied Father Cleveland.

"Aileen," she said, turning from one, who, to her, seemed too stern, to seek consolation from the gentle being she had injured, "Aileen, grant me one favor—allow me to be your companion, your nurse, your attendant, in place of Bertha."

"It must not be, madam," replied Father Cleveland, for he knew that Aileen would acquiesce, and he dreaded the effect her constant presence, and the excitement to which she would probably give way, might have on the weak frame of the sufferer.

"But you will not refuse to see me each day," she said. "You, Reverend Sir, will surely not deny me this?" and she turned to Father Cleveland, though Aileen had bowed her head, and pressed, in token of assent, the hand which was laid within her own. Closely she drew her veil around her face, to hide the tears which gushed forth, having imprinted one kiss on the forehead of Aileen, and then turning to Father Cleveland, as she passed him, she said, in a low tone of voice, "I shall see you again, for I have much to say," and hurried from the room.

Father Cleveland was not wrong in his supposition that a scene so exciting as that which had taken place with Miss Seton would be productive of ill effects to Aileen; she became more feverish than usual, and literally gasped for breath.

"I shall be with you again to-morrow, Aileen," he said. "Meanwhile, keep your mind as quiet as possible; let not the interview with this unhappy lady who has left us, occasion you any uneasiness."

He then returned home, making several sick calls on his way, and spent an hour or two over his books; but, though the eyes of the good Jesuit were fixed on their pages, his thoughts were with poor Aileen, whose days, he plainly saw, were fast drawing to a close. At last his meditations were broken by the entrance of his housekeeper, who told him that a lady wished to see him.

"A lady!" he replied, with something of surprise, for it was a very poor mission to which he had been appointed, consisting almost exclusively of the poorer classes.

"Yes, Sir; a very fashionable lady she is too; she wishes to see you immediately, but would not give her name."

The mind of the Priest instantly reverted to Miss Seton; he remembered she had said she would see him again. What could the unhappy guilty woman want with him? he believed she was not a Catholic; he felt about as hard towards her as his countenance was stern, and he could be very stern at times. Sarah knew that; but she declared later that she had never seen him look so cross before; however, he decided upon seeing the lady, whoever she might be, and, as he suspected, the next moment Miss Seton was ushered into the room.

For one moment the fashionable lady felt awed as she had never felt before; there was something in the very air of the quiet humble room in that little Presbytery, its walls adorned with a few rare old engravings of sacred subjects, its large crucifix of ivory, and its exquisite Mater Dolorosa, which hung before her very eyes, with its sublime expression of resigned, but heartfelt anguish—the tear so life like, trembling, as it were, upon the cheek; and then the living man before whom she stood, was so calm and dignified, so all unlike those who had courted and caressed her by their flattery, that all the courage she had summoned to her aid vanished when she stood in his presence, and her eyes involuntarily fell beneath the stern glance with which he regarded her.

Father Cleveland was the first to break the awkwardness of the silence, but his cold request—"What would you wish me, Miss Seton?" gave her no encouragement to speak out the true reason of her visit; you see, this unhappy Augusta was awed as she had never been before, for this simple reason, that for the first time, perhaps, in her worldly, useless life, she felt her self obliged to own that she confronted one in every way above herself; she had never felt this before; but here her own heart acknowledged