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A MOTHER'S SACRIFICE OR, WHO WAS GUILTY?

By Christine Faber, Authoress of "Carroll O'Donoghue."

CHAPTER XXI.—CONTINUED.

He gave the paper to a gentleman to pass to Margaret, and by the time she had read it, the writer, together with his uncle, Nicholas Neville, was disappearing through a private passage. And while Margaret looked, too bewildered between the sudden, unaccountable change in Madame Bernot's physical condition, and her own sudden transition from sorrow to joy, to know exactly how she ought to regard Plowden, a dark-faced, heavy-bearded man rushed in a state of wild excitement after the lawyer. Overtaking the latter on the threshold of the passage he plucked frantically at his coat. Plowden paused and turned, recognizing in the Spanish-looking countenance one of the disputants on the greatness of Berton's mind, and to whom he had spoken a day or two previous.

"Well," he asked curtly, "what would you say to me?" "You told me," was the reply in husky tones, "to wait and see if the great lawyer's mind would be so great under defeat. I went to see him when they carried him out, but they told me he was a raving maniac—that his mind was gone."

A softened, kindly look broke over Plowden's face. "And you, my friend," he said, "what effect will this have upon you?" "I shall turn to my God and my Faith again, knowing that Religion alone survives all shocks."

He bowed his head and spoke in a solemn, and reverential tone, as if he was suddenly inspired with some deep, religious feeling. Plowden grasped his hand. "I know not who you are, my good fellow, nor whence you come, but you have given me courage for my fate; by my right doing has already gained a soul from infidelity; it seems like an omen of my own pardon."

And while the stranger, having wrung the lawyer's hand hard, departed, Plowden looked back at the courtroom where Margaret stood, and murmured, in tones audible alone to his uncle:

"Oh, Margaret Calvert! to you I owe having done what I did to-day." "God bless her!" responded his uncle, and both turned and pursued their way, not to the sunny streets, but to the rigorous guardianship of "Roquelare."

Margaret had witnessed, though of course without being able to hear, the colloquy between Plowden and the strange man, and she had seen the lawyer's lingering look toward herself. In her intense happiness she could well afford to have no feeling but the most tender kindness for every one, and after the first few moments of perplexed feeling, she wanted to rush to the lawyer; and to assure him not only of her present kind feelings, and of the prayers which she should constantly offer for him, but that the most tender gratitude and sisterly affection should ever linger round his very memory.

Before, however, she could summon courage sufficient to cross the space between them, he had disappeared, and some of the court officers, including the judge, were pressing about Madame Bernot to tender their congratulations, and she was contentedly informed that Hubert would be permitted to see her, and that he now waited for that purpose, in a private room.

She rose on the reception of that news. These about her stood in respectful and marvelous silence, for the change in her physical condition so miraculously wrought had produced a singular impression.

Dr. Durant was in such a state of tremor that his very voice shook as he said: "My dear madam, be careful; do not presume on your suddenly-acquired strength."

She answered with a smile. "Nay, doctor; since Heaven has vouchsafed me two blessings in one day, surely I may testify my joy by using and showing the wonderful goodness of God," and she went on leaning slightly on Margaret's arm.

She trembled, and walked unsteadily at first, but her step continued to become firmer, until at length she could withdraw from her support, and walk alone to the apartment in which Hubert waited.

A court officer opened the door for the party, and mother and son met as they had not met in nine long years—her arms around him, his form strained to hers in a long, tender embrace. Then Margaret gave way to the feelings of her own overcharged heart—averting her head, she cried for very joy. She was so happy that she was almost unhappy with a vague feeling that such extraordinary happiness must be followed by some equally great calamity. Even the eyes of the court officer were moist, and Dr. Durant saying to that official in an undertone:

"Madame Bernot's state is a very unnatural one: a reaction is sure to follow, and it may cause her death," was wiping his own eyes.

Without in the courtroom, Mrs. Delmar still lingered, uncertain whether to hasten home to communicate the

good news to Louise, or to remain in order to gratify her curiosity about Madame Bernot; which curiosity had been raised to a white heat by the peculiar beauty of the invalid, as well as the wonderful change which had been effected so suddenly in her physical condition.

Eugene had learned that Hubert was permitted to receive a visit from his mother in the private room to which the latter had adjourned, and when he communicated that fact to his own maternal parent, she joyously responded:

"It will not be amiss to follow with our congratulations." Her curiosity to see more of Madame Bernot and her desire to make a favorable impression on Hubert by being among the first to testify her joy at the sudden, happy determination of his trial, made her defiant enough to meet even that "odious Margaret Calvert."

Eugene looked ruefully when he heard the proposition: his finer feelings revolted from intruding upon that sacred meeting between mother and son—but Mrs. Delmar seized his arm and with brazen effrontery pushed toward the door. It was half open, and the position of the parties within was disclosed.

Hubert had disengaged himself from his mother's arms to call Margaret, and when she came, to present her to his mother as the angel who had guided and assisted him through all the troubled, fiery time; and when Mrs. Delmar and her son entered, he was still holding Margaret's hands, and pouring out what his full heart could prompt of her virtues, her devotion.

Eugene tremblingly introduced his mother. Madame Bernot slightly smiled, and bowed to the fashionable lady, who immediately went forward to pour into Hubert's ear what she considered a graceful and appropriate little speech.

The young man drew Margaret forward. "Together, Mrs. Delmar, we must accept and thank you for your congratulations; together, for Margaret has been so intimately connected with my sorrows, that it is but just she should participate in my joys; and though not my cousin, she shall soon hold a far nearer and dearer relation to me."

He put his arm about her and drew her to him, and Margaret was fain to hide her blushing joyful face in her hands.

For the worldly woman who looked on the scene, through the false smile she forced to her lips, through the false expression she forced to her eyes, that their glitter of disappointment and rage might not be seen; through the false words she forced herself to speak, could be discerned and heard, the bitterness which struggled up from her heart.

The lovers were too happy to notice it, or had they done so, to care; and Madame Bernot was too recently from a purely spiritual atmosphere to understand the rage and malice which painted more than ever to crush that "odious Margaret Calvert."

But Eugene, owing to his sister's confidence, partly comprehended the feelings which raged in his mother's heart, and having slipped Louise's mischievous into Margaret's hand with a whispered:

"Read that when you have leisure," took Mrs. Delmar on his arm, and hardly waiting to have her finish her smirking adieu, through which her forced smile shone sickeningly false, hurried her out.

How different was the going home from the coming to the court! Madame was able to go in her own carriage, she was accompanied by Margaret and Dr. Durant, and what happy faces and light hearts the vehicle carried! Even the doctor had rallied from his nervousness, and though still declaring it unacceptable he was beginning to believe in the permanency of the wonderful cure.

The Bernot servants—the warm-hearted, faithful domestics who had sympathized with their master's trouble, who had borne fears and anxieties on his account as if they had been their own—now rejoiced as if some wonderful good fortune had befallen themselves. Even Krebie's excitement, not unmixed with terror, when she beheld Madame Bernot rise, had caught the joyous infection of those about her, though she did not quite understand the cause of such sudden and boisterous joy, and she was exclaiming with a stronger Teutonic accent than ever:

"Mein Gott! das is all wonderful." She was undecided whether to remain lest Madame Bernot might require her attendance, or to accompany the help, now that the court room was being rapidly cleared, but Madame, herself, having at length disappeared, she decided on the latter course.

The streets through which the domestics passed on their homeward way, resounded with their voices; and in the very car which they entered, was heard above the rattling of the vehicle such fragments as:

"It's wonderful about Madame Bernot!" "Something always told me Mr. Hubert would get off!" "It was a judgment of God on the blackguard." The last remark from Hannah Moore, in reference to Berton's sudden illness. "I wonder what they'll do with Mr. Plowden now."

"Sure I keep thinking all the time that I saw his uncle somewhere before,"—from Rosie the chambermaid. The car stopped for them to alight, and when Samuel Lewis had gallantly assisted John McNamee to help the ladies out, Hannah Moore said in a very confidential manner:

"Rosie, there's after saying that she thinks she saw Mr. Plowden's uncle before, and maybe she has—and now that everything's come out, I'll make a few explanations myself; but not till to-night, when we're having a sociable glass together."

At which the pompous head-waiter condescended to bring his fat hand down on Miss Moore's shoulder, in token of approval, and Mr. Samuel Lewis said, "good, good," after the manner in which they cry, "hear, hear," at political speeches.

At home, each hastened to his, or her respective duties, and never was work done so easily or so quickly. They looked for a visit from Madame Bernot, but Miss Calvert alone came to them, shortly after the arrival of the carriage. She came to them looking radiant with happiness, and crying from very joy while she thanked them. The warm-hearted domestics wept also.

She announced to them that Madame Bernot would remain in her room, as she had always done, until Hubert's fate should be definitely decided, and she requested them to pray for his speedy release; then she lightly ascended to meet Father Germain, to whom a messenger had been dispatched with the wonderful news, and the result of which was that the good priest came himself to see Madame, and to tender his congratulations.

The radiant expression of Margaret's face told him all, before she had uttered a word, and he extended his hand, saying with deep emotion:

"Thank God, my child, for He has been very, very good." Madame Bernot received him standing; she whom he had never beheld out of her invalid chair, and whom he never expected to behold out of it until inclosed by her coffin. He broke forth involuntarily into a psalm, exclaiming the wonderful goodness of God; and Madame and Margaret bowed their heads and reverently joined him. Then he made particular inquiries about her physical state—she suffered no pain, she was free from all weakness and tremor, and as she sat in a chair similar to the one he occupied, save for the appearance which her white merino robe gave her, and the spiritualized expression of her face, one could scarcely imagine that she had nearly nine long years. Her eyes had not forgotten their old habit; occasionally they turned to the pictured head of the Saviour, and when Father Germain at length took his leave, it was with a feeling, priest as he was, akin to awe; for he knew that he had been in the presence of a saint—a saint on whom the Divine zeal was already set, for he clearly foresaw that her heavenly reward was not far distant. But he had not spoken of that to Margaret—he could not bear to cast a shadow on the girl's happiness.

The social glass over which Hannah Moore had promised to make her own particular explanations, was prepared, and sparkling in the hands of those for whom it was intended. Goodly slices of cake accompanied it, and every one was eating and sipping, and waiting with manifest interest for the promised tale.

"Mind you, it's not much," said Miss Moore, smoothing out her glossy apron fresh from the iron, and settling the stiff cuffs on her wrists, "it's only to let you all understand why I'm feeling so badly about poor Mr. Frederick, as I always used to call him, and how it was that I came to know so much about him."

"Once I was out of a place a good while, and stopping with a sister-in-law who didn't much care about having me on her floor, and when I heard accidentally of a delicate lady wanting a strong girl to wait on her I went to see about it. When I found she would take me on my own terms my heart danced for joy. That lady was Mrs. Clare; and delicate indeed she was, and fair and sweet as an angel. I wasn't there long before I knew she carried a breaking heart in her bosom; and it used to make my own heart weak to see the way she'd be crying to herself when her son and her brother would be away."

"I thought she was a widow, and so did the rest of the help, and we used to wonder among ourselves how long her husband was dead, and at what age she was married, for she looked so young to have a son, a young man. We used to call him Mr. Frederick, and though he was always kind and polite, and though we couldn't but admire his handsome looks, there was something about him that used to make us kind of frightened of him. We thought it might be because he was so much with his uncle—and he was dark and strange enough, heaven knows!"

"I used sometimes to overhear the mother and son, talking; she would ask him to give up something, and he'd get into a passion and swear that he never would; and then she'd fall to crying and he'd rush out."

"Things went on that way for a good while, and one day he came up to his mother in a great hurry. I was in a closet in the next room folding away clothes. I couldn't make out everything they were saying, and I thought it would be mean to try to listen, so I went on with my work; but I couldn't help hearing enough to know what it was about."

"He wanted to accept some place that had been offered to him—and he said it would give him power, and place him just where he wanted to be. But his mother begged and entreated him not to take it, because if he did he would have to give up his religion. She might as well speak to the wall—he wouldn't listen to her—he wouldn't listen to anything but his own hot passion, and when he rushed out as he always did,

I heard her fall. I went in to her, and picked her up, and brought her to, and after a little, seeing I suppose how my heart ached for her, she told me everything about herself, and how she feared that her son would yet murder either Cecil Clare, or his father, and that was the reason she was constantly praying him to give up his wishing for revenge. She asked me not to tell anybody what she had been saying to me, for she didn't want people to know the facts about her son's birth, and I promised to keep everything secret. After that she wanted me near her all the time, and Mr. Frederick and Mr. Neville knew that she had told me the secrets about herself, but seeing that she thought me so faithful like, and was so fond of me, I suppose they didn't much mind. I said before that Mr. Neville, the brother, was a queer man; he was a ventriloquist."

"Ventriloquist!" interrupted the pompous head-waiter, but Miss Moore, heedless of the interruption, continued: "And he used to be trying to teach his nephew the same bad trick. Sure it was him that bid me speak that time to day when we were all startled by the strange voice from the crowd; myself was frightened as well as the rest, for I couldn't think what would bring him there. Well, at last, the poor gentle creature was dying, and though I've seen Mr. Frederick at her bedside cry like a child, yet he wouldn't promise her even then that he'd give up wishing for the revenge. She made me swear by the prayer-book in my hands that I'd never tell what I knew about her son; and I took the oath with Mr. Frederick and Mr. Neville looking on."

"Perhaps you will meet him sometime with another name, Hannah," she said to me, "and if you do, don't speak to him till he speaks to you first, for fear people might find out."

"And I promised, though I think her son put her up to make me promise that, lest I'd be claiming acquaintance with him when he wouldn't want me to."

"Well, she died—that is nearly five years ago—and I was in and out of place till I engaged with Mr. Frederick. Sure enough, I met Mr. Frederick with another name—wasn't he the Mr. Charles Plowden that examined us all on the first go-off, and didn't my heart stand still, when I saw by his look that he knew me! I thought of all sorts of distracting things then—I was sure, somehow, that the murdered man, Cecil Clare, and the Cecil Clare the poor, dead woman used to speak of, were the same. I thought of the passions Mr. Frederick used to get in, and the way he used to swear that he'd have vengeance, and that nothing in the world should stand between him and it. And when I saw him going so hard on Mr. Hubert, I was almost tempted to tell all I knew, but my oath to his dead mother held me back. I think he was afraid of me, for, if you remember, he dropped the case kind of sudden."

"But the first thing that greatly puzzled me was the beggar that came here once—the beggar that Rosie wanted to tell you all about on the night that Miss Calvert came home ill from the ball. I wouldn't let her make much of it, if you recollect, but I had reasons for that. The beggar was Mr. Neville—I knew him at once, in spite of his old, ragged dress, and he knew by my look that I did, for he put his finger to his lips, unknown to Rosie. He asked questions about Madame Bernot and Mr. Hubert and Miss Calvert; but he asked them in a careless way that one wouldn't be apt to think much about, and Rosie answered them all. I thought maybe he'd make a sign, or say a secret word to me going out, and for that reason I went to the door with him myself; but he didn't even look, only hurried off. I didn't know what to think—I felt sure it was not poverty, for he was rich out and out; and I couldn't relieve myself by speaking about it to any one, without, in some way, breaking my word to the dead. That was before we were examined, and then, when we were examined, and I knew that Mr. Plowden was just Mr. Frederick, and nobody else, I couldn't help but think that Mr. Neville visited this house so that he might help his nephew by finding out all he could about the Bernots; and I felt bitter toward them both to be trying to bring trouble into a noble family."

"I wouldn't let Rosie tell you about it, as she wanted to do, nor make much of it, because at that time Mr. Frederick used to come here so friendly-like, and I was afraid if you got talking about the circumstance it might make mischief in some way, so I just shut up everything in my own heart. But I had very queer thoughts, especially after Mr. Hubert's arrest, when Mr. Frederick was so attentive to Miss Calvert. I used to think sometimes, that if Mr. Hubert did murder Cecil Clare, Mr. Frederick would try to bring Mr. Hubert to justice for having taken the vengeance out of his own hands; and that perhaps all his friendliness was only on purpose to get all the clues he could. I knew he was sharp, and I always thought he was his mother's entreaties. But he has proved himself brave and noble for once; perhaps it is owing to his mother's prayers in Heaven for him—and, anyway, I'm sorry for him this night, for I'm aware of his round his own neck the halter will be at last."

She stopped suddenly, and threw her apron over her head; then, finding her emotion becoming too powerful, she begged the company to excuse her, and retiring to her room she indulged in a hearty fit of crying, after which she said her beads for the real murderer of Cecil Clare.

The remainder of the help, in deference to Mrs. Moore's sorrowful feelings, retired also, when they had exchanged a few brief comments on the tale, and offered some conjectures as to why "Mr. Frederick" had changed his name to Charles Plowden.

In Madame Bernot's room there was taking place, a sweet, happy communion of two pure hearts; to the interchange of a confidence to which the angels might have listened. There was no hesitation now in pouring into Madame's ear the tale of her own, and Hubert's love—how the crime which he had supposed rested on his soul had prevented the utterance of a word of lover-like affection, and Madame bent to the kneeling girl, and would her arms about her, and answered:

"In the past, when I fancied there would be a union between you and Maurice, because of his passionate affection for you, I little dreamed that it would be Hubert who should at last possess such a treasure."

And still holding the beautiful head close to her, she continued to speak, softly, of the past:

"When, over Maurice's coffin, I extorted from you and Hubert the promise never to speak of how my boy met his death, I did it because I thought it would help more surely to eradicate any rancor which might remain in Hubert's heart, and because I thought it would seem like a more complete forgiveness of Maurice's murderer; and when I shut myself from the outer world and sought to die to all, save spiritual things, I did it as a sacrifice to be offered for Maurice's soul. You know that he died unshriven, Margaret; that no priest administered to him the last rites, though I have reason to believe that his life, up to that unhappy time, was pure and blameless. It was that which made me freely forgive his murderer, and pray that God would send me sufferings, anguish, anything, only to pardon my murdered boy. He sent them, and He has taken them away as suddenly as He visited me with them. I think my sacrifice has been accepted, Margaret—that my son has been pardoned."

Her eyes turned to the picture, and her whole face seemed to shine with an inspired, ecstatic expression. It was as if she saw the realization of her desire, and Margaret little doubted but that to the mental vision of the dear saint was presented something of the scene which is permitted alone to heavenly dwellers, and when the young girl bestowed her good-night kiss, it was with much the same feeling of reverence as that with which she was wont to pray in the church.

In her room, for the first time since she had hurriedly thrust it into her pocket, Margaret thought of the misadventure which Delmar had given her, and she drew it forth to read.

She was too happy to be affected by the knowledge of the calamities which society had heaped upon her, and she was too generous not to pardon immediately, and even, in some measure, to love, the writer for the frankness and penitence which were so simply, but so touchingly, expressed.

She answered in her own kind, gentle way—penning words which must rivet the good influence that Eugene had begun already to exert upon his wayward sister, and which must assure her not only of Margaret's entire forgiveness, but of her sincere affection; and, having prepared it for the morning mail, she knelt to offer up her happy, grateful prayers.

There was but one cloud on the dazzling brightness of her joy—the thought of Plowden. If she could but see him to pour forth her gratitude, and to assure him that she remembered nothing for him save the one act which had given to her so much bliss; but she must wait, as she had waited before, in Hubert's case, and as she had done then, she would do now, pray for the unhappy murderer of Cecil Clare.

On that same day, in the home of the Delmars, a painful scene had occurred, occasioned by a woman's temper, and Eugene, appalled, listened to, and looked at his mother, as if she had been suddenly transformed into some totally unknown being. She tore through the parlors like one half-crazed, venting bitter reproaches equally on the Bernots, and on her son and daughter.

Louise having replied to the news which Mrs. Delmar so indignantly communicated on her return from the court, that she rejoiced at Hubert and Margaret's happiness, it flamed into fiercer fire, the rage which already burned so furiously in her mother's breast.

Like every other maniac she only darted her wrath on the very kindness that would have soothed her back to reason and calmness. Louise, in obedience to a sign from her brother, controlling, by an effort, her desire to retort to the false accusations of her mother, forced herself to answer quietly, how just and how Hubert Bernot had acted, and how unnatural it was to suppose that his heart could be won at will. But the frantic woman was only made worse by the attempted justification; and, at last, Eugene, with such a look of pain in his face as perhaps had been there never before, drew his sister's arm within his own and led her from the room, while the irate woman, having continued to storm until her passion had somewhat spent itself, ordered the carriage, and driving to one of her numerous fashionable confidants, relieved herself by reviving all the calamities about Margaret Calvert, and complaining of her son's and daughter's want of sympathy with her own unhappy feelings.

Hubert Bernot no longer occupied his old cell; and that first night on which he was free with a freedom no prince of earth could have given, and