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CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"I knew that you would rather suffer anything, run any risk, than that I should appear."

"Yes," he said, "God knows I would. It seems to me that nothing else matters."

"Oh, do not say that," she broke in, with a catch in her voice. "Do not say that when—when so much is at stake, your liberty your safety."

"You must not think of them," he responded, quickly. "I have brought it all on myself."

"Ah, no, no!" she cried. "Not that. You did not do it; you are innocent!"

"Of the crime with which I am charged—yes," he said, "but," bitterly, "I am guilty of having wrecked your life, of having caused you unhappiness."

She shook her head slightly, with a faint smile that was infinitely sad.

"No; it—it was my fault. If you had never seen me—"

"Don't!" he broke in, hoarsely. "You know that no shadow of blame can rest on you. None—none whatever. No punishment, I might suffer for anything I have done, or not done, could atone for the wrong I have done you. It is that thought that makes me say and feel that nothing that can happen to me can matter in the very least. I have only one desire, and that is that you should come to forget me and all that concerns me; I dare not hope that you will ever forgive—"

Her head dropped, then she looked at him.

"I have forgiven!" she said, simply. "It—it was not hard. If—if you had not cared for me—he uttered a broken exclamation, but she went on calmly, sadly, her eyes meeting his bravely, with a kind of sad resignation—"you—you would not have asked me, have you, to go with you?"

"That—that does not palliate," he said, hoarsely.

"Ah, yes," she said, and all the woman spoke in her tone. "Yes, I remem-

ber that when—when I remember that night!" A faint color passed quickly over her pale face.

He hung his head.

"That is like you!" he said, humbly, gratefully. "It was like you to come here to tell me this. And God knows how great a comfort to me it is. It will lighten the burden of my remorse. And—and you will go now; you will not appear, take any part in this business?"

"I must," she said in a low voice, but with a touch of firmness which was a full tribute to Lady Pauline's teaching. "I know that you would rather run any risk to spare me; and it is because of that I have come to tell you that you must not let any thought of my comfort stand in the way of my helping you. I was—there—that night; I may be able to tell them something that may help to prove your innocence."

He raised his head with a movement indicative of repudiation.

"You must not!" he said. "I—I could not bear to see you in court, before the public, with every eye upon you. I would rather—"

She shook her head.

"Tell me how I can help you," she said, breaking in upon his speech gently but firmly. "If I tell them all I know, all that happened, it may be of use."

He groaned, and turned aside that she might not see the agony on his face.

"It would not help me," he said, almost bravely; for it was difficult for him to speak. "It would not help me at all. And if it would, I could not let you do it. There—there is enough evidence without yours." He stopped, for she had shuddered and her face had grown even paler.

"Do you mean—Ah, no, no! They could not! God would not let them find you guilty! He could not—could not!" She began to tremble. With an effort she mastered her emotion, and was calm again. "Something will be discovered," she said, struggling to steady her voice. "It must be! The person who—who is guilty will be found."

"Yes, yes," he said, with an assumption of confidence. "No doubt he will be. The—the police are clever, and—"

"Are you only saying it to give me courage?" she asked, scanning his face anxiously.

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He forced a smile.

"We will hope for the best," he said. "My lawyers will do their utmost in my behalf. You have been—very ill!" He broke off abruptly, and with an infinite remorse and grief in his voice.

"Yes, I have been ill," she said. "But I am quite well and strong now. If—if I could only be sure you were safe!"

"Do not think of me," he said, quickly. "But if you must, remember that you can not help me; that if you were dragged into the business it would only increase my unhappiness."

"You think of me—always of me—not of yourself," she said, almost to herself. "Never of yourself!"

"Do I not?" he said, bitterly. "When have I not thought of myself and my selfish desires?"

She looked at him with a wistful tenderness.

"Shall I tell you? When you strove to make the poor people at Leadmore happier and more contented; when you went away last—last you should say to me what you said that night; when you gave up your place in the boat to another man. Ah, yes! I have heard it all; and—and my heart has swelled with pride. And that is not all. You were not thinking of yourself when you sent the money to save father and Bobby—and me!"

Gaunt reddened and bit his lip.

"You know! Who told you?"

"No one," she said. "But do you think I could not guess?"

He looked aside for a moment, then he said, with sad bitterness:

"And now I suppose you will refuse to feruse anything, ever so small a thing, from my hands?"

"No," she said, simply. "I will not. I know that—that it would pain you. I wanted to refuse, until—until I thought it all over; then I saw that it would be wrong to do so. It would have been as if—as if I had refused to—forgive you."

He stretched out his hands.

"God bless you, Decima!" he said in a broken voice. "You have found the way to ease my heart of its load!"

"I know," she said, as simply as before. "Some day we shall pay it back. Aunt Pauline—But I will not let you think me ungrateful and churlish."

He could not speak for a moment; the exquisite sweetness of her reasoning overcame him as nothing else could have done.

"There is no one like you!" he said at last, with a kind of reverential despair. "No one, Ah, how could I help loving you? Ah, forgive me, for she had winched and shrunk back, slightly enough, but he had perceived it.

"Forgive me!"

There was a world of grief and remorse in his voice, in his face. For he felt at that moment that though the old barrier had been removed, his conduct had raised a new one. He loved her still, and she might love him still, but the gulf yawned between them; and he himself had dug it.

Lady Pauline came to the door. She inclined her head to Gaunt, but she addressed Decima.

"Are you ready, Decima? The time has expired."

"Yes, aunt," said Decima in a low voice and with a sigh.

Lady Pauline regarded Gaunt gravely. Even she could not help pitying the misery which his face revealed.

Gaunt fought for his voice.

"I have to thank Miss Deane for coming here, Lady Pauline," he said, as steadily as he could. "I have assured her that she can not help me by—appearing in court, that I most earnestly entreat her not to do so."

Lady Pauline inclined her head.

"My niece has only done her duty in coming to you, Lord Gaunt," she said in even tones; "a duty which I could not refuse to recognize."

He bowed with his old courtliness.

"Knowing all?" He paused.

"Yes," she said. "My niece has told me everything."

"You will not need any assurance of my remorse, will not doubt my assertion that there is nothing I would not do to suffer to spare her a moment's unhappiness—discomfort?"

"Lady Pauline regarded him solemnly.

"I believe in the sincerity of your desire to spare her, Lord Gaunt," she said; "but it is part of our punishment that we are helpless to avert the consequences of our misdeeds from falling upon those who are innocent, and whom we would most desire to shield."

"That is so," said Gaunt, simply; and the commonplace assent was more eloquent of his pain and misery than a mere ornate response would have been.

"Aunt!" murmured Decima, appealingly.

"We will go," said Lady Pauline. "It is only fair and just that I should assure you of my conviction of your innocence of the awful crime laid to your charge, Lord Gaunt," she added, Gaunt inclined his head.

"Thank you, Lady Pauline. Yes, I am innocent—of that," he said, quietly.

Lady Pauline went outside again, and Decima, who had been standing with an expression of pain in her lowered eyes, raised them to Gaunt's face.

"Good-bye!" she said in a low voice. She did not hold out her hand; and that she did not do so, hurt him. He did not know that she dared not risk the risk of touching him.

"Good-bye! God bless and keep you!" he said, almost in a whisper.

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Her eyes rested upon his with an infinite sadness and infinite tenderness; then she drew them away slowly, and, with a sigh, left the cell.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

When Decima had left the cell—taking all the light and warmth with her, as it seemed to Gaunt—he sat on the bed, with his face in his hands, thinking of every word she had said, recalling the sweet face, with its new expression of sadness and resignation.

He asked himself why Fate had sent him across her path, why heaven permitted one of its angels to suffer as she had suffered, simply through loving him.

Alas! this kind of question is not only futile, but recoils upon the questioner. Why the innocent should suffer with the guilty, why the woman should suffer through her love for the man, are interrogations which remain unanswered, even by theologians, who are supposed to know everything.

Gaunt was so engrossed in thinking of Decima that he could scarcely turn his attention to his own affairs, though, in all truth, they were grave and serious enough.

Mr. Belford brought Sir James, the counsel, the next morning, and they went over the whole story and examined the evidence with a minuteness which warranted Gaunt. Perhaps he permitted this weariness to be seen, for Sir James got rather sharp.

"Look here, Lord Gaunt," he said, impressively, and no man could be more impressive than Sir James when he looked, "I'm afraid you don't realize your position."

"That's what I say!" exclaimed Mr. Belford, aggrievedly.

"The evidence is very strong. The trial will take place in about three weeks. Unless we can discover the criminal, the perpetrator of this murder, I—well, I should not like to answer for the result. Of course, I could have the trial put off—"

"Pray do not!" said Gaunt. "Three weeks of suspense will be quite long enough. If you do not discover him in that time, he will remain undiscovered. I can give you no assistance beyond that which may be supplied by my plain statement of what occurred on the night I met—my wife. Please don't think me indifferent or ungrateful for the efforts you are making in my behalf. I have no desire to figure as the first Gaunt who has been hanged, I assure you; but I feel quite helpless, and when I am in that condition—" He made a little weary gesture with his hand.

Sir James shrugged his shoulders.

"We will do all we can. We must find out all that is possible to be discovered concerning the unhappy lady's movements since she parted from you. You know no details of her life of late, I suppose?"

"Absolutely nothing," said Gaunt, "excepting that she was living with her brother."

(To be continued.)

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