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A MOTHER'S SACRIFICE

OR, WHO WAS GUILTY?

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

CHAPTER XXI.

Early the next morning Margaret despatched a messenger to Father Germain to acquaint him of Madame Bernot's determination to appear in court, and also to request him, if it were possible, to see Hubert and prepare him for his mother's presence in court.

As the prisoner's spiritual adviser the clergyman had access to the jail when he would, and the messenger returned with the reply that all should be done as Miss Calvert desired.

Great was the astonishment and consternation among the Bernot servants when they witnessed the preparations for conveying Madame Bernot to court—muffled in a large cloak, and closely veiled, she was borne in her invalid chair, which was so constructed that it could be readily used upon this occasion.

The bearers were the head waiter and the hostler who assisted McNamee in the care of the horses, and Dr. Durant, who in company with Plowden, walked beside, had given particular instructions to go slowly and steadily, that no inadvertent jar might increase the pain which he felt she was suffering; if he could have looked beneath her veil he would have beheld her face covered with clammy perspiration produced by physical agony; her lips white, and her mouth drawn from the same cause; but she gave no sign. Was she not going to plead for the life of her son—her only child? What then could be any physical pain compared with the thought of what was likely to happen to him.

She had requested Margaret to use the carriage; so, for the first time since the trial began, the young girl entered the handsome equipage, accompanied by Annie Corbin, and Kreble, and it was driven slowly in order to keep the chair in sight. Windows were flung open, and heads stretched far out to view the curious procession. Fashionable ladies in un-fashionable morning costumes, ventured even to the stoop, to obtain a closer sight of the strange cortege, and gentlemen who had just risen after late debauches, rushed from their breakfasts at the risk of having only cold mocha to drink, to catch a glimpse of this mother going to a legal court.

The court room was more densely crowded than it yet had been, but the party were admitted through a private entrance.

Plowden had been early astir that morning, and he had made such arrangements that no one of the judicial gentlemen seemed surprised at Madame Bernot's appearance. A passage was respectfully made for the invalid chair, and she was borne close to the judge's seat whither chairs were courteously placed for Margaret and Dr. Durant.

Some one in the crowd who had obtained his information from a court official, voluntarily enlightened those about him, and in a few minutes the identity of the large muffled person in the peculiar chair, was whispered all about the court. People stood on tip-toe to get a closer look, but the thick veil baffled every effort.

Mrs. Delmar adjusted her glass a third time in a very perplexed state of mind. She had not even Louisa to whom to communicate her conjectures.

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for that young lady, despite the drive from which she had returned with unmistakable roses of health upon her cheeks, still pleaded illness, and was, though with every symptom of irate dissatisfaction on the part of her mother, permitted to remain at home.

Eugene, the provoking fellow, would only return monosyllabic replies to his mother's remarks. Truth was, the young man was as much puzzled as Mrs. Delmar herself, to decide upon the identity of that strange muffled form.

"It must be Madame Bernot," she said, re-arranging the position of her glass, "for Margaret Calvert is so attentive to her."

Margaret was unfastening the invalid's cloak, in order to throw it slightly back, the atmosphere of the room was so warm.

The prisoner entered. Before he quite reached his place, he paused and swept a hurried anxious look about him, till his eyes encountered the large form in the invalid chair. Margaret whispered to Madame Bernot, and in another moment the young girl, in obedience to a request, had lifted the veil which shrouded the invalid's face, and mother and son's eyes met.

It was an interchange of looks, on the part of the one so full of tender love that it made many eyes moist; on the other so expressive of intense relief, and at length of sudden joy, that there fell from Margaret glad tears because of her very sympathy with the full heart of the prisoner.

He passed to his place with an elastic step. Margaret dropped the veil again over the invalid's face; and people awoke from the strange spell in which a sight of that rare and saint-like countenance had seemed to bind them. Even Mrs. Delmar was pettishly wondering what it was that gave to the sick woman's features such great and peculiar beauty. She did not remember even the color of Madame Bernot's eyes.

On conclusion of the customary legal preliminaries, Kreble Karidat was called for examination. On reaching the court, Annie Corbin had been conducted to the place assigned the Bernot servants, who had already arrived; and Hannah Moore had undertaken to reason the poor, trembling German woman into something like a state of "decent behavior," as she herself termed it. Sam Lewis had also with an air of great importance proffered his advice.

"Bamboozle him like I did, when he's asking you the questions; that's all you've to do; there's nothing like bamboozling."

But poor Kreble would only shake his head and reiterate.

"Mein Gott!"

On the stand she was little better.

"I know notings," she said; "I comes to dis country six years ago. I goes South and gets von place to nurse Madame Bernot; den for von year ask me such things about Mr. Hubert?" with a sudden burst of indignation directed full at Bertoni which almost provoked even the risible faculties of the judge.

Kreble was permitted to descend without being cross-examined, and Bertoni made a few brief remarks, the purport of which was to show, that the last witness had been examined, not because her testimony was an actual necessity, but that his honorable opponents might be quite satisfied of his desire to examine every witness, in order that anything favorable to the prisoner which could be produced might be shown; to which remarks Plowden bowed, and smiled scornfully, well knowing that the opposing counsel had proceeded to such lengths only because they were so many opportunities of displaying his own triumph.

Margaret lifted Madame Bernot's veil, and there was a breathless silence for her testimony was the next in order. Dr. Durant hurriedly felt her pulse; the beats were more regular than they had been for days.

"I can't account for it at all," said the puzzled physician. His own appearance presented greater evidence of mental excitement than did Madame Bernot's; for she was as calm, apparently, as though quietly resting at home.

People expected the low, tremulous, indistinct tones which are usually accredited to invalids; they were not prepared for the exquisitely sweet voice which floated out clear, distinct, and perfect in its articulation.

When she had answered the preliminary questions she was allowed to proceed with her tale, uninterrupted as she evidently wished to do.

"I have requested to be heard to-day in behalf of my only child who has been charged with the crime of murder. I do not seek to avert the penalty which Justice would inflict upon him. I have no hope of influencing the hearts of his judges to lighten the rigor of the law in his case, but I desire to state facts which may cause his memory to be less dishonored—which may win for the remainder of his existence less opprobrium than that with which he is now visited.

"Thirteen years ago our home was one of the happiest in Louisiana; my elder son, Maurice, was at college. Cecil Clare, whose home was also in our state, was his class-mate and warm friend.

"One morning there was a duel on the outskirts of the college grounds, and my son fell with a ball through his heart.

"Over his coffin we learned from some of his college mates more definite, but sadder particulars. Cecil Clare, who had frequently partaken of our hospitality, jealous of Maurice's superior scholarship, of his popularity, formed a pretext for rousing my boy's hot

southern blood, and a duel was the result. Maurice fired in the air—fired in the air, though his antagonist took aim so sure that it was proof of his intention to take a life, and over my son's dead body Clare paused a moment to exult even while his friends were urging him to flee. My husband speedily followed his murdered boy, and my present state of suffering came upon me. Where peace and happiness had reigned ten days before, grief and desolation now made their abode.

"We forgave Cecil Clare; my husband with his dying lips had pronounced his pardon, and over Maurice's coffin, for my sake, Hubert had retraced the boyish vengeance he had sworn, and for the execution of which he sighed for manhood. I also obtained from him and Margaret Calvert a solemn promise never, upon any occasion to mention the sad circumstances of Maurice's death.

"My illness compelled the utmost seclusion; but I had other reasons for severing myself as completely as my poor weak nature would allow, from all worldly affairs. It were better I had not done so, for then my son would not have feared to give me his confidence, and it would not have been for another to tell me that my only child was charged with murder.

"It were better also that we had never come North—though we did so only to be near Hubert during his college term—for then he would not have met so unhappily his brother's murderer. I have heard that hot words passed between them; I know not—I know only that, from my son's unflinching tenderness to me, from his disposition in boyhood, from the tenor of his whole life up to that one unhappy deed, he never would have committed an intentional, a deliberate, murder; and I ask of the gentlemen who may have my boy's life in their hands, to remember, before they unite in a final and fatal decision, that he is the sole remaining child of a widowed, broken-down mother, that his life before this unfortunate affair has been blameless, and that the man he is said to have killed was himself a murderer. I have done, gentlemen."

Margaret Calvert dropped the veil over the pale, beautiful countenance. Dr. Durant felt her pulse again, and then the people began to move in their seats, and to whisper their admiration, and wonder, and sympathy, till "order" was called.

The prisoner had kept his face bowed in his hands while his mother was speaking, and he did not remove them when she had ceased. The various emotions caused by the sound of her voice, and the memories which she was awakening, were almost beyond his control, as might be perceived by the trembling of his fingers, and the deep flush visible on the side of his face and neck.

The doctor urged Madame Bernot to permit herself to be borne out, now that she had performed her part, but she refused, whispering:

"I have not seen my son for so long; do not ask me to leave him now."

She was suffering acutely; but no pain would have induced her to leave the court room while Hubert remained.

Every witness for the prosecution had been examined, and Bertoni waited with a look of supercilious contempt, for Plowden's promised proceedings.

That gentleman, from the very moment of his entrance, had seemed to watch a certain part of the room; turning his keen glance frequently in that direction, and wearing at such times a look of anxious expectation; with that exception, he seemed to be singularly pre-occupied; as if he were more intent upon some determination of his own, than upon the testimony then under way, and it was with that same strangely pre-occupied manner that he rose, and leaning forward, spoke a moment to the judge.

Directly after, Hannah Moore was called.

Great was the consternation among the Bernot servants, who, some time before, had arrived at the pleasant conclusion that no more testimony would be required from them; and the puzzled, frightened cook turned to John McNamee and whispered:

"Is it me, he means?"

"Yes, to be sure; go on—they're waiting for you."

She gathered her shawl about her with no very definite idea of what she was doing, and took her way to the stand, while her broad, good-natured face bloomed like a very peony from sudden color.

When she had taken the oath and stood trembling as if she was herself a culprit, Plowden leaned slightly forward, and looked at her long and earnestly, and almost tenderly; it was a look designed to recall other times, to awake in her heart all the kind feelings which he knew slumbered there. She read his expression, and her eyes dropped, for her Irish heart was full.

"You once held the position of nurse to a certain Mrs. Clare, did you not?" he asked in a peculiar softened tone as if he would coax forth her reply.

Her surprise permitted no answer for a moment, and then it was given with reluctance.

"I did."

"Mrs. Clare had a son, Frederick, whom you knew well?"

"She had," her astonishment growing visibly greater.

"You had ample opportunity of knowing Frederick Clare's disposition to be turbulent and untractable, did you not?"

"I did," falteringly.

"You knew him to be passionate, with a firmness in his passion which would yield to no power under heaven, did you not?"

"Yes," with a half gasp.

"What relation was this Frederick Clare to the murdered man, Cecil Clare?"

The witness refused to answer. Pale as she was before red, she stood with resolutely closed lips.

"Speak, woman!" thundered a voice from the crowd—"your promise is no longer binding, for a human life is at stake."

People looked in vain for the owner of that voice; no one could point him out to the officer whose duty it was to preserve order in the court.

"Yes, speak!" said Plowden, softly, to the startled witness, "answer every question I shall put, if you would not hear the sentence of death passed upon your young master, Hubert Bernot."

A desperate struggle was evidently going on in the domestic heart—the perspiration came out thickly upon her face, and her hands fidgeted nervously with her shawl.

"Speak!" reiterated Plowden, "in mercy to the living, and in justice to the dead, speak!"

Still struggling with her conflicting feelings, she answered with much hesitation:

"He was the brother of Cecil Clare."

"Sons of the same father, but of different mothers, were they not?" asked the lawyer.

"Yes."

"You were in the confidence of Mrs. Clare; you knew that she had been deceived by a mock marriage with her child's father; that she had only learned that fact when she found herself deserted, and was told that her deceiver had gone to England, where he had already a wife and child?"

"Yes; she told me that."

"You learned further from her confidence, that when in the course of years she heard of the death of the legitimate Mrs. Clare, she accompanied by her son, journeyed to that state for the purpose of appealing for her rights to the man who had deceived her?"

"Yes."

"That the result of that journey was a stern refusal from the elder Clare to acknowledge either mother or son, and insulting scoffs from his legitimate son, then a young man of twenty; that the youth, who had accompanied his mother, only to find himself further than ever from a father, swore boyish vengeance on Cecil Clare; that desire for revenge grew to be part of the lad's very being, so that when he returned with his mother to their northern home, he talked and thought of nothing else. You knew all this, did you not?"

"I did."

"What member of that household was there beside mother and son?"

"An only brother of Mrs. Clare."

"How long did you remain with the family?" speaking more rapidly.

"Until Mrs. Clare died."

"That will do for the present."

And, as the witness stepped down, so trembling and confused, as to be proceeding in a wrong direction, till some one kindly set her right, Plowden, in a rapid, impassioned manner, requested that the gentlemen of the jury would be careful to follow, and connect the clues as he would now present them.

"It has been shown conclusively in a previous testimony," he said, "that the prisoner, even though he did not act upon it, had a motive to incite him to the murder of Cecil Clare, and in the testimony just adduced, we learn that there was another being who had treasured vengeance in his heart for this same Cecil Clare. It has not been proved yet, either by the prisoner's own confession, or by any evidence so far obtained, that the prisoner struck the fatal blow in the breast. Improbable as it may seem, it is not impossible that Frederick Clare, the half-brother of the murdered man, may have given the fatal stroke."

He stopped suddenly, inclined himself again toward the judge, and in a moment the latter called:

"Nicholas Neville."

A tall, grand form made its way from the densest part of the crowd—a form, the first sight of which conveyed the impression of uncommon beauty and strength; but a longer look made one recoil with a feeling akin to pain, the whole frame was such a tottering thing. He wore no cloak, as he had done on the previous evening, during his interview with the lawyer, but his dress was entirely black, and his vest was buttoned up close to his collar.

On arriving at the witness stand he looked searching, for a moment, as if seeking to recognize the faces of the judge and jurors—those faces—they seemed to be transfixed with mingled astonishment and alarm; Bertoni's was bleached with horror, and his strong form visibly trembled.

The strange, tottering form raised its left arm and made a single sign. In an instant judge and some of the jury had risen to their feet, stood in perfect silence for a moment, and then slowly resumed their seats.

People stared at each other with wild, wondering eyes. Never had such proceedings been in any court of justice before; but, reading no explanation of the mysterious doings in the countenances of their neighbors, they were fain to turn their glances back, and wait for time to solve their yet unspoken questions.

At the first sound of Nicholas Neville's tones everybody recognized the voice which, so strangely, from the crowd, had issued the command to Hannah Moore.

"I am the uncle of Frederick Clare; his mother was my only sister. When she learned that her marriage was legally invalid, I brought her away from her native New England hills,

that the breath of censure and scorn might not touch her. We came to this city, and it was in direct opposition to me that she sought her deceiver when she learned of the death of his legitimate wife. That journey only secured a desire for vengeance into my nephew's heart. On his return; at his studies, in his sleep, in conversation, he would break forth in one topic—to hurl vengeance on his half-brother, Cecil Clare.

"He fostered ambition, he sought for power, only that it might help to accomplish his end. On the death of his mother, he began his search for Cecil Clare. I accompanied him through love for him, and because of the promise I had given his mother on her death bed, to watch her son, and if possible save him from the effect of any rash deed he might commit.

"We traveled South in search of the Clares; but father and son had gone to Europe some years before, in consequence of a duel in which Cecil had killed his antagonist. We followed to Europe—from city to city, wherever the slightest clue led us. At last in Germany we came accidentally upon the bankers who transacted the business of the Clares; from them we learned that the father was dead, the son a constant attendant on the salons of Paris. To Paris we hurried, and one night we met the object of our search, but, well as my nephew fancied he remembered the features of him whom he so hated, he failed to recognize them until the fragment of a conversation which we overheard, revealed the identity of Cecil Clare. We learned further that he was an accomplished ruse; but something must have alarmed him, for that same night he hurriedly left Paris. We pursued our search for months, but without success, and we at length determined to return home.

"My nephew applied himself to his profession, but his hate and desire for revenge were as deep and unquenchable as ever.

"On the night of the 10th of Sept., or rather on the early morning of the 11th—for it was past midnight when we were returning from a visit—a man whose face was partially covered with dry, encrusted blood, staggered toward us; we feared he might be severely hurt, and we hastened to offer assistance. He was somewhat maddled from intoxication, and yet he had all the anger and obstinacy of a drunken man. We urged him to accompany us, that something might be done for the wound in his face; but he broke into cursing Hubert Bernot, saying that the latter had inflicted the wound, and had left him for dead on the street, but that he—Cecil Clare—would yet have vengeance.

"Up to that time we had not recognized him, for we had not seen his features closely; but when he mentioned his own name, my nephew sprang back. I whispered to spare him because of his intoxicated, helpless state, and my nephew came close to me, and put his hand through my arm. Cecil Clare continued in his madman way to speak of himself, of his fight from some one whom he said pursued him to kill him, and then suddenly with a burst of drunken passion he referred to the mother and son who had called upon his father years before, stigmatizing the mother by some foul name.

"I felt the arm within mine suddenly withdrawn, I saw a form rush past, I heard a heavy thud, and Cecil Clare was lying on the sidewalk drawing his last breath. Vengeance had been dealt at last, and Frederick Clare was the murderer of his half-brother."

There was not a motion among the spell-bound crowd; there was scarcely a breath drawn by the prisoner, who in his intense excitement had risen from his seat and low stooped pale and motionless; there was scarcely a breath drawn by Madame Bernot, or Margaret Calvert; the latter had thrown aside her own veil, and was leaning forward with clasped hands and parted lips; and there was scarcely a breath drawn by any of the Bernot servants, who grasped each other in their wonder, and looked with eyes that seemed to have become strangely extended.

Even the impassible face of the judge betrayed something of the strange emotions under which he labored; and Bertoni's visage was purple—swollen and purple—like that of a man suffering from some fell disease.

Plowden drew himself slightly up, and looked for an instant toward Margaret Calvert; then with a rapid glance at the motley crowd of upturned faces, he said, slowly:

"Since the testimony just given, the veracity of which even 'Rougelet' will hardly question, has fixed the murder on another than Hubert Bernot, there remains only to ask of the witness to point out this Frederick Clare who gave the blow which sent Cecil Clare into eternity."

The answer came from the witness in tones as slow, as loud, and as thrillingly distinct:

"Frederick Clare and Charles Plowden are one and the same person."

Plowden stretched forth his right hand.

"And I here acknowledge myself to be the murderer of Cecil Clare. My honorable opponent was on the wrong track when he pursued Hubert Bernot."

There was a sound from Bertoni, who had sprung to his feet, as if an effort to speak had ended in a hoarse, half-stifled scream, and then he sank helpless into his chair—so helpless that his head dropped to one side and his hands sought vainly for some support.

Two gentlemen near caught him, but even their faces turned white at the swollen, disfigured visage which rested on the arm of one.

Madame Bernot had risen from her