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KATE ASHWOOD.

CHAPTER XXII.—Continued.

Lady Clinton, who had been in Fitz James's confidence ever since his engagement to Kate, scolded Charles very much for leaving her thus at an hotel, and made him promise to bring her back with him at once.

When he returned to the hotel, he found Kate lying on a bed with a violent headache, and very feverish. It was evident the excitement she was undergoing was too much for her.

Kate needed no repetition of the last sentence. She jumped off the bed, and, putting on her bonnet and shawl, pronounced herself quite ready. Lady Clinton gave her a most hearty welcome; told her that she hoped she would remain with her a long time; and endeavored to comfort her by telling her she was sure Fitz-James would soon recover, though, indeed, at the time she tried to communicate hope, she scarcely felt any herself.

Soon after the doctor made his appearance. He pronounced his patient slightly better, but desired above all things that he should be kept very quiet, and not excited; and the good little Esculapius was right, for Fitz-James's life hung on a thread which Atropos was waiting impatiently to cut with her half-open scissors.

Fitz-James, however, slept uneasily during the night. He wandered much, and next morning at five o'clock the fever was so high, that it seemed as if naught but a miracle could save him. Dr. Carter at length gave notice that more experienced medical aid must be called in, otherwise he could not answer that his patient would survive long.

Poor Kate's anguish was fearful; she waited the whole day long in that dressing-room, and it was only by the most urgent entreaties that Lady Clinton could prevail on her to take the necessary bodily refreshment. She heard his broken sentences with a feeling that each word he uttered pierced her soul.

'Gold,' he muttered, 'lead—did you say lead? it was all water! riches, no, no, no! Where's Kate? I say where is she?' These and such-like delirious ravings were repeated over hundreds of times.

Dr. Carter left not his bedside; besides his great affection for Fitz-James—for he had known him from childhood—he felt interested in the lovely girl who wandered like a ghost up and down the house, and looked the picture of despair, pale and tearless, for her agony was too great for tears. Whenever Lady Clinton left the sick-room, Kate's eyes were raised imploringly to hers to inquire how he was.

'No change as yet,' was the never-failing reply. Towards evening news came that the doctor had arrived from Dublin. Dr. Brunker immediately proceeded to the sick man's room. Fitz-James was then at his worst; the ravings continued with but little intermission.

ed to her an hour. The sound of loneliness, if we may use the expression, was in the house, for Fitz James's chamber was a long way from the hall, and every one that could be the least use to him was there. Kate only of all the household could not enter there. How she longed for the privilege of watching him, attending him, cooling his burning temples! and yet this melancholy satisfaction must be denied her. How she envied Lady Clinton each time she saw her enter his room; how she longed to be in her place.

After waiting in the hall for upwards of an hour, which to poor Kate seemed more like ten hours than one, the door slowly opened, and Kate heard footsteps approaching. She rushed towards the doctors, and inquired in the most anxious manner if there was still any hope. She scarcely ventured to look in their faces; so great was her dread lest she should there read the dreaded monosyllable 'no.'

Dr. Brunker replied: 'There certainly is hope; I can't say more, Miss Ashwood—for I presume I am right in saying so—you must not despair; neither would I desire that you should hope too much. I cannot conceal from you the fact that Mr. O'Brien is very, very ill; but try to keep your courage. You must take care not to go near him, or you will kill him. I would not answer for his life for an hour, if he had the slightest excitement; his life hangs on a thread.

The doctor ordered some remedies for Fitz-James, which had an almost immediate effect in allaying the violence of the fever. The next difficulty was to keep him from becoming weakened more than he could bear, when the fever changed from high to low; and the doctor would not at all pronounce him out of danger till he satisfied himself that his constitution was able to resist the trying ordeal; but still it was a blessing to hear no longer the agitated ravings, the fearful delirium. Father Meagher, Fitz-James's great friend, came to see him. He talked to him calmly, and in a consoling manner, of death; and raised his thoughts far from Kate, and the mines, and all things earthly. But Fitz-James had never swerved from the one direct and narrow path. From his childhood he had always placed his happiness in doing his duty, and death had no terrors for him. Father Meagher did not remain long enough with Fitz-James to fatigue him; he merely stayed as long as he considered the patient was fit for such discourse.

On leaving him he went to the library, where he found Kate sitting with her hands crossed before her in an attitude of despair. So absorbed was she in her thoughts, that she heard not the footsteps of the good priest. He came near her, and his voice startled her as he said kindly, 'My poor child, you have indeed suffered much.' These words of kindness from a complete stranger affected her so much that she was quite overcome, and sobbed hysterically, and the reaction from her cold, icy, frigid misery to the out-pouring of her sorrow was of use to her.

'Miss Ashwood,' he began, 'Mr. O'Brien is, I am sorry to say, very, very weak. God, however, can work wonders. If his strength can be kept up, he may yet recover; but I must own I fear he may succumb. However, we must always hope for the best. My child, should the worst happen, you must be prepared to bear it. Pray to God, and He will give you strength to do so; but we need not altogether take the worst side. He may recover; and, trust me, my prayers will never be wanting for my dear friend.'

He continued in this strain for a long time, and Kate felt relieved and comforted, and she, by degrees, confided in him the story of her love, her hopes and fears, her long engagement, all the impediments in the way of her marriage. She could scarcely believe she could have felt such confidence in a Catholic priest, for she had been brought up in the belief that they were hard, arrogant, self-seeking Churchmen; she never knew the fact that there are thousands and thousands of men living the lives of angels on earth, working and laboring in the cause of truth and religion, and showing by their lives whose disciples they are.

He whom she loved was spared—what more did she ask on earth?

CHAPTER XXIII.

This chapter introduces us to new and various characters. Sir George was, when we last heard of him, arrested in Southampton by the police, and he was on that very day conveyed to prison.

How many different characters might be seen within the dark portals of a jail! The old hardened reprobate and the young offender whose first crime—perchance the stealing of a handkerchief—was the forerunner of many others;—the young man old in crime, and the old man who could not count the years he has lived in sin; the learned and the unlearned; the drunkard, the gambler, the cheat, the highwayman, and the murderer. The gentleman by birth, though not by character, oftentimes finds the jail his only shelter: side by side with the unlettered clown, to whom jail-living and jail-accommodation are almost splendor.

Among such a motley group did Sir George Fasten, the *à-dé-vant* exquisite and dandy of the first water, find himself. There he might be seen, sometimes in his cell, again at other times compelled to mix with felons, and associate with the lowest class of mortals. He cared not for the moral atmosphere around; but felt bitterly the degradation—which he considered much greater—of encountering the gaze of all those around, who, as he thought, in his prosperous days would have bowed low to him. He was, indeed, a very different spectacle from what he had been in days gone by. His moustaches and whiskers were grown to an immense length, his linen was dirty, his manner morose and sullen. His eyes glared fiercely, and he answered any question put to him by a sort of grunt only, which might be taken either as an affirmative or a negative. He used to talk to himself, and eat his meals with an air of disgust. He looked as if it were dangerous to rouse him.

The lawyer who had undertaken his defence was allowed, of course, to visit him frequently. Many plans were proposed by Sir George on which to found his innocence; but Mr. Briefly chose his own line of defence. Sir George felt most uneasy. The proofs were very strong of his guilt; Miss Norton of course would be summoned to give evidence, and her details of the evening in question would no doubt be very clear. Mr. Briefly, however, meant to ground the defence, not to the fact of the deed not having been done, for that would be impossible, but on its being a justifiable defence against an attack on his life. How could Sir George know by intuition that the people in pursuit of him were officers of the law? He might well imagine they were highwaymen; and as such every one knew he was perfectly justified in defending himself.

Still Sir George thought the case very doubtful. He made up his mind to being convicted. 'But,' though he, 'many people would not consider my piece of business so very bad. Rather a plucky thing shooting at a bailiff, too; they might clap me on the back yet, and say I was a 'brick' to have done it.'

The clergyman of the jail came to visit him one day, and was received at first with courtesy by Sir George; but the moment he introduced the topic of religion Sir George told him in plain terms he wanted no such conversation; that he was obliged for the kind interest he took in him; but begged he would trouble himself no further, adding, 'You must of course appear to believe in such humbug, and exert your eloquence with me, as you make your living by such means; and it is rather a lazy gentleman-like kind of life too—nothing to do, and well paid for doing that.—I wish I had taken to the Church myself; I might have got on extremely well in it, with an uncle a bishop, a cousin a peer, and good interest besides. I might have got some of the loaves and fishes going. I should have made a much better income in that way than at a government office. I might have been dean, or even bishop, ere this; I absolutely threw myself away for a thousand a year at that stupid office.' The clergyman, finding himself thus insulted, soon withdrew, and never again visited Sir George.

Not long after this Mr. Briefly came one day with a very long face to Sir George, and told him that there was indeed a bad case coming out against him, and from a quarter which he never dreamt of.

'Sir George,' said the lawyer, 'you had a wife once.'

'How do you know that?' asked Sir George, unconsciously avowing the truth of the charge, and turning deadly pale.

'The story is this, as I have heard it,' replied the lawyer; 'you married about six years ago your mother's maid, Jane Foster.' Here Sir George groaned deeply. 'You took her to Warnstead a month before she died; where you considered she would be more quietly concealed

than elsewhere. You became desperate in your money-matters, and thought there was no way of getting out of your difficulties, but by marrying an heiress. To accomplish this, your first step was poisoning your wife; of course you know it is needless to keep matters from me.'

Sir George writhed in agony; his eyes glared like a tiger's. He paced up and down the cell in a fury. He did not attempt to deny the charges. He felt as if his tongue were spell-bound. These assertions he knew were true.—He also knew that Mr. Briefly must have heard every particular concerning his wife. At last he said as coolly as he could, 'But how the devil do you know that?'

'When your wife was on her deathbed,' said Mr. Briefly, still in his quiet concise business-like manner, 'she sent for a clergyman one day in your absence. To him she confided the whole details of her marriage, the secrecy connected with it, and also a suspicion that she was poisoned, begging at the same time that he would ever keep this suspicion of hers a secret. A little girl, a sister of hers, had followed her from London, unknown to your wife. This child loved her sister affectionately; but was afraid to go near her, lest you should discover her. She remained at Warnstead, but did not allow her sister to be aware of her proximity. She watched you going out of the house, and the clergyman entering on the day referred to; and she crept up the stairs and listened at the door while he was with your wife. What she overheard naturally increased the dislike and suspicion she entertained of you ever since you became acquainted with her sister. She went back to London and told this to her brother, a young lad of sixteen, the only relation she had in the world. He was apprenticed to an apothecary, and had often heard discussions on poisons, and their detection. It occurred to him that at some future time he might be able to have light thrown on the cause of your wife's death. He and his sister went to Warnstead the night of your wife's funeral, and marked the spot where she was laid. They planted a small shrub on the tomb in order that they might recognise it at a future time. They wept there, and before they left knelt down, and swore by their injured sister's grave that they would revenge her death, if ever they had the opportunity of doing so. They were naturally timorous, as they were both very young, and quite friendless; and they were afraid they would not be listened to, if they came forward. When the girl heard of your arrest, she and her brother went to the lawyer who was to appear for the prosecution and told him the whole story. She had been indefatigable in her search for information about her sister in the neighborhood of Warnstead. The people who owned the house said you would never let them near her; that they suspected all was not right, when you were so very careful in excluding every one from her. She also went to the clergyman, and told him he must come forward and give evidence, for that he should not be bound by an oath taken under the peculiar circumstances I have related; that he would be compelled to come forward and declare all he knew. This is an awkward business, and I am sure a very difficult case to defend; but of course I must make every exertion.'

Sir George was nearly maddened by this announcement. The facts of the case were so exactly true, that he despaired of success; and from that day he never felt the slightest hope.—Mr. Briefly from time to time endeavored to raise his spirits; quite unsuccessfully. He failed to kindle within him the faintest hope.

The day appointed for the trial was fast approaching. What Sir George's inward sufferings were, few can tell. He saw no prospect before him but an ignominious death. He feared to face the world—he who never feared to commit crimes of the blackest dye. He trembled as he sometimes pictured to himself the trial—the court crowded with people; his enemies would be there, and what an hour of triumph for them. He, the great, the fashionable, the dashing Sir George was to appear as a criminal before them all,—judges, jury, counsel, acquaintances, and, above all, Miss Norton, whom he cursed vehemently as the cause of his imprisonment. He also uttered deep imprecations on the sister of his injured wife. But of what avail were these maledictions? they did not lessen his pangs. His agony was fearful. He could not sleep at night; and from time to time, in the dark, it seemed to him as if his wife glided into the room, and his hair stood erect with fear. And it seemed to him as if a hand was laid upon him, and he almost thought he heard a voice saying, 'Now I am revenged!' Then again the bailiff seemed to glare horribly at him with eyes of fire, and he looked up every where in the cell, got out of his bed and walked round, but found no one. He lay awake whole nights in this way these horrible spectres appearing to him. He knew not what side to turn for comfort, for what ease can the unrepenting man experience!—

Death—that awful terror to the sinful man—must come soon. He knew it; he felt as though the rope were round his neck already. His whole physiognomy was changed, his eyes became hollow, his cheeks attenuated, his mouth drawn; his head, formerly so erect, drooped forward; his shoulders were bent and stooped; he looked thirty years older than he did on the memorable night when he left Rugton, and ran away with Miss Norton.

One night he lay down on his bed, as usual not to sleep, but to rest his weary limbs. His thoughts dwelt gloomily on the approaching trial, then reverted to former days, when he was the gay, though certainly not the happy, man.—Then the pale face of his wife rose before him as he saw her on the day of her death, looking kindly at him as she expired, and he the cause of her decease. He heard steps approaching, and trembled. What could it be? He shivered with the cold sweat that poured down his whole body. The steps approached. He shouted; but no one heeded him. He then buried his head beneath the clothes. Could it be he thought, his wife's spirit come to him?—What was the intruder? No mortal could gain admittance there without leave. His shouts were unheard and unheeded. He at last felt something cold on his hand, then on his face, and he swooned away with the fright. When he recovered he had only the recollection of something horrible, as a person awakes from a dreadful nightmare and knows not anything distinctly.

That we may not be suspected of attributing the terror of the wretch who was the inmate of the prison cell to any supernatural cause, we may mention that the very commonplace incident of a rat creeping across his bed was what created it. A guilty mind is always certain to invest with horror the simplest matter.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The night before the trial Mr. Briefly sat up late with his client. He thought, on the whole, that Sir George was less desponding than usual. He talked about the defence in a more business-like manner than he had done before. He was very clear in pointing out some parts of the case that might be beneficially dwelt upon. Mr. Briefly did his best to rouse him, and bid him hope. After the lawyer took his leave, Sir George became more wretched than he had ever been. The scene of the morrow was still before his eyes. The idea of appearing in his degraded position was awful to him. At length he stamped his foot upon the ground, exclaiming: 'I must do it: there's no help for it. I must die this night. There is no way of avoiding it, and I will die. How foolish they will all look to-morrow when they find I have escaped them!'

'But where shall I be?' suggested itself to him from the depths of a conscience seared and hardened long since to any but selfish considerations. 'Hell!' he thought,—'tis only an invention by which the clergy live. They must impose on us a little; they have to eat and drink; and how could they, were it not for the superstition of their fellow-men? There is no God; how, then, can there be a hell?'

Such was Sir George's soliloquy. But, alas, how false and hollow the impious effort to stifle the utterance of conscience. His teeth chattered with terror; still he mentally exclaimed: 'I don't fear; I am no coward.' He worked for a while up and down the narrow cell. How he would commit crime, could the intending culprit see Sir George on that awful night when he was debating within himself the means of self-destruction! He first thought of a pistol; there was none. 'The ruffians,' he exclaimed, 'have left me nothing!' Next he thought of a knife—none either. 'The villains,' he muttered; 'I won't face the court to-morrow—on that I am resolved. And yet,' he said solemnly, 'am I going to face a higher and more awful tribunal?' He bit his lip in his agony till the blood came. But one mode of suicide remained: he could hang himself. He threw himself on the floor in an agony of horror and terror. Faces seemed to appear before him. There stood his wife in her first loveliness, as she appeared to him on the day of his marriage. Then somehow she disappeared, and he saw nothing but a shadow. It, again, faded away, and a graveyard rose in view, in which a man was digging. What! was it his own or his wife's grave? Again it was lost to view, and a poor wretched cellar came next before his eyes, in which were a young man, and a woman grown prematurely old, whose arms lay a starved-looking baby to whom the wretched mother offered her breast in vain. Sir George's conscience (if such a thing remained to him) smote him as he remembered how he had swindled that man out of his last shilling at a game of cards, and how deaf he was to the remonstrances of his victims. Then more and more faces with which he was strangely familiar. And now the scene shifted and he saw a court of justice. The judge was on his bench, the jury in their box, and he was the culprit; near him