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EUSTACE;  
OR,  
SELF-DEVOTION.

CHAPTER I.—THE WEDDING.

Look out, gentle reader, on the quiet face of nature in that sweet still hour, the dawn of day. It is a summer morn. The pale moon-beams are seen no more, the glittering stars which shone in the azure firmament are no longer visible to your sight, the sable veil of night is drawn aside, the crowing cock heralds the approach of morn, and the faint streaks of crimson, purple, and gold in the eastern horizon tell you that the glorious sun is about to commence his daily course. Stand with me on yon sea-shore, let us gaze on the rippling waves. See how gently at this calm hour, when all nature is yet at rest, wave followeth wave, each sparkling beneath those golden rays. Nearer, yet more near they come. And lo, those countless grain of sand on the sea-shore are covered from our sight, washed away by the relentless tide, even as the sands in the hour-glass of life run out with the ceaseless, unerring hand of time.

Step aside with me to yonder glade; early morn, with its sweet quietude, hath passed; the gentle trill of the bird singing its matin song is heard no more: the lowing kine have been led into the meadows; the sun is at its height; even in the quiet village of Ashdale there are human hopes and fears, anxieties and cares, joy and sorrow; the noontide comes again, and the ruder duties of every-day life have been resumed.—Life, busy life, commenced again with the dawn, of the summer day; all things in nature fail not to agree, and, like to the peaceful calm of infancy, ere passion hath gained a mastery over the human breast, so is the summer morn like again to the gentle rippling wave which rolleth on concealing the quicksands and rocks beneath. So is man in the morning of life, it passeth away, and the noontide approacheth, bringing with it the grosser, ruder cares and anxieties of life, its fruitless efforts and oftentimes vain aspirations. Nor fail we to find a fit similitude for age as it sinks into the grave, with the night of nature hushing into rest all things around us.

But let me return from my digression. Ashdale is unusually cheerful this morning, for a bride has been led to the altar; the very small, but yet gem in its way of a Gothic church lately built at Ashdale has been gaily decorated. The bells, which in defiance of statutes enacted in days of intolerance, have been placed in the tower, send forth a merry peal; the faces of the good folks of Ashdale beam with kindness and good humor, and many a 'God speed ye both,' struck on music eae, as I Minnie Herbert, and my young friend, Lucy Maxwell, followed in the bridal train of my own sweet Maggie.

I have watched over Maggie with more than mother's love, I have known her guileless, simple religious; I have felt that she was destined for the world and its cares, whilst I would fain have shrunk away to the haven of rest, the cloister.—I knew that a fleeting fancy had once passed through her mind, leading her to think of seclusion from the world; and a little discernment showed me that this transitory half sort of fancy was but mere enthusiasm, not that deep, settled desire which when once it has taken possession of the soul rarely leaves it but with death, which introduces it to the possession of that sovereign good which aving failed to be united to in time it may nevertheless hope to possess in eternity.

Eustace has returned to England, he is now a partner in the firm in which he was engaged;—all things seem bright and prosperous, for he possessed that which was above all price, he was prudent, religious, and industrious, yet Maggie's wanderings continued till our wise and good friend Father Hubert, sounded the depths of that unfathomable abyss, the human heart, the secret workings of which we ourselves are the last to see, the least calculated to define, but which one grown grey in the service of the altar, and who could read well the characters of those beneath, his care, pronounced an illusion; declaring her vocation lay in the performance of the duties of the world, not those of the cloister. And thus it was that one sunny morn, four years after the death of my beloved cousin Gerald, the marriage bells of St. Cuthbert's rung out a merry peal, and Father Hubert's lips pronounced the nuptial blessing on Eustace and his bride. *Les ex-eremes se touchent.* There is a great difference between the trim, almost elegant neatness of the apartment, small though it be, into which my guests are ushered on this happy morn, and one which I lately inhabited, the remembrance of which even now dims my eye with a tear, and chases the smile from my lips—but of this more anon.

But the orange flowers yet adorn the dark tresses of the bride; and when she has left the village, and I return to solitude and reflection, I will think over and commit to paper the trying scenes of the past four years.

A small, select, and merry party are we this ridal morn, none are here but tried, old friends,

it is Eaggie's fete day. We know the world, we have bought our experience, and the sterling gold lies deep in the characters of those whom it is our privilege to have around us.

But not misanthropical, children of adversity, thought I, as I glanced on those kindly faces, for the trials of none who are raised by birth and education above the lowly born can surpass what ours have been, yet full of amidst the hay and stubble in the characters of the prosperous has it been my lot to discern the sterling gold—gold dimmed by no earthly tarnish—the gold of charity, ennobled by a pure intention, the gold of humility beneath the rich covering of the highly born and delicately reared, the sweet benevolence which, whilst it relieved, seasoned the kindly action by gentle words, emanating from a god-like spirit of beneficence.

The morning sun glistened merrily through the open casements, shaded by their spotless leno curtains, and Venetian blinds, and the books, flowers, and music and drawings scattered about the adjoining chamber, the folding-door of which stands open, all whisper to me the words, 'Resipia not, Minnie, the past cannot be recalled, the dead return not to life, they have, thou hast cause to hope, a happier home than thou couldst give them, the present is thine, thou canst labor still with thine own ever-thinking brain, and busy fingers; and the incense of prayer thou canst offer unceasingly to thy God; in submission to His will true sanctity consists; the necessities of life, nay, its refinements are in thy way, do not these latter constitute in a great degree the happiness of an intellectual woman? Take, then, the future as it is with humble thankfulness, fearing not, though even the shadow of the grave hovereth dimly in the distance, but leaving the future to the merciful providence of God.'

Such were my thoughts during that wedding morning; deep, deep in the heart's inmost folds they careered, while the seemingly careless smile sat on the lip, yet the tears would come at last, as Maggie again and again pressed me to her bosom, sobbing convulsively, as she for the last time embraced me, and I strove to dash them from my eyes, and take a long, lingering look as the chaise bore her swiftly from my sight on her journey to the sunny clime of Italy.

I returned to my home—my friends are gone—the hand of night is spread over the scene—Maggie is far away, it is the first separation we have known since we have lived together. I place at hand those sundry articles which proclaimed, much as we strive to hide it from ourselves, that we are invalids. And now, in the quietude of the hour, I strive to collect my scattered thoughts, and commit to memory the sufferings and sorrows of the past.

CHAPTER II.—A FALSE FRIEND.

Alter the death of my cousin, about one year of comparative comfort passed away. Margaret obtained good situations as daily governess; and I continued to write for the serial on which I had been already some time engaged. My greatest apprehensions at this time lay in my variable health, although still unconscious of the inroads which the lapse of time, neglect, and anxiety were making in my constitution, and ignorant too of the stealthy approach of our national foe and malady, which clothes the cheek in a livelier tinge than usual, and lights up the eye with almost preternatural brilliancy, so that divested of half its horrors by borrowing these hues and appearances of health, neither the poor victim nor his friends dream of danger, till at times cure is past hope.

Yet, why should I heed that cough, that flush, or difficulty of respiration, I could still perform my accustomed duties, give a lesson, maybe, in French or music, write, and at times busy myself in household occupations, as blithely as ever; so I went on my way heedless for the time, but my insidious foe went on its own way too.

It was about this time, and ere yet the hand of severe sickness fell upon me, that a brief career of domestic happiness fell to our lot. My father had long been occupied over a voluminous work already in the hands of the printer, and for which a tolerably handsome sum had been promised. He was well known as a linguist specially versed in Oriental languages, and a generous aid extended to him by one of the celebrities of the day, and the power also which this person exercised as one of the Ministry, gave every fair reason to hope that a situation under Government or a consulate in the East, some time ardently expected, would ere long be granted.

I felt great joy, then, when the letter reached us containing this intelligence. I knew it was my father's intention not to take us thither, and I had already laid out fairy plans for the future, which were doomed to be destroyed, and

'Like the baseless fabric of a vision,  
Leave not a wreck behind.'

However, with the contemplation in the far future of Margaret provided for, and my father holding a lucrative employment, the stumbling-

blocks were removed out of my own path, and I lent a hopeful and willing ear to the voice of Father Vincent, a good priest, whom I first saw on the memorable evening on which I entered St. Mary's Chapel, when in London, four years since.

'I have just returned from the Netherlands,' he one morning said to me; 'I am acquainted with a sisterhood rich in virtue, and who number amongst them daughters of some of our oldest English families; the pension is £800, but with this they will dispense. Will you like to commence your novitiate therein?'

The suddenness of the proposal amazed me, whilst the generosity with which it was made filled me with surprise; my reply may be imagined. I went home scarcely crediting that I had heard aright; and it was settled that my sister should remain with my father, whilst I should commence preparations for my approaching novitiate.

Let it not, however, be thought that I paid no tribute to the claims of natural affection.—Alas, my pillow, bedewed with tears, told a far different tale. It was indeed a struggle to part with those so dearly loved; but when that parting is daily made, and those fond ties severed, if perchance an eligible offer is made, which removes one who has perhaps never left the roof which sheltered infancy till then, shall we complain of the severance of earthly affections, when to none less than God the heart is given.

But, however, for the change which appeared to take place in our circumstances, I had never embraced the offer made me, deeming that no sacrifice, no fit offering of the heart to God, which compromised duty; then, indeed, the image of my father, bowed down by suffering and age; of Maggie, toiling on unassisted and alone, would have been ever before me; the voice of conscience ever ringing in my ears, warning me that no sacrifice can be acceptable to God if we have failed to discharge the sacred duties He has Himself placed in our way, but rather like the soldier basely deserting his post on the battle-field, even so recreant like would be one who would thus fly from the trials of life, and throw aside the performance of its duties even for the coveted rest and quiet of the cloister.

Ah, no! then I should have shrunk from taking such a step, for paramount duty would be neglected; now, when my indeed poor earnings would not be required, my path lay plain before me, and there was no further cause for delay, and the lapse of a very few weeks beheld me installed in what I then hoped would be my future home.

The English convent of — is a somewhat extensive building, inhabited exclusively by an English sisterhood professing the rule of the great St. Austin; from time to time additions have been made to what was in the beginning but a very humble and small dwelling.

But a flourishing school in which the daughters of many of the Parisian nobility are educated, and the fortunes brought by some of the sisterhood gradually swelled the funds of the convent, so that in the course of the three hundred years which have elapsed since the foundation was made—which I believe to have been somewhere about the time of the Reformation—their institute became as flourishing as its members were pious.

I mind me well that Easter evening of my arrival there—how new the sight to me—how strange the scene. Nearly thirty-four summers have closed over my own head; no longer then at thirty years of age was I the same as the romantic girl just emancipated from my teens.—Ah, no! the blush of womanhood had passed, its prime, too, was speedily fading away; I had arrived at that sober age of maturity when we look at things more calmly than we did of yore, and suffer reason to guide rather than impulse.

The sisterhood were gentle and amiable; the prioress and novice-mistress well fitted, indeed, for their respective posts.

The order into which I had entered was in many points austere, and yet it seemed to require less of exterior mortification than that far more to the purpose, the mortification of the passions, the utter annihilation of self—the crucifixion of the senses may we not term it—daily, nay hourly, required by the Augustinian rule.

As to the choir, I may safely say my happiness was to be there, in the early matin service, at four in the morning; alike as at the still hour of eve, when compline was sung, I loved to join with the religious, nor felt the day one moment tedious, nor the night's rest on the humble pallet otherwise than sound.

The seclusion was perfect, for the Austin nun stirs not beyond the precincts of her convent, save to wander in the grounds which surround its walls.

If the question, then, be asked me, 'In what did you find the hardship of the life consist?—where was to you its peculiar penance? what

virtue did you find it more particularly needful to practice?' I would answer my querist somewhat in the following terms, and say,—'That virtue from which all other virtues may be said to flow, without which none ever flourished in the soul of man—the virtue of humility. Thus it follows, as a matter of course, that that which seemed most hard and difficult to me, was in the practice of the minute and trifling observances required, some of which I esteemed as puerile, and beneath the dignity of those of mature age. Pride of intellect, may I not say, was chafed and wounded,—and here lay the almost insurmountable difficulty which I at first experienced, and which I hesitated not to avow to the prioress.

But weeks lengthened into months, and where all seemed good and humble, surely few could be obdurate, especially if the path to perfection be smoothed by one as good and gentle as the amiable sister Teresa. But these halcyon days were not to continue. With the approach of winter came again the cough and unmistakable evidences of ill health which resulted in my departure from a home in which I had now made friendships to endure until broken by the rude hand of death.

Farewell, then, loved inmates of St. Austin's! It was not Minnie's fate to end her days beneath that hallowed shade. She was again to return to the world, and in that world to find her home.

The injunction of the physician to return home, for that decline would await me in any other climate than England, admitted of no delay; and, loaded with affectionate souvenirs, amidst embraces and tears, and prayers for my welfare, I was launched again on the stormy sea of life.

Was I the gainer by this episode in my life? I answer, yes. I had met with sterling friends, I had seen the several virtues appointed for man to cultivate in his passage through this world flourishing like rare exotics in some carefully kept soil; and I see how, even on this cold earth a high standard of virtue and moral excellence may be attained. I returned home, then, not by any means, by this first failure, cured of my desire. Nay, it had rather tempted me on to make new efforts. Moreover, the physician who attended me had suggested a visiting order as one most calculated to be conducive to my general health.

Sooth to say, my mind was now wretchedly unsettled. Alter a short sojourn in England, I regained my health; but how carry out the desire which had now become a second nature, alas! I knew not.

Reader, has it ever been your lot in life to meet with a person of a highly informed and cultivated mind, of prepossessing manners, of good address—one to whom you give your heart's best affections, even in spite of yourself—in whose conversation you take pleasure—with whom you are for a time, in short, fascinated and enthralled, and yet when you think on certain points in his or her character, as the case may be, a feeling of aversion comes over you, for an indescribable something tells you that there is much lying hid beneath to be feared, not so far as that which appears on the surface; and you try vainly to shake off the influence such an one possesses; but no, the task is far less easy than you imagine; and even as a little child extends its hand to grasp the glittering steel which would cause its own destruction, or wanders to the edge of a precipice, in quest of the bright flowers which grow upon its brink, so do you allow this strange infatuation to grow upon you, till the fair exterior is, by some chance, thrown aside, the false friend appears, and the man or woman stand confessed in all their naked deformity of character; and then you think and bewail over your own short-sightedness, your own want of discernment in reading the characters of those around you, and wonder how, suspicion having been once excited, you could have continued thus wilfully blind.

It happened that one bright summer morning, with spirits unusually light, I was returning home after an hour or two spent in tuition, when I encountered Father Vincent with a lady, perhaps about thirty-three years of age. Her countenance was far from prepossessing, she was plain to an extent rarely met with, especially amongst those gently born. And the expression of that pale round face, thick lips, and large mouth, was scarcely redeemed even by the dark eyes and regular white teeth which gleamed within the parted lips. She was introduced to me by the name of Eliza Stukeley, the female relative, the niece, in fact, of a noble English family. She spoke to me not as one stranger speaks to another, but as those speak who are familiar with our trials; insensibly that swart countenance lost its ugliness, and seemed positively pleasing in my eyes, the soft and musical accents of the voice held me entranced, those eyes seemed humid with sympathetic tears, and the soft hand pressed mine with such affection, that with all

the open-hearted frankness of my own nature, I thanked Father Vincent for the new friend he had given me.

'I shall leave you,' he replied, 'and wish you to become intimate friends,' and as he spoke thus he bade us both farewell, and left us to continue our walk together. Miss Stukeley had moved in high circles, and though by no means 'distingue' in person, she was very much so in manner, yet I did not feel quite at ease, there was a constraint over me when with this person; I felt as if every word I uttered was weighed, every action noted, and humiliating thought, in this our first interview, there was an influence which I could not shake off.

I found in the course of the short conversation which continued till I reached my own home, that she was living alone since the death of her uncle and aunt; and that she was about to commence her novitiate shortly, amongst the Sisters of Charity.

I invited her to spend the evening with my family, the invitation was immediately accepted, and a more pleasant one could not well be passed, than that which ensued in the society of this strange and fascinating woman. Eliza Stukeley was not accomplished, save that she painted very beautifully; but she was one of those rare, perhaps happily so, specimens of the softer sex, who, to a highly cultivated mind, well informed far beyond even the most well-read of the generality of women, united; a depth of thought and power of reasoning, such as we scarcely expect to meet with save in the stronger mind of man. As to my father, he was, as it were, bewitched by my new friend; few words were there for myself and Maggie, and we had to hide our diminished heads, and merely look on and listen whilst my new friend and my father conversed together.

I will pass over the next few weeks, save to say, *en passant*, that my new acquaintanceship with Miss Stukeley quickly ripened into the warmest friendship. I still felt that this person exercised a power over me to which I had never been subjected before. I disliked the influence, and strove to repel it, but in vain; and when told by Father Vincent, on the first occasion after my introduction, that the fortune of this lady would be sufficient to pay for my own admission also in a certain convent of the order I have named, my gratitude became enlisted, and I yielded myself up, without further effort, to the influence of Eliza.

But there are wheels within wheels in this strange world of ours, and secret motives often guide the actions of those about us, actuating them in a far different way than we think for.—Perhaps Eliza was herself conscious of the power she possessed. I know not how this may be; I only know that unobtrusive as I really am, I soon found that my new friend constituted herself the mistress of my actions, the mistress over me, and inwardly I contrasted her proud assumption of authority, her austere views, her sharp irony—for Eliza, I soon found, could be severely ironical—with the gentle humility of the nuns under whose mild sway I could have been so happy.

Then again, that calm evenness of temper, which nothing could disturb, fretted and jarred on my now irritable nerves; for with that imperturbable calm, there was often the proud curl on the lip, which said so much, even whilst the tongue was mute. Then came the outbreak, for poor Gerald's lessons were not learned yet. My own proud spirit would ill brook the authority of an equal; and I felt that I would sooner dash the cup of hope for ever from my lips, than stoop to receive it from the hands of one who strove so utterly to subjugate my own free spirit.

Then, again, a reaction would take place.—Who could long be proof against the gentleness, assumed or otherwise, of Eliza? And with bitterness of feeling, and yielding to temper for the time, I would retort angrily to some sarcastic remark, repaying, it might sometimes be, with interest the words or look—for the expression of the face will sometimes say even more than words.—whilst she who had given the provocation would meet with a wound from the two-edged tool she played with. But then was her temper ruffled? When did Eliza ever betray that the calm in which she might be said to possess her soul was disturbed?

I felt angry that my father, and Father Vincent too, were blind to her faults; for, whilst the one admired her for her depth of thought, the other extolled her humility and virtue. Alas! I knew there was a causer in the bud; that all those little, paltry, miserable feelings which agitate the minds of the meanest of our sex were at war within her own; that aiming at piety, she possessed only its semblance, and caught but at the shadow: that her powerful and gifted mind, her unquestionable genius, only made her more guilty.

I felt, I knew all this, and yet my poor, weak heart at times strove to feel happy, and to