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## EUSTACE; OR, SELF-DEVOTION. CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

Then came, amid the darkness of the night, only now and then illumined by the still vivid flashes of lightning, a loud and awful crash—the chase had come in contact with the tomb, and was dashed in a thousand pieces, its occupant was thrown on one of the many grassy hillocks, which were around us, and the horse, still dragging with it a remnant of the destroyed vehicle, made a little detour to the right, and galloping furiously in the direction of the high-road, was soon lost to sight.

But my dear sister lay insensible; and the piteous moan she had uttered had told me she was injured, nay, perhaps, mortally; but the stranger, how had he fared? Was I the only person who in that night of horrors had escaped unscathed, or left in the possession of consciousness?

I approached the mound on which he lay. I heard him moan, then, rising, place his hand on his head, and to my inquiries as to whether he was much hurt, he replied,—

“Thank God, I was merely stunned by the fall. I believe I am un hurt, save a few bruises which I have received; but the young lady,” he uttered, “I heard a shriek—have either of you been injured, or was it merely occasioned by fright?”

“My sister lies by yonder grave,” I exclaimed, “injured, perhaps fatally, and a friend has swooned. If you are well enough to watch by them, while I seek a doctor’s aid, promise me to do so, for not one moment must be lost. I know that there is a surgeon residing within a few yards of the high-road, and servants from the Parsonage will, I am sure, give us their aid.”

“Allow me to hasten thither for you,” he exclaimed; “yet pause one moment, while we see what injury has been done.” As he spoke thus he knelt beside the grave, and raised my sister in his arms. The cold and heavy rain had restored that unfortunate Lucy, whose limidity had caused this accident, to consciousness, and was also working its effect on my dear Margaret, who, uttering a deep moan, pronounced my name.

“Maggie, love,” I replied, “what is the matter—are you much injured?”

“I fear my arm is”—broken, she was about to say, when the stranger, raising her in his arms, chafed her cold hands within his own, for she was about to relapse into insensibility; and as the pale rays of the moon now rose from behind a cloud, the storm having ceased, I saw before me, in the stalwart form and bronzed face of the stranger, our friend Eustace Maxwell.

In that one moment the recognition was mutual, and the words Minnie Herbert and Mr. Maxwell fell simultaneously from our lips.

“This is, indeed, a sorrowful meeting,” he exclaimed, as he desired his sister to hasten to the Parsonage, and ask for help, whilst he ran for the surgeon; and he then left me for a few moments, supporting my dear Maggie until aid should arrive.

A very few moments later two servants arrived from the Parsonage with a polite message from the vicar, offering the accommodation of his own house, till the young lady should receive surgical aid; and my sister was borne between them to the Parsonage, which was situated in the vicinity of the churchyard.

Margaret, poor girl, was quite correct as to the nature of the accident—it proved to be a fractured elbow; and but for the great skill with which it was treated, it is probable that poor Maggie would have been much longer an invalid than she really was.

It was getting very late ere we reached Rose Villa, and the good Maxwells were full of uneasiness as to the cause of our absence. Their surprise may be better imagined than described on the coach drawing up which contained our little party, and that tiresome Lucy (I do dislike timid young ladies if they let their feelings get the better of them, as much as she did) was the first to rush into the house, and explain how she had fainted during the storm, and Margaret been run over by Eustace’s horse, which had taken fright; and the surprised parents could scarcely believe her eager tale till they beheld him bearing in my dear Maggie, pale, and suffering great agony.

Then there was so much to tell and so much to do, for there was a chamber to be prepared as we prepare things for an invalid, and many, many times before midnight did Eustace steal gently to my door, his countenance betraying his anxiety, and softly whisper his inquiries as to Maggie’s state.

“Now, God bless you, darling,” I said, “I trust yet you will get a little rest. We must thank God together that the accident has not been worse than a broken arm—it might have been productive of a broken heart.”

## CHAPTER IX.—THE WEDDING IS POSTPONED AND SHADOWS DEEPLY.

It is August now, and rich and dark are the hues of my floral favorites, the dahlia, and the scarlet geranium, and the rich bell-like fuchsia, are growing in profusion before our cottage, and though autumn is closing in unusually quick, and the leaves are falling here and there in our path, still our hearts are light, our home a happy one, and content resides therein. Again, too, I hear my Maggie’s laugh, the injured arm is still in a sling, and her face a little paler, but we have reason to hope that that useful member will do duty again before very long; and we have, indeed, much cause to rejoice that the accident was no worse. On the table there are sundry little articles which would inform any one who entered the parlor that Maggie is about to change her state; there are white roses and wreaths of orange blossom; and a dress of white lace tells that the day fixed for a certain important ceremony about to take place is drawing rapidly nigh. I feel somewhat melancholy now and then. I have ever had a yearning after a certain state of life, too; in that life there is, and there is not solitude, if I may so speak. And as each sister passes down the vale of life, the progress is so gentle, and they are aided so kindly, that they are scarce made to feel the infirmities of age.—Alas, alas, a childless, solitary old age, I have often thought, must be very sad and dreary.—Youth is apt to be so selfish, as forgetful, that the snows of age will ere long chill its own young blood; and we fear that old people’s feelings are not so blunted as young ones would fain think. It must be a sad thing to know that the young ones around us imagine we have lived too long; and it needs but very, very little carelessness and want of attention and kindness on our part to lead the aged friend or relative to think thus—and then deep and sharp, indeed, must be the pang.

Ah, ye young and happy ones, who revel in all the golden wealth of youth, and health, and strength, heed not the anxiety such as these may cause you; stoop lovingly down and remove away with your own gentle hands those thorns that grow so thickly in the path of that aged one who looks to be the comfort and the stay of their declining years!

Very, very easily may they be made to feel that you think they have lived too long, so be careful how you act; it will be one of the richest jewels with which God will deck the crown he will give you in his own bright land, if with soft words and cheerful smile, and gentle ready hand you have helped on the aged and infirm in their passage to eternity.

Old age hath much to bear; its own peculiar trials of infirmity and declining health are alone sufficient without morose looks and harsher words. A neglected old age, with no child, no gentle friend to smooth the pillow beneath the aching head—ah! what a fate; may it never be mine. But let me pause, and not give way to such melancholy musings; who knows to whom it shall be given to see length of days?

The sickly need no look for the silver locks and tottering gait of age; and yet they sometimes live on, while the strong and healthy are cut down in the full possession of their youth and strength.

Poor Margaret, she little thinks that I indulge in these melancholy musings; if she knew what the current of my thoughts often is, I think, instead of laying down a rule for me to be often with her, the request would be *always*, instead; such an idea has, indeed, been already started, both by her and Eustace, who seconded it by every argument in his power. I turned a deaf ear, though I fear I may have pained them by so doing, for I remembered my brothers and their necessities; and I had no wish that when Eustace married my sister he should be harassed with the affairs of her family.

Little did I think of the storm that was at that moment to burst over our heads. I have already said that to our great discomfort and annoyance Edgar persisted in remaining at Ashdale, which place, indeed, in contradiction of his solemn promise to the contrary, he had never left, aware, no doubt, that whilst he remained, he could, whenever he chose, molest and harass us. For nearly six weeks, indeed, we had so fairly lost sight of him, that we had flattered ourselves that he had really left the place; alas! it was only a pleasant illusion on our parts; he feared, perhaps, to meet us whilst the loss of the articles he had so unworthily purloined was still fresh in our memory; he had kept himself quietly at home, and we had been absent from the place nearly three weeks, and on our return we were speedily informed by our maid that the fact was Mr. Herbert had been in Ashdale the whole time.

Suddenly, we missed him from the village, his occasional visits stopped, he came to us no more for such odd trifling sums as we could spare, and the relief we experienced was inexpressibly great. “But coming events cast their shadows

before.” And as we thought and mused over his unaccountable and sudden disappearance, an apprehension of evil looming in the distance filled our minds.

We had passed a pleasant day in the company of Lucy and Eustace, who had just bidden us farewell, and were sitting at our respective employments, when the postman delivered a letter at the door. It was directed in Arthur’s handwriting. “Some new request,” exclaimed Margaret, with a sigh. My hands trembled as I broke the seal, and my cheek grew pale as my eye rested on the first words of the letter. It ran somewhat as follows:—

“My Dearest Minnie,—Write if you can without delay, and tell me if Edgar has *any* means by which he can honorably come into the possession of £100. Whatever may be my errors, or however low I may have sunk my own position in life by an undue love of liquor, and then by early and unequal marriage, I have, at least, not disgraced my family by any want of honesty. Edgar is now in my house. He says he is acquainted with a gentleman in Ashdale who has bestowed upon him this sum as a generous gift; and he showed me a draft made payable at a banking-house in London for the amount I have named. Lose no time in writing to me, should you fear he has come by this money in any bad way. Margaret and yourself will be more likely than I to know who his associates were when he was in the north. Your affectionate brother,

“ARTHUR HERBERT.”

I cannot describe what my feelings were as my eyes glanced over this letter. The whole horrible truth flashed across my mind, till the dreadful suspicion which had crossed it, as my eyes fell on the first line, ripened into a horrible certainty as I read on. I dropped the letter on the ground. I knew not how to reply to poor Maggie’s questions: my own fears quickly communicated themselves to her; she read, and as she read her own face paled, and my horrible fears were expressed by my wretched sister in a few short words.

“Great God, he has forged; and Eustace is the victim.”

I was alarmed, fearfully alarmed, then, at the scene which followed; she shed not a tear, but ever and again pressed the cold hand still at liberty on her burning forehead. I endeavored to reason with her, to bid her hope that such was not the case; but all my efforts were of no avail; she either heard me in silent indifference, or paced the room in such a state of mind that I had every reason to dread the consequences.—Then suddenly advancing to the table, she with the greatest deliberation took up a sheet of note-paper, and penned a few lines to Eustace.

She gave them to me to read. In a brief and somewhat incoherent worded note, she begged him to inquire if the money at his banker’s was correct as to the sum lodged in their hands; that we had heard that Edgar was known to have nearly one hundred pounds in his possession; and that a suspicion, too dreadful to be entertained for one moment, had floated through our minds; this unworthy brother had seen his handwriting. She felt as if her brain would turn at the very faintest possibility of the hideous suspicion being correct; if, unhappily, it was so, then the wedding which was to take place, must be broken off, she would never bring dishonor, which would thus be affixed to her name, into his family.

Thus wrote my noble-minded Maggie. The struggle with self had, however, only commenced. I had little doubt but that she would carry her words into effect, for I well knew how indelible her character was, and especially where, what she termed, honor was concerned, I knew her determination would be fixed and decisive.

But the hope of many happy days was suddenly dashed away. All the virtues, both in a religious and social point of view, which man could possess, shine in the character of our good friend; hers would be a marriage in every way prudent, and I had the comfort of knowing that my loved Maggie would have a natural protector, whenever I should be removed from her. But now, how hideous the reverse; could I wonder that she lay so coldly in my arms, now the picture of calm despair; then, again, almost frantic between the alternate emotions of shame and grief?

Alas! alas! I could not say much to comfort her; for had I not one day seen him sitting at our writing-table, when, unknown to him, I softly entered the room, copying the signature of Eustace Maxwell, a note of whose was on the table. I cannot say that at that moment our present horrible suspicion crossed my mind, yet I did not like the action; and snatching the letter, which contained a few lines of invitation to Rose Villa, from his hand, I asked him if he could not find a better employment than in copying the letters of others.

“A business I am rather expert at,” he replied,

with a laugh: “there are few persons who can imitate the writing of others as expertly as I can.”

I attempted to seize the paper on which he was writing, but I was too late. He tore it out of my hand with a light fit of laughter, and I remember I said, “Have a care, that with principles like yours, you do not use that dangerous game to your own destruction.” I repeated this to Margaret; we neither of us liked finding him employed in such a way; and now we felt a moral certainty that in an unlucky hour the most fatal event of our lives had befallen us—the most fatal I have said, nor can I recall the words, for hitherto no taint of dishonor was affixed to our names. Guilty as the male members of our family had been, they were more their own enemies than ours.

The same post that conveyed dear Margaret’s letter to Eustace, also took one to Arthur, which he would receive early on the following morning, I told him we shared his own fears, and begged him to keep a close watch on Edgar’s movements till he heard from me again.

Before nightfall, Margaret was a tenant of the sick room, her face flushed, her head heated, I knew that fever arising from the fearful excitement of the day was doing its work; she rambled incessantly, and the first remark of the medical attendant was,—

“Something very distressing is on the mind of this young lady, some great excitement only could have produced such a high state of fever, in one strong in health only this morning.—Are you aware of any such cause having occurred?”

“I am,” I immediately answered; “she has received a terrible shock, which for some time almost deprived her of her reason.”

Two days only elapsed before the whole hideous truth lay open before us. Eustace received my sister’s note with feelings which may be better imagined than described. At first, he was willing to hope that Margaret’s sensitive feelings had made her take the alarm, where no real cause existed; everything appeared inexplicable to him, for he was not conscious that Edgar had ever seen his handwriting, still less that he could be aware of the name of the banker with whom his accounts were lodged. It was, therefore, rather with a view of calming Margaret’s apprehensions than otherwise, that he wrote to the firm, to inquire if any moneys in his name had been withdrawn from the bank within the last week, and he was both surprised and shocked to find, by the return of post, that a forged check had been presented and paid for the amount of £100.

Two days later, I received a letter to say that by the end of the week he should be in Yorkshire, to talk with us over this most unhappy business, adding, “a stop must be put to such base and criminal conduct on the part of this wretched man, who must be made aware that I am already acquainted with it; at the same time, though I would prosecute in another case, I am powerless here; had Edgar defrauded me of £1,000 instead of £100, he is safe, because he is the brother of Margaret Herbert, and,” he continued, “I leave my cause with you, Minnie. I grieve far more for the knowledge of Edgar’s utter abandonment of principle, than at the loss of the money itself; reason with Margaret, and implore her not to make me the sufferer, by voluntarily breaking the engagement which subsists between us; tell her she must bear this cross patiently, for her own soul is not less pure, her honor not one whit sullied, because her brother chooses to play a dishonorable part.”

Eustace’s kind letter did honor both to his head and his heart; but I placed it in my desk with a sigh. I knew that when this sad fit of delirium had passed away, that Margaret’s determination would stand firm—that on this point she would prove immovable as a rock. Nor, much as I grieved at the utter desolation of our former happy prospects, could I wish it otherwise for while our unhappy brother lived—if he remained in England—destruction, infamy and disgrace seemed before us, and, aware of the baseness of his mind, I felt morally certain that unhappiness would ensue, if, after her marriage, further annoyances were to take place; for that then Eustace’s connection with our family would only give him more effrontery in requesting pecuniary favors; or rather, I should say, demanding them, for such was the tone our unhappy brother constantly assumed.

Ah! better, I thought, any fate than this, as I looked on my dear sister’s flushed face that evening; better far that every engagement should be broken, than that you should have to blush, when you bear another name, for the dishonor your own brother may occasion.

But was this wretched man wholly to escape? was the leniency of Eustace and his affection for my sister to be the means of his becoming quite triumphant in his villainy? I thought this should not be. I would fain have gone to London, but

to leave Margaret was impossible, so taking up my pen I wrote the following lines:—“Doubtless, Edgar, your knowledge of the near connection which was shortly about to subsist between my poor Margaret and Mr. Maxwell, acted as an incentive to the crime you have committed. Your detestable fraud was detected almost immediately after it was committed. It is known to Eustace that you are living in Westminster, that you have robbed him, disgraced us, and laid yourself open to a chance of the severe punishment which the law of your country inflicts on those who so flagrantly transgress the rules of honesty. You escape prosecution because you know how great is the love and the generosity of him whom you have wronged; you are well aware that the sutor for the affections and the hand of a sister cannot drag a brother into a criminal court, and stamp with an everlasting disgrace the name of his betrothed.

“But if your heart be not, indeed, dead to every virtuous emotion; if you yet know what it is to feel, perhaps it may occasion you a pang which perchance may lead you to repentance, when I tell you that Maggie lies on the bed of sickness, perhaps of death, and that she is stretched thereon by your hand; if she lives, it will be with prospects for ever blighted by you, her brother; for never will Margaret’s noble nature stoop to bring disgrace into the home of him to whom she has been affianced.

“I can say no more, nor have I much hope that these weak words of mine will soften one who was deaf to the voice of our gentle Kathleen, who but for your neglect would now have been living happy and beloved. Nay, even the wretched Eleanor, who suffered at your hands, died repentant, after much trial, in no small degree your work. Will you still continue to disgrace, nay even kill those whom every law, both of God and man, binds you to protect and love.

“Farewell, my unhappy brother; it may be that on earth we may not meet again, for here your foot may never rest, your presence may never—when the course of time shall perhaps rear over in Margaret’s heart the wound your hand has afflicted—obtrude itself upon her sight thus bringing fresh to her mind all that she has suffered. We have done all that lay in our power for you, the man strong in health and strength, yet in every opportunity, on every occasion, you have repaid our sisterly affection with injury, disgrace and wrong.

“We can only pray that ere death calls you, you may retrace your steps; the path in which you are now walking is beset with dangers.—Pause, Edgar, in your career, ere it be, indeed, too late.”

Two days later, I received a note from Arthur; he informed me that Edgar, after a scene of violent altercation—for he, of course, felt certain that his brother had corresponded with me, and had betrayed him—had left his house, nor did he know whither he had gone.

Gloomily wore away the days. Margaret slowly recovered her health, but her spirits were gone; our little funds had been sorely diminished during her illness; she had, of course, lost her situation, nor could I think of her resuming another.

Poor Maggie! my heart bled to see her at the time of which I speak; not a murmur ever fell from her lips, not one repining word escaped her; she never spoke of our wretched brother, who had cast (thus blight over her life, she never alluded to Eustace or his family, and seemed to have settled down into that quiet dejection of manners so painful to behold in one who, under ordinary circumstances, is blessed with buoyancy of spirits.

It was a fine autumn evening, and Margaret and myself were about to leave home for a short walk, when a well-known voice struck upon our ear, and the next moment our old friend, Mrs. Maxwell, stood before us.

“How much longer, my dear friends,” she commenced, “are you going to punish yourselves and us, by estranging yourselves from our society.—Come, come, Maggie,” she continued, tenderly drawing my sister to her side, “your face and form both show how you have suffered; relent, now, be less punctilious in your notions of honor where you are not yourself concerned, and allow things to be as if this unhappy affair had never taken place.”

“Never, Mrs. Maxwell,” replied my sister—“never, while Edgar lives will I bear any other name than Herbert. This,” she continued, “is the first time I have uttered his name. I have striven to banish thoughts of the dreadful past from my mind; oftentimes in vain; but, oh! let not your affection for myself deceive you as to the inevitable consequences which would be the result of my admission into the bosom of your family. It is my misfortune to be nearly allied to one who has hitherto appeared as dead to the voice of natural affection; as he is dead to the recognition of those social virtues which man is bound to exercise. He has, sorely tried the patience and the leniency of—of—Eustace, your