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AN ACT OF DISOBEDIENCE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

A NARRATIVE OF REAL LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

At the age of forty-five, I stood at the door of a new and well-appointed inn in my native town; the proprietor of this establishment had dignified it with the title of hotel, a name which was certainly not altogether undeserved. An absence of thirty years had not quite obliterated from my memory the scenes of my boyhood; and despite the changes which such a length of time inevitably accomplishes, many of its localities were yet familiar to my eye; but, notwithstanding, I felt myself a stranger. I felt more—I experienced a regret, a desolation, a gnawing remorse, that no mere stranger could experience; my musings, alas! were not able to conjure up one pleasing sensation. But to my story.

I was the only child and only son of a comfortable and respectable farmer, of an upright pure heart, and the strict discharge of his social, moral and religious duties, can confer respectability. Three sisters and myself completed his family. My mother, my dear and gentle right minded mother, was a model for all mother, for all women! she was mildness itself. But a peculiar firmness of character in points of duty threw a dignity around her meekness, which stamped on the observer's mind the impress of something superhuman. To her, as should ever be the case with all good mothers, was entrusted the formation of her children's minds. Talk of education!—the only true instruction, after all, is that which is caught up around the domestic hearth.

Alas! schools and colleges too frequently undo what was well accomplished on the mother's breast and at the father's knee. Well do I remember that my mother based all her instructions on one great principle, viz., ready, implicit, unreasoning obedience. And certainly never was man or woman more successful in imbuing the young mind with moral and religious truths.—But her example and precept were not limited to the small circle of her own offspring. She looked upon her servants as her children, and they invariably departed themselves as such. Her house was the very temple of peace, order, and harmony. Since last I looked upon her face, I have mixed much with the busy world, have been familiar in female society, both in the middle classes and the highest ranks; but never have I met in woman the persuasive charm, the winning grace, which distinguished the artless manners of that Irish peasant's wife, my own darling mother!

Thus assisted, it is easy to conceive that my father was left to the free and unimpeded management of his farm, his stock, and his marketing. Though naturally a man of strong rectitude, I have no doubt that he owed his loftier tone of character to the softening virtues of my mother's pure heart; certain it is, however, he was out of doors all that she was within, and consequently never was there a more purely happy family than ours, until I was fifteen years of age. Alas! it was my miserably lot to blast that happiness.

The only son of one of my uncles, though living far inland, had somehow acquired in boyhood a taste for a seafaring life. Without informing his parents of his intentions, he sought the nearest port, bound himself to an American captain, and sailed for New York. Soon, however, disgusted with the drudgery, the intolerable slavery of a sailor's life, he formed the resolution of giving it up, and, accordingly, on their arrival in port, he quitted his ship and started for the interior of the country. He there sought employment, got it, became steady and industrious, turned his mind to mercantile pursuits, and in seven years after quitting his native place, returned with a very considerable fortune. He was just in time to receive his father's forgiveness and his dying blessing. Not so of his fond mother; she had sunk into the grave some two years before.

After the obsequies of his father, this cousin came on a visit to our house. Long intercourse with the busy world had given him easy manners, a pleasing exterior, a natural flow of good language, and very considerable powers of description; rendered him, at least to the young and inexperienced, a charming companion. Alas! I became fascinated; filled at once with a strong desire to travel, I asked permission to sail with him for America, where, having disposed of his father's effects, he designed to settle. I was mildly but firmly refused: my cousin added his persuasions to my entreaties, but all in vain. I knew it was useless to attempt moving my parents—I therefore seemed to acquiesce in their decision; but a brooding gloom settled on my young heart; the demon of disobedience successfully whispered his suggestions in my ready ear; peace fled from my soul. My first misery came with my first deliberate sin!

My cousin sailed without me. He had become a right-judging young man. He declined

to act upon my urgent proposition, namely, that he should carry me with him against the consent of my parents. How awful is the first step in sin! Baffled in all my hopes, I freely cherished the spirit of disobedience. Self-will surging in my heart, painted me as an injured person, and something like a desire of revenge settled in my soul. To carry my wishes into execution, I first had recourse to dissimulation, and sedulously studied to exhibit a look of satisfaction, while discontent sat heavy at my heart. The guilty ever deem themselves the objects of suspicion; it was so with me: resolved on emigrating; there was no means left me but pilfering, and to that degrading vice I yielded, softening the sting of remorse by arguing that stealing from a father cannot justly be called stealing, and that the trifling sums which I intended to extract would fall far short of the portion which in the end would justly come to my share. Vice is very ingenious; I dealt cautiously, but soon had accumulated a sufficiency to carry me to America.

Was I happy during my novitiate in crime? Let those who have acted as I did answer.—Alas! my mind was in a state of continual unmitigated torture! The dread of detection haunted me day and night. A kind look from my mother, a soft word from my father, pointed the arrows of remorse and wounded my innocent soul. Conscience! oh, conscience, was indeed their stern avenger! But what was my agony when I thought of my confessor? Hitherto I had been a regular attender at the Sacraments. The Easter indulgence was now approaching—how should I meet him? To meet him was to upset all plans—to destroy the influence of the evil spirit that tempted me. Alas! that spirit was too subtle; I yielded to his suggestions; and though suffering the tortures of the lost ones, through remorse for the outrage I was planning, through the dread of the dangers of the voyage, through the fear of death, and of everlasting punishment, yet still the pride of my stubborn self-will triumphed, and three days before the indulgence commenced, I quitted for ever the shelter of my father's roof.

I may not paint what I suffered on the voyage. For about a week sea-sickness held me in a state of absolute prostration, but with returning health, the power of conscience, the stings of remorse, the dread of death and judgment in a state of mortal sin, took possession of my soul, and, like as many beasts of prey contending for a dead carcass, rent and tore and lacerated it without mercy! No father then to pour the balm of forgiveness into my burning bosom! No kind, tender mother to drop a tear of pity over the follies and the crimes of her repentant child.—But yet, sunk though I was, I felt that I still had a Father, and to Him I fervently prayed for forgiveness! I remembered the dying bequest of my Saviour; I presumed to say, "Mother, behold thy son." A degree of comfort was vouchsafed to me! I landed safe, had no difficulty in finding my cousin, but was fated to meet a chilling reception. He read at a glance my whole course of conduct—I confessed all.

"I presume," said he, "that you desire employment from me; look to your position—you come admitting that, to gratify your own selfishness, you have most harshly violated the fourth commandment—that you became a deliberate pilferer—that you committed a breach of the most sacred trust, and with this certificate of character, you unblushingly and coolly ask me to put it in your power to treat me in the same manner so soon as you have another whim or headstrong passion to gratify. But say, did you present yourself for the benefit of the Easter indulgence?"

"No," said I, "sunk though I am, the crime of sacrilege does not stain my soul."

"Well," said he, after musing a few moments, "all may yet be recovered; I shall introduce you to my own confessor, and when he thinks fit to advise, I shall receive you into my house and treat you as a cousin."

I was soon reinstated in his good opinion. Resolved to establish a character for energy and probity, I devoted myself to the discharge of my duties; I was a ready penman and an expert arithmetician. Originally intended for the Church, I had some knowledge of the classics, and possessed a very fair knowledge of the construction of the English language. These qualifications, added to an ardent desire to please, rendered me useful to him. I honestly acquired his confidence, and he rewarded my zeal and my services, I may say, munificently.

On my becoming an inmate in his house, he wrote to my parents, announcing my safe arrival, describing my contrition, and soliciting their forgiveness. It was not refused, and, unworthy though I was, I had ready permission to correspond with them. It was no trifling consolation—communing with their spirits was ever a lightening of my load of guilt, but the dispiriting tone of my mother's letters convinced me that the fatal blow had been struck. I felt that my

ingratitude and disobedience, with their concomitant crimes, had fastened the arrow in her sensitive and dove-like heart, and that there it would fester, (and there, alas! it did fester) till it had accomplished its work.

By the time I was twenty-one years of age, I had not only become manager of my cousin's establishment, but I was also an equal partner in the profits of the concern. We were becoming wealthy and important merchants; speculations, based upon sound calculations, and carried out by judicious care and prudence, were almost universally attended by success. And not a house in the United States bore a higher name, or possessed more public confidence than ours; but just in the very acme of our prosperity, a malignant epidemic carried my cousin to a premature grave, having afforded him barely time and reason to make me sole proprietor of the firm, and the undisputed inheritor of all his wealth. This vast accession to my worldly means, (it might rationally be expected) would bring some comfort to counterbalance the loss of my cousin; it did not—I had loved him sincerely; I deeply regretted his loss; and the sudden and awful summons of so good a man, had not only admonished me to put my own house in order, but had enabled me to set a proper estimate on the world and all its vanities.

On my return from consigning his mortal remains to the tomb, a letter from Ireland awaited my perusal. With palpitating heart I devoured the contents—my mother had been stricken down with a paralytic affection. No longer able to use the pen herself, Father O'Donovan told the woeful tale. Was I happy then? Did the wealth of Dives relieve his tortures in the pit? Conscious of having lacerated all her maternal and Christian feelings, I rightly deemed myself the cause of her misfortunes; I deemed that my wealth came as a mark of Divine vengeance;—that my reward was to be evidently in this world, and that everlasting punishment was reserved for the next. A slight nervous fever ensued, and had it not been for the earnest zeal of my confessor, whose judicious advice renewed the early lessons imbibed from the loved lips of my then saintly, and my now sainted mother, despair and final impotence would likely have stamped their horrors on my closing scene. To that confessor I owe much. On my arrival in America, he it was who first brought comfort to my gloomy breast. His spiritual counsels shed that happiness which countless penitents have experienced at the sacred Tribunal. But he did more; to fill up my leisure hours, he prescribed a course of study, in order to counteract the temptations which at every step await youth in a great commercial city. Under his equally kind and able tutelage, I pursued with ardor his sagacious advice, until, to my practical commercial knowledge, I added a considerable skill in science and the arts, with such perfection in the modern languages of Europe, as enabled me to correspond with our factors in France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, &c. In a word, I owe to him whatever standing I can justly claim in society.

I soon recovered from my slight illness, and in the hurry and bustle of business, regained my former tone of mind. My earthly affairs continued to prosper; wealth, little desired for its own sake, continued to flow upon me in unbroken current. With wealth came civic importance and civic honors. At the urgent entreaties of others, I permitted myself to be nominated as a candidate for the office of chief magistrate of my adopted city. I was triumphantly elected; and on the day of my inauguration, when enjoying my victory amid the congratulations of sincere friends, and the uproarious shouts of our excited partisans, a letter from my early confessor, my good and virtuous parish priest, announced the passage of another saint to heaven, by the happy and peaceful, and edifying decease of my loved and venerated mother.

CHAPTER II.

Was I happy then? The bitter truth, with more than electric force and rapidity, flashed upon my mind—I was the murderer of my mother—my disobedience had broken her heart, had cut her off in the midst of her days, had left my father alone in the world to bewail her loss, (for my sisters were all married, and engaged in the affairs of their own families.) Was I happy then? Was Cain happy, when, bearing the marks of his crime, he was sent out a vagrant on the face of the earth? Oh the tortures of remorse! True, I had deeply grieved for my first errors—true, I had humbled myself before God's anointed, and disburdened my conscience—true, I had watered my bed with my tears; but did those tears spring from true contrition, or fruitless remorse? The Great Searcher of hearts alone could tell; and instead of happiness and joy leading me to my couch, a guilty conscience was 'my grim chamberlain' on the night of my triumph.

The counsel of my confessor was again sought, and with its usual happy results? but the soul which has once known sin, can never again

know unalloyed happiness. True, as even I have experienced, we may be firm in the hope of salvation, conscious of the goodness of God, and the merits of our Saviour; yet there is assuredly one chilling thought that must unceasingly pursue us, namely, that even when mercy opens its bosom to receive us, for all eternity, we must rank only among the penitents, and never see the beatific vision in that fulness and brilliance of glory reserved for those pure souls, whose privilege it is to follow in the train of the Lamb.

The sting of remorse had been once removed; but sincere grief for the death of my beloved parent left a stamp of gravity on my demeanor previously unseen; I became more recollected, and therefore more clearly did I perceive the true value of worldly grandeur. But I had other food for reflection; I was now a married man, and the father of a healthy, promising family, depending on me, not only for their temporal comforts, but for their spiritual welfare—yea, for their eternal salvation. My deep responsibility was ever present to my mind—how did I dread the retributive justice of God. How I trembled to think that He in His inscrutable ways should 'visit the sins of the father upon the children,' and mete, through mine to me, the same measure I had meted to my parents. Like the prodigal son, I resolved to visit my father, and at his feet implore pardon. But the world has its demands—trade must be driven—I was the mainspring of my establishment—civic duties honorably imposed must not be neglected. Procrastination weakens our best resolves, and the desire of visiting my sole remaining parent became daily colder and colder, till at length it died away.

I continued to be fortunate in my worldly affairs, as well as being favored with the esteem of my fellow-citizens. In my capacity of chief magistrate, I had given general, if not universal satisfaction, and this paved the way for fresh honors. In the course of a few years I had been successively elected sheriff for the county, a representative and senator in Congress, and, finally, Governor of our State. These honors certainly came both unsought for and undesired, but yet I possessed not moral courage, perhaps I should say sufficient humility, to refuse them. I was not ignorant of the dangers which beset public men in high stations; but self-love, that most insidious of flatterers, triumphed again, and I must confess, that on the day of my inauguration to the last-mentioned office, in the bustle and excitement, and other delusions of the hour, I did feel considerably elated. The worldling will not wonder that self-gratulation on viewing my important position should take possession of my heart. But just in the zenith of my glory, in the acme of my complacency, a servant of the new governor presented a letter on a silver salver, adding—'a young Irishman, sir, desires an interview.'

In an instant the blood rushed back in icy current to my heart. 'But the young man wait my leisure,' was all that I had power to say, while the present scene, with all its unsubstantial glories, faded from my view, and in an instant my spirit was wandering in melancholy and boding reverie round the haunts of my youth. I summoned sufficient nerve and presence of mind to get through the duties of the day, and on retiring, soon found, by the contents of Father O'Donovan's letter, that my own worthy father had gone to receive his eternal reward, that crown which awaits him 'who preserves his soul in patience,' and who meekly receives all things as coming from the providence of God! Was I happy then? Was Absalom, surrounded by his flatterers, happy under the deep consciousness of his disobedience and its results? Absalom, yearning with filial love, declared that being denied the happiness of looking upon his father's face, was his greatest punishment. Mine was still more severe; he hoped from a living father for the mitigation of his sentence. I knew that no act of grace could ever reverse the fiat which denied me the pleasure of looking upon the face of my father!

In my first moment of leisure, I seat for the young Irishman. He entered with an easy grace that made a ready impression on my mind. His whole exterior was prepossessing. Dressed in a suit of respectable mourning, standing in the flush of luscious health, and the fresh and somewhat mellow beauty of twenty years—my heart clung to him; I inquired his name.

"I bear your own name, sir, I am your own nephew—son to your oldest sister."

"My nephew you may be by the laws of consanguinity," was my stern reply, 'but neither by affection nor adoption, till you have cleared up one point.'

In committing this outrage on the young man's feelings, I was actuated by the sudden thought that dazzled by my success in life, he had followed my bad example, and had committed an act of disobedience similar to that which had wrought such misery to my parents, and had not left my own happiness unscathed. I therefore added in a firm tone:

'Tell me truly why you are here, and whether you have come with or against the consent of your father and mother.'

He reddened to the roots of his hair—the flush of honest pride and manly independence sat upon his bold brow, as half turning on his heel, he calmly and firmly replied:

'I am here like many others, to pursue fortune. But' (and he paused a moment, perhaps to shape the most delicate part of his reply) 'I have never grieved my parents by disobedience! Here is a letter from my mother, another from my confessor; they will speak as to my character.'

With dignity and grace he presented the documents. I glanced them over—they were all I could desire. And I clasped my nephew to my heart, and wept upon his neck—I made ample amends for my stern reception.

I shall leave my readers to imagine what was the nature of my communings with my own spirit; during that memorable night, and for some days after, my dignity, I felt, sat awkwardly upon me. I knew that a hair shirt had better suited my true condition, but I was obliged to fulfil my new duties, and I did so conscientiously. My mercantile affairs continued to prosper—no doubt I was envied by some, certainly I was honored and respected by others; yet all the external show of pomp and grandeur and station, could not stifle the "still small voice" of conscience, could not abate the gnawings of the "worm that never dieth." At length resolved that, at the expiration of my term of office, I would make a pilgrimage to the graves of my parents, and pour out my sorrows over their venerated, though unstarred remains.

Eschewing all procrastination, I set about winding up my affairs in good earnest, placed proper managers over my mercantile concerns, selected suitable guardians for my family, and when the due time had arrived, under pretence of visiting my European agents and extending my traffic, I sailed from my adopted country and arrived safely in my native village.

Standing at the door of my hotel, as already mentioned, indulging in bitter reflection, and undecided as to what should be my first move, I perceived the peasantry as well as the more tidily-dressed townsfolk streaming quickly towards one point.

I inquired the cause, and soon learned what I might have known, that, it being a holiday, the people were going to hear Mass. In my early days, the old parish chapel and its humble cemetery stood in an opposite direction. Thither I had resolved on directing my course, but as a change had evidently taken place, and as I was bound to be present at the "Holy Sacrifice," I deferred my visit to the old graveyard, mingled in the living stream, and in good time arrived at the house of God, a plain but substantial and commodious building. I entered the sacred edifice, and to my unspeakable consolation, once more, in my native land, I raised my heart in public prayer to the God of my fathers. It may have been the effect of excitement, but I assuredly felt that, since I left the green fields of Erin, my spirit had not been so elastic or happy.

The morning prayers had been read by a young ecclesiastic, and after he retired, an aged, gray-haired priest issued slowly from the unpretending vestry. I had not caught a glance of his face; but with the load of years, and with a tottering gait, he ascended the steps of the altar. Who he was or what was his name I could not divine, but in his very feebleness there was a grace of motion which I thought familiar to me. He gained the platform and arranged the altar, then turning to address the people—oh, thou destroyer, Time! there stood the skeleton remains of the once robust, agile, and athletic Father O'Donovan, my early, my venerated, my much loved parish priest! Gazing on the wreck, my spirit sunk within me, and bitterly did I weep, forgetting in my sympathy for my shattered pastor, that time and care had furrowed my own cheek, and lavishly powdered my once raven locks. But the sluices of my heart were opened and I continued to weep, notwithstanding the observation which my appearance as a stranger, and my strong emotion, were calculated to attract.

The service, however, commenced, and proceeded as far as the Gospel, when the celebrant laid aside the chasuble, &c., and from the platform of the altar began his sermon. The first words of text were, 'Father! I have sinned against heaven and before you!' He made a slight pause, and such is the power of conscience, I felt assured, he fixed his aged, but still penetrating eyes, on me, as if to search the inmost recesses of my trembling soul. Words cannot paint the pain of my position. It is said, and I think truly, that the culprit on the scaffold shrieks more sensitively from the piercing glances of the multitude around him, than from the death struggle which awaits him. Similar horrors did I feel in the midst of that simple and unsuspecting congregation. Satisfied that every