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JUSTICE AND MERCY;

OR,

THE FEAST OF ALL-HALLOWS.

CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

For several days Flora continued in such a state that it was impossible to revert to the subject, lest the excitement it occasioned should cause a relapse. At length, however, she slowly recovered: and one fine morning in July she made her first appearance in the library.

Old friends are strangely altered, save one, thought Flora; for she could not but perceive that there was an air of coldness about Lady Harcourt, of supercilious insolence on the part of Inez, and even of restraint on that of the always good-natured and kind-hearted Sir Godfrey.

Yes, all save one were altered; and the reflection struck like an ice-bolt on her affectionate heart.

Again the horrors of the night preceding her illness rushed on her mind; she knew not that so fearful a suspicion had entered the minds of her friends; it was torture enough to her to think that they could be so cruel and unjust as to suppose that, with the instrument of death levelled against her by a midnight assassin, she should hesitate a moment between life and loss of property.

One alone there was, however, whose beguiling smile was sunshine to her eyes—whose low voice was music to her ears—whom she loved, and could almost have worshipped, for the kindness and gentleness with which he treated her.

This was Eustace Vere—and even his sympathizing word and look, his kindly advice, she was about to lose. A few days wrought, however, a visible change. She strove to think that perhaps she was mistaken—that she was merely the victim, since her illness, of some idle fancy which made her look with a jaundiced eye even on the actions of her best friends. At all events, with the sanguine hopefulness of one whose life is in its prime, she strove to hope the best.

Poor Flora! how could she think that she mistook the cold constraint of Lady Harcourt, still proffering every kindness the delicate situation of the invalid required, though with a sad want of the friendly warmth she had once experienced—the reserve of the frank-hearted Sir Godfrey, or the more open rudeness of Inez!

Yet she grew better and stronger every day; the hue of health again mantled her cheek, instead of the burning glow of fever; and Lady Harcourt resolved soon to question her upon the events which had come to light during her illness.

It was the night previous to the departure of Eustace Vere. The family had gone out to enjoy the beauty of a lovely summer evening; and Eustace, with a wish yet again to delight in a ramble amid the beauties of Ravensbourne and the Elms, the estates lying contiguous to each other, and desirous also once more to see his old friend, Sir Robert, turned his steps to the Hall.

As he neared the identical spot in which, so long since, he had first made acquaintance with Inez and his old friend, the sound of voices, coupled with his own name, struck upon his ear. The very soul of honor, Eustace would have shrunk within himself at the thought of playing the odious part of eaves-dropper; yet to hear his own name mentioned, and coupled with that of Flora, arrested his attention. Nor was it easy now to withdraw, till the speakers, who were advancing through a thicket of trees near the spot at which he stood, had passed on.

'Beware, Inez, of madly rushing at such conclusions,' were the words Eustace heard; 'in a few short days we shall all lose sight of Eustace Vere, perhaps for ever. As such feelings are awakened in your bosom—as you so far forget yourself as to confess that you have bestowed your affections on one who has never dreamed of gaining them, and madly to hate your cousin; because you think that in her you possess a rival—it is, indeed, well that he is about to leave us;—but remember, I know well that Eustace bears no warmer feeling towards Flora than one of sincere friendship, increased perhaps by finding that one whom he believes most innocent is now laboring under the unjust suspicions of her friends.'

A burst of passionate anger, mingled with scorn and hate to Flora, now broke forth from the Spanish girl; and almost petrified at what he had heard, the aspirant to the cloister, the candidate for priesthood, the declared votary of the single life—he who had lived nearly thirty years, and never given a thought to the fairest of the daughters of men—now stood almost paralyzed, to think that, though innocently, he had been the cause of sin and hatred to others—that he should have awakened a feeling in the breast of another which had never dwelt in his own.

Shocked beyond measure at what he had heard, with the passionate sobs of the young Spaniard

still ringing in his ears, the neophyte of the cloister turned hastily, as soon as the old gentleman and his ward had passed by, and determined to leave the Elms early on the following morning, resolved to bid farewell to its inmates that night.

Food, indeed, for meditation had Eustace Vere during his long and solitary ride homeward. Now many a little web was unravelled, which hitherto he had not been able to see through. The proud curl of the lip, the flashing eye, the scornful bearing of the young Spaniard, whenever he had involuntarily rendered the homage due to poor Flora's worth, all were present to his mind's eye, and he was at no loss to see what had excited them. The Elms was indeed no place for him. The thought of again meeting Inez, even in the company of others, almost unnerved him; and he trembled to think of the further trials that might be in store for Flora.

When he entered the library, he found her alone. The traces of tears were still in her eyes, and, extending her hand to him, she exclaimed—

'I hear you are in a few days about to leave us, Mr. Vere. I shall lose in you a warm friend, one who sympathized with me under heavy trials which it has pleased God to place upon me.—You firmly believe in my innocence—do you not, Mr. Vere?' she added, large tears now coursing down her face. 'It has come to my knowledge, through the medium of one of the servants, that I am really suspected of being acquainted with those who obtained a forcible entrance into the house. Here I shall stay, then, only till I feel strong enough to maintain myself, and shall then seek employment as a governess. Just heavens! these suspicions on the part of others are dreadful? she murmured, placing her hand on her burning brow as she spoke—but tell me, do you sincerely believe in my innocence?'

'Without doubt, my dear Miss Douglas,' exclaimed Eustace Vere, with much earnestness of manner—

'I would stake my life—my honor, far dearer to me than life—upon your unblemished integrity, your spotless innocence. Now, farewell,' he added; 'for I leave the Elms before its inmates will have risen in the morning. I shall often pray for you, that this dark cloud which hangs over you may be dispersed. Meanwhile, try and bear whatever may befall you with resignation, convinced that God is a tender Father, who will not try you beyond your strength. We may meet again—let us hope it will be under happier circumstances.'

As the last words fell from his lips, Flora returned with warmth the pressure of his hand, and watched his retreating form disappear in the obscurity of the twilight; then, burying her face in the pillows of the couch, she sobbed aloud.

She wept, because she had lost a kind friend—because there was now no voice to cheer and console her. Hers were not the tears springing from a heart bursting with mortified pride—the tears of unhallowed love.

The next morning Lady Harcourt intended to break out to Flora what she had heard respecting her probable knowledge of those who had plundered the house. She had already retired to rest ere the family had returned. They all evinced surprise at the sudden determination of Mr. Vere to leave the following morning, when a few hours previous he had spoken of remaining three days longer; but he spoke of circumstances having occurred which made it necessary that his journey should no longer be deferred, and they reluctantly bade him farewell.

CHAPTER IX.

The bright rays of the July morning glanced cheerily over the hills and dales of Ravensbourne, as Eustace Vere approached the mansion, which he was compelled to pass in his way from the Elms the following morning. As he advanced to the old building he reined in his horse, whilst for a few moments he contemplated the beauty and peacefulness of the scene around him. The dews of the summer morning lay like sparkling diamonds on every blade of grass and wild flower in his path; whilst a thin blue mist, which had hung over the earth when he left the Elms, was now fading away before the bright sunbeams.—He had paused for a few moments when a well-known voice met his ear, and the worthy master of Ravensbourne, emerging from an avenue, exclaimed—

'Whither so early, Eustace Vere; what can have brought you to Ravensbourne so soon after cockcrow?'

'A speech to which I was an unwilling listener last night, mine honored friend,' replied Eustace; 'an aching heart there is at yonder Elms, and your fair Spanish ward carries, methinks, a wicked heart beneath a fair form.'

'Is it possible, Eustace,' said the old gentleman, scarcely able to forbear smiling, 'that the words which were meant only for mine own ear have reached yours?'

'E'en so,' was the reply; 'and as I am about, you are aware, though no one else suspects it, to enter a monastery, it was best, I thought, no longer to delay my departure; but, ere I go, I wished to say a few words to you respecting poor Flora Douglas. Most innocent is she, I feel convinced, of the wrong of which she is even more than suspected. This mystery never may be unravelled; but promise me, worthy Sir Robert,' added Eustace, 'that you will supply my place to this unhappy girl. Shield her with your generous sympathy, sustain her with your consolatory and pious words; and, until the return of Sir Godfrey's chaplain, which will not now be long, and which she ardently desires, manage to be at the Elms occasionally; it may be that your presence may check Inez in her mad career of jealousy and hate, for she it is who was the first to raise the dark suspicions now aloft respecting her cousin. It was to say this that I halted here this morning in the somewhat vague hope that I might see you again; but now farewell, good Sir Robert,' added the young man, leaning forward extending his hand to the friend who grasped it with affectionate warmth, 'and fail not to remember in your prayers an unworthy son of Holy Church who is about to consecrate himself to the service of God. It may be that we may meet again, my good friend; trust me, if I ever have the opportunity of coming hither, I shall not fail to seek the hospitable shelter of Ravensbourne.'

As he uttered the last words with no small degree of emotion, Eustace Vere set spurs to his horse and galloped swiftly away. The old man ascended a little hillock which commanded a view of the high road, and surely tears must have sprung to his eyes, for an unusual moisture had gathered there, and taking his handkerchief he brushed them, if tears they were, quickly away, as if ashamed of the unwonted manifestations of feeling, and then exclaimed—

'A right noble youth, art thou, dear good Eustace, and thy heart is a fair offering to lay at the altar of God.'

CHAPTER X.

'Now, dear Flora,' said Lady Harcourt, the morning after the departure of Eustace, 'as you are better in health I wish to ask you more particularly respecting the disastrous affair of this robbery. It has been said, love,' continued her ladyship, throwing her arms around the waist of Flora as she spoke, 'that a man in the garb of a sailor, a wretched miserable-looking object, followed you one night on your way from the village; that you returned home far beyond your usual hour, and the only servant who did see you, for you sought your room directly, can bear witness to your excessive agitation and apparent illness on that night. Now, dearest Flora,' continued Lady Harcourt, 'why this concealment with us, your best friends? You have really kept back something which we ought to have known when this sad affair took place.'

Lady Harcourt felt the form of Flora tremble as she held her, her face turned pale, and taking the hand of Lady Harcourt within her own, she exclaimed—

'Dearest madam, the sting of poverty, the loss of my parents even, was nothing to the trial I now endure. I can tell you nothing—a solemn oath binds me to silence, and if even I dared to break it, it would avail nothing. Nor, had I told you this when you first returned to the Elms, would it have been productive of the slightest good; nay, on the contrary, it would have caused more misery; and, strange as this avowal may seem to your ladyship, I can only beg of you to believe that, as far as I am concerned, not even the faintest suspicion should rest upon me; and, as far as I know at the present moment, an eternal silence must seal my lips for ever upon this subject.'

A dark cloud overspread the countenance of Lady Harcourt, and she replied, withdrawing the arm she had seemed to place so caressingly around Flora's waist. 'Then you really admit, Flora, that this strange man stopped you, and bound you by an oath to secrecy. Think you we can credit this most strange tale? Robbers do not extort oaths from the dependants of those they are about to injure. This deceit, coupled with your having shown the way to Sir Godfrey's room is really more than I can forgive.'

A mist passed over the eyes of Flora as these harsh words fell upon her ears, a faintness seized her, and burning tears sprang to her eyes—but pride repelled them; then starting to her feet, she exclaimed, 'The Elms, madam, have sheltered me too long. Why am I thus persecuted?—what interest could I, a friendless orphan, have, thus to abuse the charity of those who have befriended me?'

'None,' said the voice of Inez, who had at that moment entered the library, 'but may not some poor relation in Scotland have followed you hither, and, binding you to silence as you say, have then made you take him to those very spots in which the valuables stolen were kept as in a place of safety; and—'

Inez was interrupted in her unfeeling and malignant speech, and the deep voice of Sir Godfrey exclaimed, while he led the half unconscious Flora to a couch,—'forgive these insults, dear Miss Douglas—pardon, for my sake, these coarse suspicions. The mystery in which this sad affair is involved, never, perchance, may be cleared up; let it be spoken of no more. You are the last person on whom suspicion should fall, and understand me well,' he added, 'such dark thoughts never have and never will cross my mind.'

'Many thanks, Sir Godfrey,' faintly replied Flora; 'accept my most graceful thanks, that you at least hold me above suspicion; I shall leave the Elms to-morrow, firm in the conviction that Lady Harcourt will one day see how deeply I have been wronged.'

'Not wronged by me, dear Miss Douglas,' replied Sir Godfrey; 'not wronged or suspected by him who is the owner of this place; show those who entertain those dark suspicions, how you can rise above such calumny; rush not away leaving them to point the finger of scorn at your character; stay, and become the mistress of the Elms, and as the future Lady Harcourt dare your enemies to say and do their worst, only give me, Flora, the power to protect you.'

In amazement too deep for utterance, Flora gazed first at the noble-hearted Sir Godfrey, then at his indignant mother, and lastly at Inez; then frankly extending her hand to Sir Godfrey, she replied—

'Deem me not unworthy of your kindness, because I cannot grant that which you ask; the bride whom Sir Godfrey Harcourt chooses should have a character untarnished by the faintest breath of slander; when, if ever, this dark plot is effaced, then and not till then, can Flora Douglas feel she may accept so noble an offer; but I am proud, good Sir Godfrey—proud of my father's time-honored name—proud, amidst my deepest poverty, that I am the daughter of a noble race; and a something tells me that ere I again visit the Elms all will have been cleared up, for the grave will not close over those who injure me, until the veil be drawn from their eyes.'

'Is your resolution then really taken to leave us, Flora?' exclaimed Sir Godfrey; whose mother even advanced, as though she would make an effort to detain her.

'It is,' she replied, 'and my own heart tells me I am right in departing at once.'

'And whither do you purpose going, Flora?' asked her ladyship, rejoiced that what she considered her son's most imprudent offer had not been accepted.

'To London, madam,' she replied; 'I can have an introduction to families residing in the metropolis, from ladies whom I knew in Scotland, and shall seek employment as a governess.'

As Flora uttered these words she left the room; and, retiring to her own apartment, vented her grief in many bitter tears. The whole world then was again before her; and she was to throw herself on the troubled waters of life, without even money to procure what was necessary to sustain her whilst she sought for employment; 'this,' so ran a few hasty lines which were placed in her hand, 'was as bad as committing an act of suicide,' and the writer, who what none other than Sir Godfrey, begged her to accept the loan at least of a sum of money for present use.

True to herself, however, Flora resolved to withstand the kindness of Sir Godfrey, and seek for temporary aid from the owner of Ravensbourne, who she felt certain would with pleasure extend it to her; and she, therefore, with many thanks, but positively, declined the offer.

Anxious, as Eustace Vere had been, to leave before the family were about, though from widely different motives, Flora determined on leaving the Elms early on the following morning.—Hastily arranging then the few things she possessed, and to the last moment concealing her intentions from those around her, she wrote a few lines to Lady Harcourt and her son; to the former, begging her to think of her more kindly, and judge her less harshly; and reiterating her deep conviction that the day, however distant would yet come when she would be permitted to break the fatal silence which a solemn oath compelled her to keep. To Sir Godfrey, her words were expressive of a grateful sense of his kindness, and conveyed to him her just appreciation of the honor he had done her in making her an offer of his hand, whilst such a suspicion rested on her character. Leaving both these letters on her dressing table, and directing her luggage to be forwarded on to London, Flora sallied forth whilst all were still occupants of their chambers.

A short walk, though still too long for one but lately risen from a bed of sickness, brought Flora to the market town of E—, from whence she proceeded on her way to London;

on arriving at which on the following morning, she posted a note to Sir Robert Mortimer, informing him of all that had occurred and begging him to aid her with the loan of a small sum of money, which she would repay on procuring employment.

CHAPTER XI.

Those who are familiar with the environs of London, and the localities of Southwark, will have heard of a neighborhood known by the Lock's Fields. Somewhat extensive as to size, and inhabited almost exclusively by the very lowest grade of society, of whom not a few are persons over whom the police have to keep a strict watch, it is shunned by the more respectable inhabitants of the surrounding localities.

Here indeed abound dirty courts, filled with squalid children and half-clad idle mothers, who drink by night and storm and swear by day; here are the abodes of many of the wretched men and women who ply their fruit at the corners of streets and by the wayside of the high road, the honest laborer, the poor mechanic, and the lower grade of half-starved artists; here are marine store shops as they are termed, whose only goods as far as we can see consist of old iron, dirty phials, and a motley assemblage of bones and rags; here are the sheds, for we cannot dignify them by a better name, of the broker, who displays his well-worn chairs and tables to the wretched creatures who dwell around him; here are pawn-brokers' shops too—for the poorer the neighborhood, the greater is the number of these places; and last, though not least, is the gin-palace, with its plate glass front, its large lamps, and spacious entrance, forming a strange contrast to the poorer dwellings from about, and as the gin-palace leads to the pledge-shop, it stands as a matter of course that the two shall not be far apart. It is December, a dark dreary wet night in December, but the lowest of the streets and courts in Lock's Fields are not quiet for all that; and in one of its worst haunts, where profligacy and theft go hand in hand, angry words may now be heard, mingled with oaths and the wailing of a child.

In one of those wretched tenements, in a room on the ground floor, a man, a woman in a state of intoxication, and a child are seated; on the table lies a rich bracelet, and ever anon the man attentively examines it, and wonders how much that cheat Isaac Levi, the receiver of stolen goods, will offer him for the precious bauble.—Already mad with the potent draughts she has swallowed, the wretched woman craves for more and, enraged by the sullen refusal of the man, threatens to tell the police how her husband came by that gem. Already was she clenched the fist raised, when fear at that threat made his hand fall in impotent wrath upon the table; and, taking a coin from his pocket, he threw it to the wretched being who yet craved for more of the poisonous draught. The child was a little fair blue eyed girl, perhaps seven years old, not more, and might have seemed to a stranger as an angel amid the condemned. 'Those large melancholy eyes were turned with an expression of fear towards the mother, and it seemed as though it nestled closer to the man, as mutely claiming the protection which the gentler sex denied.—Not even its well-worn clothes and the unkempt state of those rich auburn locks could in any way disguise the beauty of the child, who ever and anon looked wonderingly on that rich bracelet which once had graced the arm of Lady Harcourt. Seymour, for it was he, took the child on his knee, pushed back the hair from the open brow, and kissed it with affectionate fondness; and then, laying it in its wretched bed, he prepared to wend his way to one of the many receivers of stolen goods who infest the metropolis.

The wife returned home after his departure, and now, fanning the embers into a blaze, drew forth a roll of paper from her bosom, which she attempted to peruse by the pale light which they emitted.

This wretched woman was scarcely forty years of age, but a life of mingled want and dissipation had so furrowed her brow and striped her hair, added to which her love of drink had left its never failing trace—that she might she have passed for at least ten years older than she really was.

Yet once this woman, now so revolting in her aspect, had been the belle of her native village; and there was once, too, a time when she had loved and had led a virtuous life; but the slippery path of crime is scarcely ever emerged in all at once, for one vice leads to another; and as there are gradations in virtue, so there are in wickedness. Now, however, there was no white spots to be seen in this wretched woman's life. All, all was so black that the recording angel could not, at the last day, point to one redeeming trait; yet there she sits, half sober—only half—but enough so to know well what she is, about. Sometimes she looks at the neglected child buried in the peaceful sleep of infancy, but who never knew either a mother's love or care; then