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A MOTHER'S SACRIFICE; OR, WHO WAS GUILTY?

By Christine Faber, Authors of "Carroll O'Donoghue."

CHAPTER XIX.

"You promise, Margaret," said Hubert, as he held her hand in a farewell grasp, "if they call for your evidence to-morrow to give it according to my desire. Remember, my whole peace of mind depends upon it, and I shall watch you, and linger upon your words as I have never listened to voice before."

"I promise," she said huskily, and then she turned to the cell door, while Plowden, still anxious-looking, and somewhat agitated, murmured his leave-taking.

"If to-morrow would but end it," said Hubert wistfully.

"To-day after my answer, the lawyer gloomily breaking from Hubert's grasp as if fearful of being questioned.

"Forgo your visit to the church to-day," said Plowden, laying his hand somewhat heavily on Margaret's arm, when they reached the street at which she usually left him.

She looked up in surprise. He continued: "I have something to say to you which can only be said in your own home—something that must be said soon."

She bowed assent, and continued in the direction of her residence. She could not have answered him because of the sudden faintness which his words had caused. What could be the something that had to be told in her own home, and told soon, but an announcement to prepare her for Hubert's approaching execution? She was obliged to take his arm to support her trembling limbs, to lean heavily upon it when the mist came before her vision; and Plowden's blood leaped wildly in his veins, and the struggle in his heart grew fiercer, for how could he, as he was about to do, sever himself from the friendship, from the sight of this being whom he so madly loved?

He did not suffer his excitement to betray itself, and when she ushered him into an ante-room that opened from one of the parlors, though his face was as white as her own, and his lips compressed with mental agony, his manner seemed free from the agitation which had marked it in the prison. He motioned her to a seat, and for a moment each looked silently into the other's countenance—he, as if to divine from her face how she would receive his communication, she to read in his very lineaments an answer to the question she could not ask.

"Do you trust me, Miss Calvert?" he said at last, "I trust me entirely? I have fancied that you did not—that you accepted my services solely because you had no other alternative. I seek not to know the motive of such distrust. I do not desire to learn if anything in my conduct has given rise to suspicion—I only ask, do you trust me now as Hubert's true friend?"

His eyes had in them something so mournful, his whole face was so strangely expressive of some secret suffering, that the girl's tender heart, even in her own sorrow, had compassion for him—she was even stricken with a pang of remorse that she had ever entertained a doubt of his sincerity; under the influence of that feeling, she extended her hand and answered frankly:

"Whatever suspicion—whatever distrust—I have entertained, has quite gone. Believe me when I say I trust you entirely."

He pressed her hand slightly, and bowed his head as if in gratitude for the assurance.

"If," he resumed, that mournful, haunting look still in his eyes, "your cousin's sentence should be comparatively light, the happiness of both of you would be eventually ensured, would it not?—that is, after the lapse of a proper time your marriage would take place?"

Margaret answered: "You heard the resolution he announced in his cell a few days since; and in very gratitude to God for a light sentence, both Hubert and I should consider it little to make the sacrifice he spoke of."

"If an acquittal were possible," said Plowden, "surely in that case you would marry."

She shook her head.

"You heard him also upon that point, and his desire is, in every instance, mine."

The lawyer's manner became agitated as he spoke.

"Miss Calvert, if it were possible—bending toward her—"remember, I only say if it were possible—to make your cousin believe that he had been laboring under a mental delusion—that there was no murder upon his soul—if he came forth with no stain upon his character, would you two, who love each other so well, then be united?"

Oh, the sudden light that broke over her face; her whole countenance shone as if it had been transfused, but it was only for a second; for a second that her fancy had caught his words and made them a delightful reality; sober, sorrowful truth however, rent the fabric, and left her more desolate, more heart-broken than before.

The hot tears fell fast upon her cheeks as she answered:

"Could that happen, there might, indeed, be no obstacle to the event you mention—but why torture me with such an impossibility? I know he committed the murder—I who listened to his story, and washed his knife; then, all the world could not make him believe himself guiltless."

"Bear with me, Miss Calvert, even if I do give utterance to impossibilities; it is necessary to do so in order to satisfy myself of one thing; and to prove your trust in me by listening, and answering, even though you cannot understand the motives of my questions. Was such a happy ending of this trial possible, and was it accomplished by the effort of one man, what would be your regard for this man?"

"What could it be?" she answered, "but a gratitude so deep and tender that I should hold the next place to Hubert in my heart."

Plowden grew more strangely excited; the veins in his forehead began again to swell, and his face to flush so suddenly and deeply that the livid color seemed to merge into a purple hue.

"But, suppose this man's own dark had been a guilty one; suppose dark, heavy crimes rested on his soul, what would it be then, Margaret—Miss Calvert—what would be your regard for him then?"

stands between you and Hubert, and if it has led me to speak a little incoherently, to betray the haunting regrets which to-day have been fiercer than usual, forgive me—extend to me a little of the sympathy with which you sweeten Hubert's life. For the rest, I have only to say that all hope has not yet gone; only trust me, and, whatever happens, remember your promise to pity and pray for him who should restore happiness to you and Hubert."

He wrung her hand and hurried forth.

Margaret remained where he had left her, too bewildered, too wildly troubled to do anything else than stand as it were, while a whole multitude of thoughts rushed in a confused and distracted manner upon her mind.

Was she to fear or hope from Plowden's words, or, as she had already done, to regard them as the ravings of a suddenly unsettled mind; if the latter, who would take his place as Hubert's counsel—who would, or could work for Hubert as he had done? Then she remembered what Hannah Moore had said about the lawyer, and she found herself wondering in a vague way if there was any connection between the cook's mysterious knowledge of him, and the strange things he himself had spoken.

She would have hurried to Father Germain with her doubts and fears, but she had been so little with the invalid that day that it seemed like neglect to defer attendance upon her aunt simply to have her own trouble allayed or calmed.

Her temples throbbled with pain from the intense excitement and grief of the past few hours; her form was weak and trembling from the little sustenance she had taken, and her eyes ached from want of sleep and the long and passionate bursts of weeping to which she had become only too well intured. Truly, Margaret, even when she had changed her out-door costume, and bathed her face, as she went trotting down to her aunt's room, was a pitiable object.

Madame Bernot's physical condition still remained weak and precarious, though her appearance—save that her face was often convulsed by spasms of pain—gave no indication of the alarming increase of her disease. She smiled faintly when Margaret, taking Kreble's place, began to bathe her hands; and when the fiery darts of pain, which sometimes shot through her fingers, subsided, she said, softly: "You have been out oftener than usual to-day, Margaret, have you not? Every time I asked for you they said you were out. I only wish it did you more good, my darling, for you look very pale."

Her niece did not reply; she knew not what excuse to frame, so she bent closer to the vessel in which she was saturating the bathing cloth.

Madame Bernot continued: "I wonder if Hubert could leave his friends just a little while to come to me; sometimes I think my end is not very far away, and I should like to bless him before I go. And yet it would be selfish to take him from those poor people now. He says in his last letter that poor young man may be hung, and if so, I would not deprive him of a minute of my son's companionship—not that poor mother who is soon perhaps to be childless. No; his place with them since he affords them comfort, and perhaps God will spare my life till he can come to me—my own noble boy; but Thy will be done."

She looked at the picture, and for a few moments was oblivious of everything save that blood-stained face; then, as if with an effort she turned her eyes to Margaret, and resumed:

"I have been thinking, my dear child, what your future will be when I am gone: so far as means of support are concerned, my own private portion shall revert to you, and Hubert also will make ample provision for you."

"Don't—don't!" pleaded Margaret piteously, and lifting her hands in deprecating entreaty, "don't talk of your death—I cannot bear it."

And, indeed, it looked as if it would take little more to make her frail strength wholly depart.

The invalid faintly smiled.

"I know your affectionate heart, my dear girl, and how you have repaid my little care with more than a daughter's tenderness; it is for that reason I would say something now—something that flashed on my mind to-day very suddenly, and for the first time. Will you answer me very frankly, and will you promise not to feel hurt even though I should be very far from the truth?"

Margaret bowed assent, and Madame resumed:

"Long ago, when you came to me a little, sacred trust, and grew up so fair and sweet, twining yourself about all our hearts, I used to think that one day he who is dead—she stopped suddenly as if threatened by one of her occasional spasms, but the symptoms, if such they were, passed away—"might hold a near and dear place to you. He was much older, it is true; but the difference in your ages would be amply compensated by his love. Do you remember, Margaret, his affection for you, how frequently he spoke of the future when you would be old enough to marry, and I fondly hoped it would be so, until that sin blighted us all? To-day when I reflected on the lonely position in which my death would leave you, there came suddenly into my mind the possibility of your union with Hubert. Perhaps you are already attached to each other, only I, in my blindness have not perceived it—I have been so accustomed to regard your affection for each other such alone as exists between brother and sister; but perhaps it is different, Margaret.

Tell me, has Hubert ever said that he loved you, and, if so, what has been your answer?"

Margaret could not speak; she could only lift her face for an instant while the hot, sudden colored every feature, and then bury it in her hands; but it was enough for Madame Bernot.

"I shall not embarrass you further, my darling," she said, "I think I understand it all now, and I shall wait until Hubert comes home. Perhaps the dear God will spare me so long, and if He should not, you can transmit to my son, my wishes on this subject. Why have you been so silent, my dear girl? Was it that you feared my displeasure? Ah! Margaret, you hold too dear a place in my heart for me to wish to withhold my son from you."

If she could only have looked into the heart of the girl kneeling beside her, how inured to suffering though she was, would she not have started back appalled from the anguish burning there; how would she not have yearned in pity and tenderness over poor Margaret's wild desire to throw herself on that loving breast, and sob out that union could never be—that cup of happiness had turned to gall and wormwood months ago.

But the invalid saw nothing only the bowed, motionless head of her niece, and she suspected nothing save that Margaret's heart was in Hubert's keeping, and then her eyes wandered to the beloved picture. But the effort which it had cost her to say so much, and to revert to that past which had been hitherto as a sealed book, even to her own thoughts, brought on one of her severe spasms. They were wont to come suddenly and without warning, but they rarely left her so white and corpse-like as did this one, and Margaret knelt in terror, while Kreble raised the cushions and laid the still, white face softly back.

The same lone night hours that witnessed Margaret's vigil in the sick room, looked upon an unusual scene in the Delmar homestead. Louise, immediately on the return of her mother and herself from the court, had shut herself in her room on the plea of a headache, and she had given way unrestrainedly to the strange and painful thoughts which agitated her mind.

Too vain and shallow, too superficially educated to know how to reason with her passionate desires, and lacking the one infallible guide, true religion, she could only shrink and writhe under her strange mental torture without even attempting to combat it. In all her previous trouble her usual course was to flee at once to some one of her confidants—as what girl of fashion has not one or more of such?—and talk herself out of her real, or imaginary sorrow; but this troubled state of feeling was something so different from anything she had yet experienced, that she turned impatiently from describing that pain to any of her frivolous companions.

She thought of her mother, but it was only to turn with the same impatience from the idea of giving her such a confidence, divining instinctively that the latter would not understand it, and, if she did, would not be capable of sympathizing with it.

The hours wore on. Mrs. Delmar had sent to know how she was, and on learning that she was no better and had refused to partake of the repast sent to her room, came herself with affected maternal solicitude to advise that the family physician be summoned. But Louise was in no mood for questions or endearments, and to both returned such childish answers, and gave such other unmistakable evidence of being in a very ill temper, that the fashionable lady was glad to return to the visitor she had left.

And the unhappy girl flung herself on the lounge again, and tossed and moaned until she heard her brother ascend to his room.

Her thoughts were becoming unendurable. Poor, pampered child of fashion! she could not bear pain, and she sought to fling it from her at any cost. She must tell her trouble to some one; she must obtain sympathy, if not relief, somewhere, and to her brother, who, she fancied—because he was Hubert's friend—would be the most likely to compassionate, and perhaps to help her, she determined to pour out the unhappy passion of her foolish heart.

Hitherto, there had been few confidences between the brother and sister, partly owing to their different dispositions, and partly owing to the training which Louise had received—a training that taught her to look abroad for confidants, that made her regard other young men as more fitting objects upon whom to lavish attentions than an old-fashioned brother whose ideas of right and wrong were rather too strict.

Eugene's sex had saved him from the pernicious training of his sister; it had removed him during his boyhood, and a good portion of his early manhood from his mother's soul-destroying care, and with impulses naturally good, and parts though not brilliant, yet steady and sure, he had escaped scathless from the temptations which beset most youths. Seeing but little even of his mother and sister until he had left college, he considered women as something beyond his understanding—creatures to be wondered at, and to be made familiar with mainly accidents. His feelings, so far as veneration was concerned, underwent a considerable change before he was many weeks within sight and hearing of his fashionable mother's foibles; and at last he burst into very unparading reproofs of the same, but the reproofs had no other effect than to make Mrs. Delmar declare herself the worst treated mother

in the world, and dub Eugene in his absence, "A hateful all the more."

For Louise, he had all the proud affection which a young man naturally entertains for an only sister; he was proud of her showy style, and because of her youth he could overlook the faults she had so accurately copied from her elegant parent; he basked in the sunshine her presence made in the house; he was restless and lonesome at any protracted absence of hers from home, but to bestow upon her any of the little endearments with which brothers sometimes petted sisters, he would have thought as soon of embracing Miss Calvert. When, through any chance inadvertence she requested him to button her glove, or adjust her shawl, he would evince such trembling awkwardness, and such evident dislike of the task, that she invariably broke from him in impatience.

To have told her any of his own affairs, or to have expected from her a similar confidence, would have been to him a preposterous idea, and had a sudden chasm disclosed itself in the floor at his feet, he could not have been more astonished than when she stood on the threshold of his room asking: "May I come in? I have something to say to you."

Louise, who never by any chance entered his apartment—he could not understand it; and he stood with the portion of a cigar yet in his hand, and a thin wreath of smoke still curling about his head.

She repeated her request, and he, as if not yet comprehending, answered: "Yes; I shall be down in a minute," and he turned away as if to prepare to descend, but she sprang after him, saying: "I mean here—to speak to you here; mamma would interrupt us below."

He looked ruefully about him, as if his bachelor apartment would suffer some terrible innovation if he permitted this visit; but Louise had already pushed her way to his own easy chair, and nestling down into it began to cry as if her heart would break.

This was a new phase of that peculiar creature—woman—and, slightly alarmed, Eugene closed the door, threw his cigar into the cuspidor, drew a chair in front of his sister, and waited quietly for her emotion to subside.

It was harder than she had imagined it would be to impart this new and strange confidence—to open her heart at once to one to whom even its most casual workings had never been laid bare, and she made a feint of still continuing to weep, even after her actual tears had ceased, that he might be the first to speak. But the simple fellow, not knowing what to say, kept an equal silence, and which he would have protracted for an indefinite length of time, had she not, provoked at his apparent want of tact, burst out impatiently at last:

"I want to speak to you about Hubert Bernot."

Eugene gravely nodded; he understood no more than her words implied, and if he wondered what connection her tears had with that gentleman, certainly no glimmer of the truth entered his mind.

"Did you visit him to-day?" shading her face with her hand; and looking down, that, not meeting his eyes, she might have more courage to speak.

"I did," was the reply.

"And"—in a faltering voice—"Does he think that—that he will have to die?"

"He seems fully to expect it."

"Do you,"—in a very faltering voice—"Really think so, too?"

"I am afraid it will be so—yes," with a sigh.

"And he will die and never know that I loved him"—bidding her face in her hands with sudden shame.

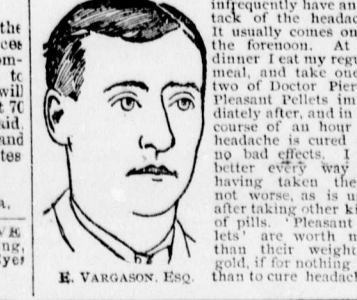
Eugene looked at her in dumb-stricken wonder. Feeling how useless it would be to wait for him to draw forth all she would tell, she flung her hands from her face, as if defiant of the very shame which had caused her to put them there, and told it all—the beginning of her attachment to Hubert when the first spark was applied by her mother—the rapid growth of that attachment, and now its sad uselessness if he were to die without even knowing of its existence.

The young man comprehended at last. Perchance he more easily understood his sister's suffering from the fact of a like pain having been once in his own heart when he had dared to dream—he ventured nothing more—a village belle about whom half the college students had raved betimes. He answered very sadly, but with almost a woman's tenderness.

"Hubert is already engaged to his cousin. This afternoon he extorted my promise to be one of the executors of the wealth which he will leave her in the event of his death."

If the more womanly and better part of Louise Delmar's nature had asserted itself up to this part, though in a weak and unmanly manner, the hard, warped part of her nature came uppermost now—jealousy, as bitter as it was sudden, swept over her soul, and transformed her from the tremulous, love sick girl into the rigid, vindictive woman.

Her brother continued to speak as if to one who was suffering from the generous impulses of an over-kind heart. He repeated the tale that Hubert had told him, but repeated it in a more touching and affectionate manner. He described Margaret Calvert's faithful devotion—such a description as his own noble feelings could alone give—and he affected what men of more powerful intellect but less innate goodness must have failed utterly to do—he touched the heart, the passionate, jealous heart of his sister. Never perhaps had all the woman been so roused in her nature; never had springs of



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