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HONOUR WITHOUT RENOWN

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Author of "Three Daughters of the United Kingdom"

CHAPTER XXX.

De Woodville slept little that night. That which his brother had revealed concerning his unfortunate friend had roused within him a desire for immediate action. He could sit still no longer; the spirit of impulsive energy so characteristic of his sister, seemed for the time to have taken possession of his mind. He felt he must be up and moving; he must use every force and device to free from his long and unjust incarceration poor Edmund Leadbitter.

At an early hour, therefore, the following morning he called at the Convent door to inquire after, and, if possible, to see his sister. But Ma Soeur shook her head.

"You cannot see her, sir. She is better, and has just fallen asleep; I dare not disturb her now."

"You are sure she is better?" he inquired, anxiously.

"Certain of it. She has splendid spirits, a good constitution; her pulse is calmer; so I have now great hopes of her recovery."

"Thank God!" he ejaculated firmly; then there was a pause, during which he appeared perplexed by conflicting feelings. Presently he resumed the conversation, looking the while with a penetrating gaze at his companion.

"If you are really so hopeful regarding my sister's present condition, and can assure me that I cannot, by remaining near her, materially aid her recovery, I am inclined to return to England and endeavor to procure the release of a dear friend from a very unjust punishment. Tell her that I am leaving in order to see justice done to my friend, Edmund Leadbitter."

"Yes, I understand something of that sad case, and will deliver with joy your welcome message. I am sure that the pleasure it will afford Sister Marguerite will serve as a grateful tonic to her. In fact, I know well that she would much rather feel that you were thus occupied, than that you should linger here."

"That is just the point which was troubling me—the fear lest she might feel I had neglected her in her present critical condition."

"Then you may safely cast out of your mind all doubt on that score; for I can assure you that our dear little Sister has, from the first, been filled rather with concern regarding her late patient's brother, than with anxiety as to herself. Nay, I feel quite justified in stating that the knowledge of your strenuous endeavors with regard to your friend will greatly forward her own recovery."

"I am sincerely glad to hear that your views coincide so exactly with my own, Ma Soeur. With your permission and assurance, I will return to England at once, for I am filled with unrest until this business of poor Leadbitter is cleared up." And so they parted; he rushing off to bid adieu to Marie, and inform her of all his plans, and she to resume her arduous duties.

It was not until the afternoon of the following day that the long divided members of "The United Kingdom" were permitted to come together once more. So excited were Marie and Madge at the prospect of seeing their dear friend again, that with their arms around each other, they felt in their anticipation like schoolgirls once more; for their hearts were still pure and young, and they seemed entirely to lose sight of the fact that they were or ought to be—important and sedate little matrons.

"Dear, dear little Bertie!" cried Marie; "how delighted she will be to see us."

"And we!—what pleasure for us to look upon her brave face once more," chimed in Madge. "You know, Marie, though we may not tell her so, she is quite a little heroine—a martyr to charity, is she not?"

"Indeed, she is! Ah, Madge, when I think of old times, and compare them with the present, how convinced I am of the wisdom of God—He knew which of us to choose." And so they chatted on, until, by the time they had reached the Convent, they had worked themselves into a state of excitement. Ma Soeur observed the look of bright anticipation on their sweet faces, and had not the heart to damp their joy; she merely cautioned them gently to be careful, and not to overtax the strength of Sister Marguerite.

In their haste, and to their utter astonishment, they almost fell over the body of old Leo, who, as a faithful sentinel was keeping guard outside the parlor door.

"Yes, indeed!" interjected Ma Soeur, with a look of injured dignity.

"Yes, well, Madame la Comtesse look surprised; but, believe me, the Sister is well guarded. Many of her friends are around her, and they are of a charming variety. The dog is only one of the party who took us by storm a few nights ago."

"Leo, Leo! how did you get here?" inquired Marie, stooping low and caressing him affectionately.

"Why, I left you safely at home, and you are here before me."

"Go in and ask his old mistress to tell you all about it," replied Ma Soeur, opening the parlor door. "See, this is the room into which she was carried; and as she likes it and is comfortable, we have not moved her yet."

Sister Marguerite was prepared for the visit, and was, perhaps, the calmest of the three, as the old friends hurried forward and sank on their knees at either side of the low bed.

Do what she would the little Countess could not suppress the tears of joy which rushed to her eyes when she saw her oldest and best-beloved friend lying thus helpless before them; and the colour came and went in oppressive waves over the fine face of Madge O'Hagan, and her heart beat fast and painfully, as she marked with a quick eye the traces of hard work and suffering stamped plainly upon dear Sister Marguerite's features.

"How delicate, how ill she looks," pondered Madge; and yet they both thought, "how beautiful and sweet!"

The minutes flew on wings. It was impossible to crowd into so short a time one-half of what they had to ask and to tell each other. Neither could I attempt to describe all the mutual joy and true, honest love and interest, expressed and understood in this first meeting after their long separation.

"Madge, how is my little Marguerite the Third, that sweet little girl of whom you ought to feel so proud?" And, Marie, how fares my little nephew, so like his dear old grandpapa that I love him with a special love?" It made them very happy to tell her all their hopes, their fears, in hearing which they found so full of kindness and sympathy; and their hearts were flooded anew with gratitude as they realised so keenly what the loss of her would have meant to them.

Thus marked with happy visits, the days passed on until three weeks had flown, during which time Father de Woodville had been recalled to England, and O'Hagan had been telegraphed for to join the Earl; meanwhile, the dear patient had made rapid progress towards recovery. Nothing that could be done to hasten the invalid's restoration to health was left undone. Paris too, was vigorously and thankfully settling down to that peace and order to which for so long she had been an absolute stranger. Hope, born of patient endurance, was budding into life once more; even the birds were venturing and twittering their joy at the new and pleasant change of affairs.

One morning Sister Margaret received a letter from the Lady Abbess of St. Benedict's which caused all three both pleasure and pain. Often the trio re-read and talked over the contents of this letter, and whether the little recipient's health really did return, or the purport of this epistle urged her to strenuous exertions towards recovery, puzzled Madge considerably. She leaned entirely towards the latter theory. This is what the Abbess wrote:

"Knowing of your serious illness, my dearest child, I have refrained from writing as long as, with a good conscience, I could do so; knowing that if my letter should find you still unable to move, it could but needlessly distress and pain you. Poor old Father Egbert is asking for you daily. He is almost blind, and very feeble, but never a day passes that he does not treat to know if 'dear little Bertie' is coming to see him. He seems to forget that you are a nun, and when I try to insinuate that you would certainly be with him if you could, he waves me away with great dignity, assuring me sternly that you promised to go and see him before he died, and that Bertie never breaks her word, etc. Often, too, he speaks of Marie and the sweet Scotch nightingale, as he calls Madge, as though he loved to linger in memory over the old children in whom he always took such deep interest. So I feel sure that, though he cannot see your faces, still it would give him genuine delight to hear your voices and feel your presence near him once more."

"Tell Ma Soeur that a branch convent of your own order has been opened in the little town close by, so that you might spend your convalescent days with us, returning at nights to your own Sisters; and need I say how, from dear old Fr. Egbert down to the youngest novice in the community, we should be delighted to have our 'United Kingdom' once more amongst us, and what earth we would lavish upon our sick child."

So Ma Soeur was coaxed into giving the necessary permission; and, truth to tell, she was not loth to do so, for in her secret heart she was desirous that Sister Marguerite should be moved from Paris as soon as possible, for change of scene and for rest; and where could she find either better than at St. Benedict's Abbey?

Thus it was arranged that "The United Kingdom" should dwell once more—for a time at least—under the very roof where first the three had learnt to know and love each other.

CHAPTER XXXI.

And now we will follow De Woodville, as he speeds towards the confines of that hard, cold unfriendly building, upon which poor Marion had gazed with such a forlorn and breaking heart that memorable morning.

Having previously notified his expected arrival at the prison, the Earl alighted at the adjoining town, and securing the most respectable-looking vehicle that he could find, drove at a rapid pace to the quarters of the Governor of the jail, who received him personally, and led him at once into his own private apartments. There they talked very earnestly together for some time, the Governor informing De Woodville of the unexpected visit of Monsieur Camard, and made; also of the discovery of the papers declared by Manfred to be hidden beneath the old altar-stone in the ruined abbey, which, if genuine, would establish Leadbitter's innocence at once.

"Anticipating the best result of further inquiries," he continued confidently, "I have already given orders for the prisoner to be removed to more comfortable quarters, where the doctor has taken him under his special charge. He finds him weakly; his constitution has, perhaps, been a little tried of late. And he coughed pompously."

He was not weakly when he entered this unfortunate place," answered his visitor sternly; "he was as fine, as manly a young fellow as ever trod this earth."

"Probably! In fact, he may have been, for all I know. But, carelessly—men are not sent here, you know, to gormandise on the fat of the land, and to grow burly and strong at their country's cost. The Earl rose abruptly, and said:

"Will you allow me," he asked, "to see and speak to poor Leadbitter, since you own that his innocence is almost proved. Being his friend of long standing, I have suffered much anxiety on his account." The Governor rose slowly to his feet, remarking in an indifferent tone of voice:

"Yes, I suppose you may see him; but if this is the first time that you have done so since his entrance here, well, you must be prepared to find him much altered—that's all."

"And all you care, too," muttered the Earl to himself as he curled his lips in the old disdainful way, and looked down with dignity upon the five feet five inches of humanity before him. But there was something in the bearing and look of De Woodville which impressed the Governor with a feeling of respect and awe, seeing that he was displeased, he added:

"Well, I will say, that whenever I have seen No. 75, I have noticed that there was an erect and manly look about him; he wasn't the sort of fellow to impress one with the idea that he was very deeply dyed in guilt. Still, you know, we get all sorts here, and it would not do for one's heart to run away with one's head in a place like this, would it?" De Woodville vouchsafed no reply, but followed in gloomy silence. The Governor continued:

"I have even heard it said by some of the warders that the language and manners of . . . your friend . . . I forget his name, have earned for him among his associates the name of The Philosopher; so calm and stoical has been his conduct at times."

"H'm!" grunted De Woodville savagely. "It would require the strength of a man, as well as of a philosopher, to bear up amid such uncounted surroundings and such companionship as poor Sir Edmund has had to submit to for the last three years. It is terrible to think of all he has endured—and so unjustly too!"

"Well, sir," reiterated the Governor, turning sharply round. "I, at least, neither condemn him nor measure his sentence. The judgment and punishment of the prisoners is neither meted out nor commuted by me. It is my painful duty to see that the sentence is duly carried out."

De Woodville made the stronger reply, but the further he proceeded the stronger grew the spirit of disgust and pity within him. "What an oppressive air of helplessness pervades this detestable abode," he thought; "the grey walls, scarcely touched by a gleam of Heaven's sunlight to cheer so many hearts! And how many are in here for life! Surely death must come to them as a happy release. God help the poor wretches doomed to pine away their lives here."

As De Woodville made no effort to conceal his disgust, the Governor purposely avoided those precincts where the prisoners were engaged in laborious occupations, and with the aid of a large bunch of keys led the way down long, unfriendly-looking passages, through strong, iron-clamped doors, and across several small paved yards, each of which latter was devoid of trees or the smallest shelter whatsoever.

"Poor Leadbitter!" ejaculated the Earl, gulping down his feelings. "And so these are the scenes upon which alone your kind eyes have gazed for so long. Would that Manfred could have tasted a little of your loneliness and sufferings!"

"Ah, there you are mistaken, sir. Your friend has frequently been out working in the quarries; so he has enjoyed as much change of scene as we could well give him."

"Keen enjoyment that, I should presume," remarked De Woodville, drily.

They paused at last in front of a door as heavily and strongly framed apparently as its neighbors, but instead of inserting the key at once, the Governor slid back a small panel, and after peeping through it himself, beckoned to his companion to do the same, remarking in a slightly injured tone of voice: "Now, sir, come and look for yourself; your friend does not appear so very gloomy or uncomfortable all, does he?"

De Woodville stepped towards the small embrasure and looked in, his heart palpitating violently as he did so.

"That man with him has always been the poor fellow's best friend and comforter; he is one of the prison chaplains—Father Lawrence by name. He has from the first evinced a great regard for No. 75, and has frequently spoken of him to me; but, you know, men of his calling are often too soft-hearted, and I fear, are frequently deceived." But the Earl scarcely heard the remark, his attention was so riveted upon what he saw.

The apartment into which he peered seemed lofty, dry, and airy, but as destitute as it well could be of any of those comforts which the Governor had assured him his friend was now surrounded. He did not know that the few small beds in which he saw standing at precise distances apart were considered by the prisoners as very havens of rest and luxury; nor could he realize how many in this same apartment had wept tears of joy when they had heard from the lips of their pastor or physician that their end was near—that their term of dreary punishment was almost over, and that freedom, eternal and unbought, would be theirs for ever. Surely there was often great peace to those death-beds, for there was neither comfort nor luxury to leave, and the ties of nature had been severed long ago; so that when men whose duty it was to speak of hope and repentance had bidden them look up, and know that their term of punishment was completed at last, surely there was more joy and less pain at such death-beds than at any of the more comfortable ones elsewhere.

But Romano, who was somewhere near the festival of the Assumption. His car stood at the door of a rural post-office where he was doing some landscape work for the summer. The little woman with drab hair, in a drab skirt, handed him his sheaf of mail. He extracted one letter dexterously, his foot on the step of the car. It was *Der Enigke*.

He devoured it rapidly, turned white under his tan, and stumbled into the tonneau. He motioned to a jockey driver standing on the curb. "I'm ill. I can't drive. Take me to shack 'Z.' The Barnacles."

No one ever saw him after that. He was shell-shocked, or such, I believe, is the sudden paralysis of will, and whirl of delirium which succeeds such a blow as Romano's emotions had received, in mentally rushing to meet it.

"Time only," he may take ten years; give him all the paint and canvas he wants. Don't bother him. Let him alone. Romano's eyes stared coldly through the iron bars. Ten years! Not Eternity, rather. He was doomed, damned; he knew it. His soliloquy never changed. Five years passed. Ten.

"Doomed, damned," he repeated the words. Remonstrances, entreaties, prayers, exhortations. All vain. Melancholia was his bride. Despair his only companion. Memory a blank. His parents and a sister had died since he left Old Shipton, but the dates were unknown to him, and he felt no pang.

"Gone to Paradise," he said to himself, "and I hell."

Never once in those years had he failed to fiercely defend the Church when he heard her sanctity assailed. He gave generously to the poor. He instructed converts and those about to die in his dread box which contained some relics and sacraments picked up on his foreign travels. His rosary and crucifix were wrapped in white tissue and buried deep in his trunk. He believed that his touch would be sacrilegious. He uttered no prayer. Not a word of the liturgy could he recall.

Some one had left a small crucifix on his dressing table. He saw it and shuddered. "Doomed, damned, No. That was never done for me." Then, passionately, on his knees for the first time in fifteen years, he protested: "O my God, I love Thee. I adore Thee. I give Thee my heart."

He arose bewildered, and asked himself: Who was it that said Act of Love? Not Romano, assuredly. Romano is doomed, damned! Weeks passed. He was shaving himself, his razor uplifted, when a voice murmured in his ear, "Memorare. Remember what?"

He demanded, "You know, whoever you are, that I can't remember a thing."

"Memorare," the voice continued, "that never was it known that any one."

The voice ceased, or Romano could no longer hear it. A month passed, when Romano, walking in the hospital garden, stopped short.

"I have it," he cried. "Remember that never was it known that any one who fled to thy protection, implored thy aid, and sought thy intercessions, was left unaided."

He adored the Blessed Sacrament and lifted his head slightly to receive the host. Romano eyed him critically, from a well-favored pew. "Via dolorosa," he conjectured, "good model, but I haven't time."

He was at the moment engaged on some designs from "Aida" for a rich man's palace.

And it came to pass that soon thereafter Lazarus died and was gathered unto Abraham's bosom. Father Ott mentioned the fact when he called on Romano to enquire of his health which was stamping his face with an odd pallor.

"Your model," said he, "the Raggedy Man, has finished his Sorrowful Way and has evaded you. You are too slow, Romano, in your undertakings. You know I advised your trying that. You're not looking fit. There's nothing like taking a little journey along the way of the Cross to make a man fervent and contented."

"Dead, is he?" enquired Romano, and lit his tenth cigarette. "Well, you don't take me for any supercilious Dives, Father?"

"No, but you lost a good chance. It is a mistake not to look twice at a man like that when he has really attracted you."

"You want an alms for him," said Romano. "No doubt you have the expense of his burial. You were his only friend."

Father Ott made the sign of the Cross. "May he rest in peace, and may perpetual light shine upon him."

There's his Purgatory, too," pursued Romano. "Well," he felt in his vest pocket, and touched a neglected rosary. Also, a five dollar bill. He handed the bill to Father Ott.

"Pray for him, Father, and—for me, too, if you don't object." The priest looked at the artist intently. "When you get ready, Romano, you will come to me. There's something on your mind. When you can't stand it any longer, you will tell me what it is. God bless you, my son. Good evening!"

The artist stood at the window staring into the empty street. "The Raggedy Man in Abraham's bosom, I believe. He's not in Purgatory. I don't know. Nobody knows. God knows, I'm in Purgatory."

Then, suddenly, Romano dropped out of Old Shipton. No man of his intimates in the Art Colony knew where he had gone. Some said he had got material in the Leper Camp of Louisiana. He had queer, melancholy attractions, for all his flip ways.

But Romano was neither overseas nor in a Leper Camp. He was behind bars, in a retreat for the mad. Something had happened to him. It happened on a glorious day in midsummer, somewhere near the festival of the Assumption.

His car stood at the door of a rural post-office where he was doing some landscape work for the summer. The little woman with drab hair, in a drab skirt, handed him his sheaf of mail. He extracted one letter dexterously, his foot on the step of the car. It was *Der Enigke*.

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The voice ceased, or Romano could no longer hear it. A month passed, when Romano, walking in the hospital garden, stopped short.

"I have it," he cried. "Remember that never was it known that any one who fled to thy protection, implored thy aid, and sought thy intercessions, was left unaided."

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"Dead, is he?" enquired Romano, and lit his tenth cigarette. "Well, you don't take me for any supercilious Dives, Father?"

"No, but you lost a good chance. It is a mistake not to look twice at a man like that when he has really attracted you."

"You want an alms for him," said Romano. "No doubt you have the expense of his burial. You were his only friend."

Father Ott made the sign of the Cross. "May he rest in peace, and may perpetual light shine upon him."

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