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

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

CHAPTER XVII.—CONTINUED.

"This is why I called upon your son in the first instance. I learned that he had been at college with Hubert, and that they had been intimate companions. I have not seen any of the family for many years, owing to my absence in distant lands, and on my return the first news which accidentally, and in secret, greeted me, was Hubert's name coupled with the epithet 'murderer!' The party, who thus spoke was not aware of my acquaintance with the family, and when I pressed for particulars, gave them freely—showed me the papers in which his name was connected with a murder case, and told me the suspicion regarding him which had been roused at that time had rapidly gained credence. He told me also, of Madame Bernot's helplessness, invalid state. She was in perfect health when I went abroad, and I determined not to call at the house according to my first intention for I thought that by pretending to be a total stranger, and in that character, using all my vigilance, I could help them more than by visiting, and perhaps startling them with my own wild fears.

"I called at the college from which Hubert had graduated, and learned that his conduct there had been exemplary. He was in the company of your son directly that he left college, and to your son I came for information. I did not disguise myself with him. I told my story frankly. But your son was incredulous, and being Hubert's friend, he would listen to nothing which implied a stain on Hubert's character. The utmost that I could obtain from him was a promise that he would write to Hubert, nor in any way acquaint him of anything he had heard from me—I feared if he did so, it might startle the young man—if he were guilty—into betraying himself.

"A few days before we sailed, I received private information that a certain person who had left for England the day previous had boasted in a drunken carouse of being in company at the very time of the murder, with the man whom Hubert is suspected of having murdered, and further information gave me clues that I thought would enable me to find this person if I also came to England; but I have failed to discover anything more, and nothing is left for me but to return with you and your son to America."

"If Hubert did commit this crime it was in the recklessness of youth, and he deserves more pity than censure; but, still, if I could only learn how the detectives managed to get the clues they seem to hold—whether they obtained them by Hubert's own want of prudence—I should know better how to save him from the consequences."

"And then his head sunk on his breast, and he looked so dejected, that my heart ached more and more for him. I began to think that Mr. Bernot might have roused other people's suspicions as he had awakened mine, and it seemed to me that I ought to tell Mr. Conyer of my own old perplexing thoughts of the young man—that perhaps by so doing I might help to save him if he were guilty; and Mr. Conyer was such a devoted friend of poor Madame Bernot, there surely could be no harm in telling him. I felt confident Hugh would not mind my telling at that time, however angry he might have been had I told before.

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"So I opened my heart to Mr. Conyer, and I let him know everything I knew about the poor young man; how he kindly returned to the city to transact my business with the lawyer; and I showed the papers in which he could see by the date the precise day that Mr. Bernot had attended to my commission. I told him about Mr. Bernot's paleness when my son passed the remark on his knife, and he inquired if I would know the knife if I saw it again, and I answered that I could not help knowing it, it was so peculiar; then he asked me how I thought my son regarded these hints, or if he had noticed them, and I told him Hugh would not hear of such a thing, even when I spoke to him about the papers containing the investigation of the murder which he had so carefully put away, and how hurriedly and strangely he answered me when I remarked on Mr. Bernot's feelings at having his name before the public.

"Mr. Conyer thanked me for telling him all that, and he shook hands with me, and on his way out, when he reached the door, he turned back and shook hands with me again, saying 'I had done him such a service; and I felt very glad, for I thought I had helped poor Mr. Bernot.'

"I told Hugh when he came in, but he did not take it as I did. He became angry and said I had broken my promise to him; and when he saw my feelings so badly and crying to myself that I should be reproached so bitterly, he put his arm around me like he used to do when he was a boy growing up, and said:

"I didn't mean to hurt you so, mother, and it's all my fault. Perhaps if I had told you at first when you wanted to know, it would have been better. But I knew you already suspected poor Hubert of something; and I feared if I told you what Mr. Conyer had told me, you would only wonder and suspect the more, and perhaps betray your suspicions. So I thought it sufficient when I instructed you what to say of Hubert, should the gentleman ask you any questions."

"And my son then further said to me:

"I gave Mr. Conyer my promise not to write to Hubert, nor communicate to him in any way what he had told me, because I thought such a course was the better one for the time being; and Hubert's own letters to me were so calm and cheerful that I could not bear to startle him with my suspicions of this Mr. Conyer, whoever he may be.

"I know Mr. Conyer has been exceedingly kind to us; that but for him we should have been disappointed in our hopes, and should be obliged to return to New York much poorer than I came, but for all that I distrust him. I distrust the very people to whom he has introduced me; there seems to be some secret bond between them that I don't like—something that savors strongly of what I have heard of that mysterious society 'Roquelara.'"

"He may be Hubert's devoted friend as he pretends to be, but for all that I distrust him, and I am sorry you told him what you did."

"Then seeing me begin to cry, he said cheerily:

"Well, never mind, mother, perhaps there's no great harm done after all."

"I wasn't as warm after that to Mr. Conyer, but he didn't seem to mind it a bit; and to my surprise Hugh appeared to become warmly attached to him, even inviting him to spend some weeks with us when we returned home. I asked Hugh what was the meaning of his sudden friendship, and he said it was a feint, in order to watch Conyer; to learn when the latter would make the first attempt to make any use of what I had told him. But Mr. Conyer didn't seem to have the slightest idea of such a thing. He was continually deploring Madame Bernot's illness, and constantly asserting that he was afraid to meet her lest his anxiety should betray itself in some unpleasant way. He used to go to the hotel at the landing, every day, and Hugh discovered that these daily errands were for a letter directed there for him, and which never failed to arrive. And Hugh came home to me very angry.

"He's sneaking spy," he said, "and I'll unmask him before many hours," but just at that moment Mr. Conyer entered, looking so distressed, and so much as if he were going to faint that I hurried to him with a scream.

"He held a city newspaper in his hand, and as he sank into the chair to which I helped him, he motioned Hugh to read something in the paper—it was the account of Mr. Bernot's strange arrest. Hugh looked blank, and I could do nothing but wring my hands and cry, while Mr. Conyer poked himself to and fro, and said:

"Oh, and, I feared it would come to this, and, 'it is too late to save him,' and such like expressions, and then he pulled a bundle of letters out of his pocket and holding them up said:

"You were suspicious and angry, my dear fellow, that I did not have those directed here. They are from a lawyer who has been making secret discoveries of the clues daily gained by the detectives—for Hubert has been sharply and hotly driven to the confession he has made; and I feared if the letters came here their regular and punctual arrival would make it necessary for me to say something of their contents; and the latter were so hopeless, so sad, as regarded the poor fellow's approaching doom, that I could not bear to sadden you by my sorrow and anxiety."

"And he threw the letters on the table in a careless manner, and buried his face in his hands.

"I could see by Hugh's countenance that he was doubting and distrustful yet; but when I saw Mr. Conyer so broken down, all my doubts vanished, and I tried to comfort him. He only shook his head and smiled sadly, and replied, when I had said all the hopeful things I could think of:

"There is nothing for me to do now, but to go to see him, and after that to see his poor afflicted mother."

"And the way he went on then brought the tears to my eyes, though Hugh didn't seem to be a bit moved.

"I'll start this very afternoon," he said, "I can't delay longer," and then he got up slowly, put the letters back in his pocket, and went to his room.

"Hugh remained a good while in thought; at last he said:

"Mother, I'll accompany Mr. Conyer to the city; I must watch his movements, and I want to see Hubert."

"I did not oppose him, and when Hugh announced his purpose to Mr. Conyer at dinner, Mr. Conyer jumped up, and shook Hugh's hand, and said he was so delighted, and that his own visit to Hubert would not be so painful since he should be accompanied by Hubert's warm friend.

"Immediately after dinner he went out, and I saw him go slowly in the direction of the landing. When he returned I was alone, Hugh having gone out on a brief errand, and I asked him if he had been to the hotel? I thought he looked surprised, but he answered:

"Yes, that he had been sending a telegram to the lawyer who wrote to him daily, to have permits secured in order that there might be no delay in seeing Hubert when he and my son should reach the city."

"So they went, and I bade Hugh good-by, little thinking it would be so long before I should see him again."

Her tears appeared again about her face, but she pressed them back with her handkerchief, and resumed:

"My son telegraphed to me the next day, that he was well, but that he would have to remain and testify against Hubert Bernot."

"I could not believe the evidence of my eyes when I read that—Hugh, who was always Mr. Bernot's warm defender, going to testify against him. I thought it must be because he was sure of Mr. Bernot's guilt and deemed it his duty to do so; but even then it wasn't like him to drag a friend to punishment.

"He did not say in the telegram when I should hear from him again, nor did he mention any place where I could write to, and in the midst of my sorrow Mr. Conyer came in. His presence without Hugh, even though I knew the reason of my son's absence, frightened me, and I wildly implored him to tell me where Hugh was, and why he didn't return with him. Mr. Conyer seemed very much distressed; he told me how the lawyer had been false to him, that all the time he had been pretending to inform Mr. Conyer of the movements of the detectives, he had been in the secret pay of the detectives themselves, and, instead of securing the permits for which Mr. Conyer had telegraphed, he had availed himself of his knowledge of the hour at which Mr. Conyer and my son should arrive in the city, in order to have them both seized by the detectives, and forcibly detained, in order to give evidence when the case should come to trial, letting Mr. Conyer go, however, when they found that he had not seen Hubert for such a length of time, but keeping my son because he knew Hubert so well; and making him swear that he would tell everything that had caused him at any time to suspect Mr. Bernot of any crime. And I did not doubt Mr. Conyer's statement, but a sudden thought came to me in the midst of my grief, and I asked him what in the first place had led the lawyer to think of giving him—Mr. Conyer—and my son, into the hands of the detectives, and he answered that he had indiscreetly mentioned in some of his letters to the lawyer, the warm friendship which existed between Hugh and Hubert, and how they had traveled together; then he told me that he could take me to my son, and that I must not be frightened if I found him a prisoner, for the detectives would keep him as such, till his evidence could be taken; so I got ready and came with him. He was very kind to me, treating me almost as Hugh would have done, but when I got here I didn't see my son."

Again she stopped suddenly, and looked for the first time at the grim, dark countenances of the jurors as if she feared to say more.

"Go on," said Plowden softly, "you shall suffer no harm."

"Fear not to speak," said Bertoni, bending slightly forward, "you have served the end for which you were brought here, and all that you may say now can make little difference."

Thus exhorted her sudden fear seemed to vanish, and fixing her eyes with a confident look on Plowden's face, she resumed:

"Mr. Conyer took me to the house of some friend of his, and I tried to wait patiently until he could arrange for me to see my son. He said they had removed Hugh to another place, making it difficult to find him, and at last he told me that I would not be permitted to see him unless I too would tell everything I knew about Mr. Bernot, and that from Hugh himself the detectives were already aware of much of what I had in the past months told to Mr. Conyer. I became sick then from excitement, and anxiety, and grief, at being obliged to testify, and I was sick a good many weeks; but I was cared for very kindly. When I recovered enough to sit up, I did not see Mr. Conyer, but I re-

ceived a note from him which stated that he was still searching for Hugh, that he would not come to me till he had found him, and it assured me that I should be well cared for. It also said that the detectives had discovered my present abode, and it exhorted me in the event of any visit from them to consent, for Hugh's sake—for Hugh's safety—to tell in court all that I had told him.

"While I was trying to think what I ought to do, some one did come, who announced himself as a detective; he talked to me a long time, and he frightened me so with threats of injury to Hugh if I did not tell everything I knew about Mr. Bernot, that at last I consented; but I was so terrified I could not properly connect the things I wanted to remember, and the gentleman came every day and wrote down all I told him and put everything in its right place and I studied it all. But when he brought me here this morning, and I saw poor Mr. Bernot looking so pale and thought if it was my son was in his place, and Mr. Bernot's mother was going to testify as I was, my heart failed me; and when my name was called I would not have answered, but my escort remonstrated, and whispered that I might never see Hugh again if I failed to keep my promise, and that made me come up here. Now I shall see my son, shall I not?"

She looked about her as if in search of the gentleman who had brought her thither, and having caught sight of him down amid the crowd, she extended her hands to him imploringly, and said with touching pathos:

"He is all I have, you know; no one in the wide, wide world but Hugh."

Plowden signified that he had finished with the witness, and at a sign from the judge, the clerk led her down to the gentleman who had escorted her that morning, and who now hastened to conduct her out of the court room; but even as she went, she repeated in tones that brought the moisture to many eyes:

"Shall I see my son, now? He is all I have, you know."

The interest with which everybody had listened to that evidence, had been so intense that many drew a long breath of relief when the old lady at last vanished from sight, and there was a general straightening of forms, and an effort to recover from the surprise and bewilderment caused by her singular testimony.

Plowden was talking to the judge—apparently urging the adoption of some proposition—and Bertoni smiled, when Walter Conyer was called. No one answered the summons and Plowden covertly sarcasm in his tones:

"Another evidence of the unflinching invention of my honorable opponent—as I surmised, Mr. Walter Conyer does not exist."

Bertoni rose with that slow, heavy motion which seemed so well suited to his massive form, and returning Plowden's bow, he burst at once into an account of the secret means by which he had hunted Hubert Bernot to his fate.

It was "Roquelara" no more—it was he, the one man, the work of but one mind; and all the power of that massive mind was put forth then. Men who were cast in common moulds caught a glimpse of such might as made them bend in involuntary worship before a creature so gifted. And the creature, in the triumph of beholding the effects of his power on each individual of that breathless throng, imagined his mind—that wonderful, grasping mind which had not been dismayed by dishonor—to be all sufficient for him. He seemed to recognize no dependence on a Creator—he appeared rather, to use the powers which he had been gifted as if they emanated from himself. Men shuddered while they heard him, and yet shuddering, also wondered and admired. He had seized the opportunity apparently, not to show what he had lost by having the secret influence of "Roquelara" no longer at his command, but to reveal what that mysterious society had itself lost in having him no longer to wield its wonderful power.

Grand in the very attitude he assumed, grand in the expression of his face—which was lit up as men had never seen it before even in his most impassioned speech,—he seemed the impersonation of some heroic defiant and triumphant in the midst of the very arrows which sought to pin it to the ground.

As he designed that it should be, every thought of "Roquelara" was absorbed in this picture of himself, and the very members of that mysterious body who had sat in inquisition upon him a few nights before—who shuddered to think of his after fate when "Roquelara" influence should be directed against him—now paid involuntary homage to Bertoni of the master mind.

His eyes lit more brightly, his fiery words came forth with more thrilling force. What to him were dishonor, disgrace, since he could compel from his very judges such deference as they had never paid before, since he could prove that he had never failed in "Roquelara" work, and now, expelled member though he was, he possessed that which was capable of arraying itself against the whole united body of "Roquelara" and defying its sternest menaces—his intellect.

Certainly, if the great lawyer wanted to produce an effect on the society from which he had been expelled,—an effect that should cause his dishonor to be somewhat forgotten in the brilliancy of his talents and power as a man—he was eminently successful, and he was

satisfied of that success. He gradually let his listeners down from the heights to which he had raised them, and dropped his voice to its wonted tone.

"My honorable opponent," he said, "would have Mr. Walter Conyer, or the person who represented that mythical individual, upon the stand; he would interrogate him in order to discover with whom originated the plan of playing upon poor old Mrs. Murburd's garrulity; he would ask him the reason of such an ingenious act, of a part only to wear from the old lady her suspicions, and why there should be so long a delay in prosecuting this case when such a witness was at hand. It is in my power to enlighten him."

He raised himself to his full height and stood for a moment as if he would awe by his mere presence those about him; then he resumed, his tones becoming more impassioned, his voice filling the place as no voice had ever filled it before.

"Bertoni never sleeps upon a thought. Bertoni's mind never relaxes its grasp upon an idea until that idea has served his purpose. When other men buried their cares in the joys of domestic affections Bertoni worked at the problem of bringing a criminal to justice. Had the latter been some wait in the dregs of humanity whose whole neglected, miserable life pleaded in extenuation of his crime, there would be little need of so much secret and disguised work to track him to his doom; if, perhaps, sheltered by that honor which is sometimes found amongst the worst of criminals, such a one eludes the law for a time, still there are not wanting the indignation and merciless vengeance of an unreasoning populace to urge on the pursuit of the unhappy wretch; and when he is found, a whole community shudders and recoils from his bleated face and matted hair, and Self-righteousness asserts that, 'death is too good for him.'

"In this case, however, there were neither poverty, nor ignorance, nor ill-training. The prisoner who to day stands self-accused of a dire crime, was born in wealth, reared with every aid of culture, and trained in the most perfect code of morality. Why should justice have slept upon his track—why, when it was so unmistakable from Miss Calvert's manner on her first examination, that she knew more than she wished to communicate, were not strenuous efforts exerted to learn that which she concealed—the details of her cousin's traveling tour, where he went directly after leaving home, and if his sojourn at that place was uninterrupted until his tour with Hugh Murburd began. Why did every one, on the conclusion of that first investigation seem to be thoroughly satisfied that no member of the Bernot family knew anything of the murder. Even 'Roquelara'—his voice took an accent of intense scorn—'failed to discover the clues which were at that time so plain. It was left for me to gather them up, to give the warning, and then to wait—wait for Hubert's return, to watch him when he did return, to institute careful inquiries which won the information, with whom Bernot had traveled, and where he had gone directly on leaving his home."

"While residing in Bernot's face and manner, sufficient to tell me that his remorse of conscience, together with his fear of 'Roquelara,' would eventually compel him to court his doom, I still resolved to weave about him such a web of circumstantial evidence as should prove at least the thoroughness of my work."

Then briefly, but so clearly that the least intelligent mind must have comprehended, he detailed the successive means by which he had planned all that had been done by the gentleman represented as Mr. Walter Conyer. The mode of proceeding adopted by Conyer, the very excuses given by that gentleman to render his actions less suspicious, were due to Bertoni's orders—orders issued almost before they were evolved out of existing circumstances—and yet, though his statements were so brief he omitted nothing, even to an explanation about the daily letters which Mrs. Murburd had said Conyer received. They were his replies to Conyer's epistles, and they were directed to the hotel rather than to the home of Hugh, lest their punctual and regular arrival should excite the young man's suspicions.

"But lest their regular arrival should in any case be commented upon," continued Bertoni, "I had prepared an explanation for Mr. Conyer, that explanation was set forth in Mrs. Murburd's evidence, or rather in the apology for her evidence—with a bow to Plowden."

Then he told triumphantly how he had made "Roquelara" influence, even in distant England, render to the Murburds an important service, in order that his own object might be gained. He showed how the very possession by "Roquelara," of the persons of Hugh Murburd and his mother, was due to his foresight and care—the separation of the old lady from her son was owing to his thought, that there might be afforded a better opportunity for imposing upon the old lady's fears.

"And this," he said, bowing again to Plowden, "probably accounts for the absence of both mother and son, when my honorable opponent himself made a journey to C—for the purpose of interviewing the Murburds."

Plowden savagely bit his lip, and glared for an instant at the opposing counsel while the latter continued, that but for Mrs. Murburd's illness the trial would have taken place at a much earlier period.

He paused for a second, and when he resumed, his voice contained all the