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JUSTICE AND MERCY; OR, THE FEAST OF ALL-HALLOW'S. CHAPTER VI.

The benevolence of her new but strange friend had set the mind of Flora at rest as to pecuniary circumstances; but there was still reason for anxiety enough, as far as her father's state of health was concerned.

October had set in, and its gray morning mist still wrapped the city in a partial obscurity, when Flora was summoned to the bedside of her father, who was ill during the night; but aware that she had to undergo much fatigue in course of the previous day, had with much patience borne to disturb her.

Within a fortnight, then, after the interment of her father, Flora prepared for her journey to the Elms, where she arrived in safety.

It might be a little nervous agitation, natural to one entering amongst strangers, especially under such peculiar circumstances, and so quickly after the deaths of both parents, which made the check of Flora a thought paler than its wont, as she entered the library at the Elms, in which the family were then assembled.

Flora was the very soul of frankness. Ah! your very frank and candid people are sometimes great enemies to themselves, for they often speak when they should be silent, and really are no match for the wicked persons whom more or less we must all expect to cross in our passage thro' this world.

was a something even in the expression of her countenance which, to say the least, was far from pleasing. Well indeed would it be, if when woman seeks to please, she would first find out what those think of her for whom she is so frequently untrue to nature, and putting on a mask to hide the deformities which so often lie under a fair exterior.

Unfortunately for Flora, as Ravensbourne owned but a bachelor for its master, it was necessarily but a dreary abode for Inez; so that shortly after her first arrival in England, Lady Harcourt had given a general invitation to her to spend the greater portion of her time at the Elms; and being the far more cheerful habitation of the two, Inez failed not to avail herself of the offer.

Poor Flora! lately she had lived only in the hard school of adversity, she was always true to nature, unaffected as a child, and so frank and candid that whatever frailties she possessed were not hidden in the background; her very candor expressed that which many would have had sufficient art to conceal.

To the poorer tenantry on Sir Godfrey's estate she soon became a well-known and welcome visitor, administering to them the charities of Sir Godfrey and his mother; yet all was done with such unaffected simplicity, that she was not long a resident at the Elms before its inmates learned to love her, and the admiring Eustace, if he had had a heart to bestow, would certainly have yielded it willingly.

The winter season has passed away, and Lady Harcourt, attended by her son, Inez, and Eustace Vere, bade farewell for a short time to the Elms, leaving Flora there during their short stay of three weeks in London.

Five days had elapsed since their departure, and one bright evening towards the end of May she left the Elms with the intention of carrying some little assistance to a poor family in the village, and had been for some few moments in conversation with the cottager's wife ere she noticed a travel-stained, wretched-looking man, clad in the garb of a sailor, who was intently regarding her whilst she spoke.

About half of her journey was completed, and her path now lay through a somewhat lonely valley; but she had been accustomed to walk in the evening through the crowded streets of Edinburgh and in the meadows and valleys around her new home, and no fear entered her mind.

'Your name,' he exclaimed. 'You are related to the Mortimers of Ravensbourne: I cannot be mistaken in those features.'

'I detain you because I want money for food and raiment,' was the reply; 'and, in answer to the second part of your question, I require you to swear before I release you that you never make known to Sir Godfrey and Lady Harcourt, who I am, that you have ever met with or spoken to me, whom they happen to know rather too well,' he added with bitterness.

Fancy me dressed like a gentleman, not a common sailor, and tell me candidly who you think I am, and then you will not refuse the oath I require you take.'

Flora raised her eyes to the countenance of the strange man who held her, and her gaze once riveted on those features, could not be soon removed. Then she shaded her face with her hand, and again raised her eyes, as if she almost doubted the evidence of her senses, for beneath the rude aspect of the man, his ill-locks, his haggard features which told of a life of crime and recklessness, she traced a close resemblance to Lady Harcourt.

'Well, young lady, whom do I resemble?' he asked, in a jeering tone. 'You shall say who I am like, for that likeness is allowed to be striking; and when you have told me, and sworn not to reveal my appearance here, I will release you, and not before.'

'Lady Harcourt,' now gasped the terrified Flora. 'Can my surmises be correct?' she added, 'no, her ladyship has no son but Sir Godfrey; you are only playing with my fears. Take my purse,' she added, placing it in his hand as she spoke, 'and detain me no longer.'

'You have guessed right, Miss Douglas,' replied the man; 'I am Lady Harcourt's elder son by a former marriage. I had not the good fortune to be her second son, you see; and you have not chanced to hear about me because my antecedents have not been very creditable to her ladyship and her beautiful son; and as I have to be in this village some time longer, and do not choose to have all my plans frustrated, I insist on your taking an oath immediately to that purpose. Here, swear upon this, he added, drawing forth a crucifix which he wore round his neck.

Flora's lips quivered, and he felt her form tremble within his arms as he thus spoke. Again she made an effort to extricate herself, but she was as an infant in the arms of her captor; but the words, 'I will not swear, release me, or I shriek for help,' fell from her lips.

'I will not release you,' he added with an oath. 'If you shriek, there is no one at hand to hear you; and if they did, it would be no gratitude to your benefactors to let it be known that I am here. This moment then swear,' he exclaimed, 'upon this cross, that no word shall ever fall from your lips to implicate me in any way, or indeed by which it may ever be known that you are aware such a person as myself is in existence.'

As he spoke, he rudely grasped her by the arm, and passing the other arm around her waist, forced her on her knees; and now overcome by fear, her pale lips pressed the emblem of salvation, and the words of her strange oath were tremblingly uttered.

'Now, young lady, you may go in peace,' said the man. 'I must, however, relieve you of the purse you offered me, for my wants are many and pressing. If you wish to know my real name, it is Frederick Seymour, though I am known amongst my mates as Frank Milton.—Farewell! and remember your oath.'

With quick though often-faltering steps, Flora wended her way to the Elms, and on entering the house, fearful lest her excessive agitation should betray her, she drew her veil over her face and hastened to her own room.

Numerous indeed were her fears and great her surprise, that Lady Harcourt was thus allied to one whom she was well aware had led a very depraved life, yet she was convinced that no untruth had been uttered; the likeness between her ladyship and this wretched being was too strong to allow her to doubt the truth of his assertion for a moment.

Pleading a violent headache, which was indeed no untruth, for the fright occasioned by her meeting with this man had made her feel very ill, Flora prepared immediately to rest.—To sleep, however, was impossible; a presentiment of approaching evil forced itself upon her mind, connected with and growing out of this unhappy meeting. She arose in the morning, really ill and unrefreshed by the restless slumber of the previous night; very fear, too, kept her a prisoner to the house,—nay, she even dared not advance to the window lest she should again see her tormentor.

A week, however, elapsed, and she again resumed her walks, though she took especial care not to prolong them beyond a very early hour in the evening, and gradually her mind became more composed. It wanted but two days of the return of the family, an event for which Flora was most anxious, and every preparation had been made to receive them. As usual, the household had retired to rest at an early hour,

and with a feeling of thankfulness that she should be soon released from the charge which had partly been imposed upon herself, although a trusty housekeeper was left at the Elms, Flora, on this the last night but one previous to their return, sought her couch.

She had fallen into a heavy sleep, out of which she awakened with a consciousness that some noise had disturbed her. The strong rays of the May moon lighted up every object in the room, which opened into that occupied by Lady Harcourt when she was at the Elms. She listened attentively, for a terrible fear seized her, and she could almost hear the beating of her heart, so violent were its pulsations. As she raised herself in the bed and gazed around the room, a rustling sound, a slight noise, as of glass gently broken, met her ears. A dark shadow passed across the casement, and in one moment it was pushed open, and a man sprang into the room. A cry was already on her lips, though fear for a moment had paralysed her; but, darting to the bedside, a hand was placed upon her mouth, whilst immediately another entered the room, in whom she recognized the sailor.

Advancing to the bed, he made a sign to the man to remove, and then, taking his place, he whispered,—

'If you value your life, be perfectly quiet; I know that the next room belongs to Lady Harcourt; rise instantly and conduct me to that of Sir Godfrey Harcourt. Not a word, now,' he added, observing that Flora was about to speak. 'I give you but two minutes, for time must not be lost.'

'What do you require of me?' she exclaimed, in hurried accents. 'I will not betray my benefactors, and be made your tool in such evil doings as those you are engaged in. You have forced an entrance into the house; search it then by yourselves, I cannot follow you.'

'Remember your oath, and accompany me at once,' replied Seymour. 'I have means by which I and my man will enforce compliance, if you compel me to use them. Think you that I am going about in poverty and wretchedness, whilst my mother and her son live in affluence and luxury?'

Even as he spoke, the bright rays of the moon flashed full upon a pistol which he carried in his hand; and, aware that resistance was useless, Flora now rose, and throwing a mantle over her shoulders, led the way to Lady Harcourt's room. A thrill of horror seized her as she observed him pause at a small cabinet in which several valuable articles were placed; she felt as if she was about to be seized with a fainting fit, and feebly whispered whilst she clung even to him for support,—

'For heaven's sake, do not detain me a moment; let me lead you to the chamber you require, and then do what you wish; I promise you I will not shriek or thwart you.'

One glance at the almost livid countenance of Flora told the miscreant, in whose hands she was now passive, that he must not delay; and passing his arm around her waist, he supported her through three apartments, and then crossed a gallery which led to that of Sir Godfrey Harcourt. Closely followed by his companion, whose countenance was more revolting in its expression than his own, the infamous Seymour gave Flora into his care, and then proceeded stealthily and rapidly to purloin many valuable jewels, as also a large sum of money which he found in a drawer, the lock of which was quickly forced. In a few moments the work of pillage was over, and then lifting the almost insinuated girl in his arms, she heard him whisper to his companion,—

'We must be quick back, for were a woman's fit to seize her, it would alarm the house; and, moreover, we might not find our way back very quickly to the room we still require to search.'

'Silence her, Frank,' answered the ruffian, with a tremendous oath; 'do not run any chance of losing life or booty for a puny girl.'

Flora shuddered in the arms of Seymour as his brutal companion spoke: the former felt her tremble as he held her, and whispered,—

'Be silent, my pretty girl and I will not harm you, or any living thing. All I want is the means of making money; and I can easily set my conscience at rest, as you see I do not call what I take from my nearest relations theft; having plenty themselves they should not drive me to such actions.'

As Seymour thus spoke, he again entered Lady Harcourt's room, passing through which, he was about to place Flora on her bed, when the shrill loud bark of a dog rung through the house. Muttering a deep oath, he commissioned his ruffianly associate to watch by Flora; forbidding him, however, to touch her, whatever should happen; and breathing in her ear the words 'Remember your oath,' he darted again into Lady Harcourt's chamber, to complete the work of spoliation.

But the barking became more incessant, and Flora could hear the snap of a lock, the clink of

corn and precious gems; and with these faint sounds, as she relapsed into a state of insensibility, was mingled the loud peal of the alarm-bell the report of a pistol, and the tramping of many feet. When she recovered, she found herself supported by the housekeeper, who had busily employed herself in administering such restoratives as she had at hand to restore her to consciousness. Near her, too, stood the butler and three serving-men, who were anxiously awaiting any such communication as she might have to make which might serve to throw a light on a robbery which was considerable in its extent.—That the robbers had entered by Flora's window was certain; that she had heard them, and been alarmed, was equally so, or why had they found her in a fainting fit? and, moreover, she had evidently left her bed, or why had she a mantle on, and was not within the bed, but merely lying outside the quilt?

These were questions difficult to solve; and consciousness had scarcely returned fully, ere they all with one accord begged to know all that she could tell them of the mishaps of the night.

'I can tell you nothing,' she faintly whispered, 'save that I was awakened by two men, who had forced an entrance through my chamber-window, and who threatened me with instant death unless I immediately showed them Sir Godfrey's room. Having forced me to do this they carried me back, and I must have fallen into a fainting-fit as they replaced me on my bed.'

'Nice tidings for Sir Godfrey,' muttered one of the men, 'that the night before his return everything most valuable had been taken out of his room, and my lady's jewel-case gone also.—We must send a messenger off by day-break, and the police must be set on the track directly.'

'Well,' simpered a maid-servant, 'I am very glad the robbers did not enter my room instead of Miss Douglas's; I should not have liked to tell master that it was I who showed them his very room, without which perhaps Sir Godfrey's valuables would not have been stolen.'

'Nor would you have liked the dreadful fright the unfortunate choice of Miss Flora's room has caused her, Martha,' replied the housekeeper;—'it is a pity your life has not been threatened instead; but give me a hand, Giles,' she continued, turning to one of the men, 'and bear the poor young lady into my room, for she is going off again into a dead faint.'

The worthy Mrs. Fenton's commands were immediately obeyed; and then, taking especial care that the impertinent Martha should be singled out from the others, she ordered her to light a fire immediately, and bring her hot water and flannel as soon as possible.

Her motherly care, however, was some time before it was rewarded with success; for Flora relapsed from one fit into another, until towards morning, when perfect consciousness returned, but with it a high fever; and the same messenger who was sent to London to tell the disastrous news of the night to Sir Godfrey was commissioned to send a medical man without any delay to the Elms.

Early in the day two detective officers were sent down to examine the house and apartments which had been entered; the little which Flora had in her power to tell was taken down in writing, the county was scoured in every direction, and a large reward was offered by Sir Godfrey for any information which might lead to the discovery of the robbers.

In much consternation the little party, consisting of Lady Harcourt and her son, Inez and Eustace Vere, arrived at the Elms; her ladyship and Sir Godfrey most anxious to ascertain the real extent of their loss. The constant applications made to Flora, who alone could be said to know anything of the matter, aggravated her malady, and her medical attendant at length observed that he would not answer for her life unless she was left quiet, unquestioned, and nothing said which should tend to bring before her, whilst still ill, the terrible events of the previous night.

As to the servants, they could say nothing but that they found a house-dog, which was the terror of the neighborhood, stiff and dead in his kennel; and that all was perfectly quiet in the house until about two in the morning, when they were alarmed by the loud and continued barking of a small dog which was kept in the house.—One of the men had then sounded the alarm-bell, whilst another, accompanied by the butler in his search, had fired a loaded pistol at a man whom he observed in the act of retreating through the door of Lady Harcourt's apartment; the pistol had however, failed to take aim, and the two had joined in a pursuit which had proved utterly fruitless, and it was evident to all that the robbers understood well the spot from which they had to make their escape, by the dexterity with which they had managed to elude their pursuers.