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

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

CHAPTER XI.

A prison! Margaret shuddered when the hack stopped before the dark, massive front of the city jail. She had never been within such a place before, and she clung tightly to Plowden's arm as they ascended the stone steps, and treaded the stone floors of long, cheerless corridors.

Bertoni, almost at the very head of his profession, and supported by the mysterious influence of "Roquelare," had little difficulty in having Hubert Bernot consigned immediately to close imprisonment. Indeed the secret agent of "Roquelare" had seemed to exhibit a savage bitterness toward Hubert as if in revenge for the long delay of his capture—causing him to be searched, and his pocket knife taken from him lest the unhappy criminal might attempt self-destruction.

So Hubert Bernot, the aristocratic-born, the tenderly-reared, the once high-spirited youth, the cultured gentleman, was securely fastened in a murderer's cell.

It was a bare, desolate place enough, and the officer, whose duty it was to give admission to the cells, and who preceded Plowden and his companion, glanced back at Margaret as if he was curious to note the effect on one so lovely, and apparently so refined.

But beyond a trembling eagerness which was visible in her manner, and an intense anxiety that displayed itself in her eyes, there was nothing to betray the various emotions which were struggling in her soul.

The iron door of a dim narrow apartment was flung back, and something arose from a low pallet in the corner—something, for Margaret's vision was blurred by sudden weakness and it seemed as if she saw through a mist, arms extended, and as if she heard from afar, a voice crying:

"We are free at last, Margaret!"

Headless of the presence of others she went forward with a husky, stifled cry to throw herself into those arms, to sob out on his breast the love which was as true to him now and as tender, as it was in the first days of his guilty secret. But he caught her and held her at arm's length, whispering:

"No nearer, Margaret: the gulf between us is as impassable as ever."

Plowden who remained in the doorway jealously, fiercely watching, saw that it cost Hubert a mighty struggle not to fold to his breast the panting, eager girl, and for the first time since his manhood the courtly man of the world was attacked by something very like a woman's weakness. He was sick of the ghastly wrong which separated those two young hearts, and disgusted with his own base part in life. He turned away and joined the officer who was waiting without.

"Though your crime is known," said Margaret, between choking sobs, "your punishment, your disgrace is none the less mine. I suffer for you, with you, as keenly as I have ever done. I would comfort you as much as it is in my power to do. I would show you how, when a poor, frail creature like me loves you so much that your very sin and its penalty beget only new tenderness, what God's compassion, God's love, must be for you."

Hubert, continuing to hold her from him, and to look mournfully down into her eyes, shook his head.

"It is for innocence like yours to talk and feel in this manner; but, for

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is what you need when your liver becomes inactive. It's what you get when you take Dr. Pierce's Pleasant Pellets; they're free from the violence and the griping you come with the ordinary pill. The best medical authorities agree that in regulating the bowels mild methods are preferable. For every derangement of the liver, stomach and bowels, these tiny, sugar-coated pills are most effective. They go about their work in an easy and natural way, and their good taste, once used, they are always in favor. Being composed of the choicest, concentrated vegetable extracts, they cost much more than other pills found in the market, yet from forty to forty-four are put up in each sealed glass vial, as sold through druggists, at the price of the cheaper made pills.

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"I saw Delmar this morning," he said, "and a few other friends, Hubert, and they all agree in pronouncing this confession of yours to be a mental illusion—the vagary of a mind unsettled by too close application to study. Your case shall be conducted on this ground; and since all that 'Roquelare' can do will be able to

a murderer like me there is only to suffer for my crime with what courage I may."

"There is more, Hubert!"—she wrenched herself from his grasp and knelt before him—"there is your peace to make with an offended God; there is your return to your religious duties to effect. You have made a public acknowledgment of your crime, make now a private one to God's minister, and then, and not till then, will you be prepared to bear the punishment of your sin."

"It would be a mockery, Margaret—confession to a priest now, when I have fled; you can kneel at the tribunal of penance once more."

"I have already done so; I flung my burden down two days ago."

And lowering her voice though her manner became more impassioned, more thrillingly earnest, she whispered the counsels which her confessor had given her for the poor, unhappy criminal.

He listened like one under the influence of a spell until for one brief moment there came back to him the peaceful happiness of the past before he had imbrued his hands in a fellow-creature's blood. But it quickly fled and left him only more vile and loathsome in his own eyes.

He started from her.

"Listen to more, Hubert," she said; and he sank on the bed with a groan.

Approaching him until she was sufficiently near to seize his hands, and to fix his eyes with the tender, earnest, and seemingly inspired look of her own, she resumed; and never did mother plead for an only offspring at the feet of a relentless judge, nor devoted wife imploring mercy for a condemned husband, plead more powerfully, or use more touching arguments than Margaret in her entreaties to Hubert to have mercy on his poor sin-stained soul. Love made her eloquent; love sent up from her heart words with which to paint such a picture of God's pardon and tenderness for the penitent sinner, that the unhappy criminal drew his hands from her clasp, and covering his face with them, said:

"But this is not for me."

"For you, for you," she answered; "and now I shall bring a priest to you to-morrow."

He neither assented nor refused, but remained with his face buried in his hands.

He looked up at last, and motioning her to a seat beside him on the pallet, he asked about his mother and what excuse had been made for his absence, answering when she had told him:

"It is well—but how shall we continue to conceal it from her? Some time she must know it."

His head sank on his breast in anguish at the thought.

Margaret replied slowly, as if she were deliberating the plan in her own mind:

"I think Father Germain, who is your mother's spiritual director, will break it to her, after he has visited you, and when he shall deem it best—that is, if you request him to do so."

"My helper in difficulty, my comforter in adversity," burst from Hubert impulsively, and then he continued in the same impetuous way:

"Last night—the story of my crime, of your faithfulness when the picture was drawn of your wretched burden, a thousand devils seemed to pluck the guilty secret out of my heart; but I could have kept them at bay, I could have fought them down and I could still have retained the horrid thing which had been my companion so long, but for you—the proclamation of my crime would set you free: would keep you no longer the murderer's confidante. Faithful, faithful Margaret!"

He put his arm suddenly about her as if to draw her to him, but he was suddenly taken away saying, with a shudder:

"Never, never must we embrace—as I told you before, the gulf is just as impassable, for the blood of my victim swells it high and wide. Come often to me if you will, with such comforting words as you have spoken this morning; continue to attend my poor, broken-down mother as you have done for years, and when the end comes, if the last prayer of a soul that has suffered hell's torture for eighteen months will be heard, if the dying sigh of a man whose life was blasted by one crime will be received, then shall Heaven bestow on you its most cherished reward."

Plowden's form darkened the doorway.

"Shall I intrude if I enter?" he asked. "The time is almost up."

"No, come," said Hubert, and rising he extended his hand to the lawyer. Then, turning to Margaret he continued:

"This is my faithful friend who also knew my secret and yet never betrayed me. I discovered that for the first time last night, when he tried to prevent the confession I made."

A vivid flash darted into the lawyer's cheeks, but it disappeared as suddenly, and he immediately changed the conversation to the plans he had been devising for Hubert's safety.

He spoke low, but still with no fear of being overheard, for his tact had disposed of the eavesdropping officer before he re-entered the cell.

"I saw Delmar this morning," he said, "and a few other friends, Hubert, and they all agree in pronouncing this confession of yours to be a mental illusion—the vagary of a mind unsettled by too close application to study. Your case shall be conducted on this ground; and since all that 'Roquelare' can do will be able to

prove, absolutely prove, nothing against you, we shall defeat its designs and you shall escape."

"No," almost shouted Hubert, "that would be to doom myself again to the living death I have already endured. I have sinned. I shall undergo its punishment, and now I am only impatient to proclaim my crime in open court that my sentence may be immediately passed."

Plowden became furious. "You are mad, man; you would kill yourself," and then with a somewhat calmer aspect, he turned to Margaret, saying:

"Speak to him, Miss Calvert. Beg of this poor lunatic to have some mercy on himself."

She would have pleaded with him, but he waved her back, repeating more earnestly than before:

"My determination is fixed"—he folded his arms and drew himself up—"I tell you the blood of my victim is crying for this atonement: a life for a life."

He looked as if he saw another presence than that of Margaret and Plowden, and he made no reply when the lawyer said, passionately:

"Then we must save you from yourself."

Margaret burst into tears when she approached to take her leave.

"You will die here," she said, "in this desolate place with no companion, no friend near you."

"No, Margaret;" and for the first time that morning something like a smile crossed his features, "but I shall be less desolate, less friendless, than I have been for eighteen months. My guilty secret kept me an outcast from all my kind. The mask I compelled myself to wear banished me from fellowship with any, but now that I am known, that I need play a false part no longer, this cell has more of peace and happiness—mockery though it be for me to use such words—than my own home has had since the commission of my crime."

The officer was at the door announcing that every minute of the time had expired. A hurried leave was taken, Plowden promising that his influence should break through prison discipline sufficiently to permit a daily visit from Margaret and himself.

In the hack the lawyer seemed absorbed in troubled thought and Margaret also painfully abstracted. Not a word was spoken, until Margaret, as if suddenly remembering something, said with a start:

"Please stop at St. M——'s church—I shall be in time for the last service."

A curious expression came into Plowden's face—a dark, ominous look, succeeded in a moment by one so sorrowful and tender that it seemed to change his whole countenance.

He bowed assent, regretted that it would be impossible for him to accompany her into the church, but proposed that the hack should wait for her; or, if she preferred, he would stop at her home on his way and send her own carriage for her. She declined both his proffers, saying that she always walked to and from church, and there was silence again until they arrived at the church.

The service had already commenced. Plowden walked with her to the porch of the church holding her hand as if he feared that she might break from him. He whispered:

"When you enter you will pray for your cousin?"

"Certainly," she answered, her tone expressing the surprise which she felt at such a question—every breath of hers was well-nigh a prayer for him whom she loved dearer than life.

Plowden whispered again: "May I ask you when you pray for him to pray also for another unhappy soul—one whose torture is as great as that which your cousin has endured?"

She bowed her head, and with a hurried adieu he turned away. Why she should pause and look back in the very act of entering the church she could hardly explain to herself unless it was owing to the lawyer's inexplicable words. She could neither understand them, nor the emotions they roused within her—mingled emotions of pity, dislike and fear of him who had uttered them.

He, having descended the steps, was standing with his hat in his hand looking toward the open door of the edifice.

Margaret Calvert never forgot the expression of his face—Hubert's countenance when it showed his suffering most, never wore such an appalling look as this was.

He turned away, replaced his hat, and quickly entered the hack, while she went up the aisle, feeling like one just aroused from an ugly dream.

Many times during the day that look presented itself to her unbidden—unwished, it came before her: she sought no solution of it, for its cause was utterly beyond her comprehension. It was something about which she could ask no explanation, and though in a puzzling, tormenting way it would associate itself with every thought of Hubert, she could give no definite place to it in her fears for her cousin.

All that bright, mild Sabbath a certain inexplicable heaviness seemed to oppress the whole Bernot household; even the invalid seemed to be affected by unusual languor and weakness, so that Margaret feared to leave her, though she was most eager to see Father Germain in order to tell him about Hubert.

Late in the afternoon, however, Madame Bernot sank into one of her childlike slumbers, and her niece seized the opportunity to hurry forth on her anxious errand.

The good old clergyman was somewhat surprised to be summoned from

the reading of his sacred Office to meet the young girl.

"Is your aunt worse? Does she require me?" he asked hurriedly.

"No, Father; but Hubert does, and I have come to tell you about it."

He conducted her into his study and prepared to listen, his face expressing the greatest concern and attention.

It was almost a repetition of the sacred confidence she had given in the confessional two or three days before, but this time there was no mention of herself. It was a simple recital of Hubert's suffering—of Hubert's remorse; but the clergyman's keen penetration discovered much that she had left unsaid.

He said, softly, when she had finished:

"Your cousin was not alone in his suffering—you, poor child have sorrowed with him—you also have borne his secret—is it not so?"

She averted her face, for tears which the tenderness of his tones, had called up, were rolling down her cheeks.

"I knew you were troubled about something," the kind voice resumed; "on the morning of my recent visit to your aunt when you met me at the door, you seemed to wish to speak to me, but something prevented: it was to tell me this unhappy secret, was it not?"

She bowed her head, still keeping her face averted, for the tears were coming faster.

Her sensitive heart could not as yet receive the tenderness and sympathy from which it had been debarred so long without being overcome by grateful emotion.

The priest waited until she grew calm.

"I shall visit Hubert to-morrow and consult with him what to do about your aunt. By all means keep the news of this unhappy affair from her for the present—it will require the greatest care and tact to break it to her."

His face became very grave and sad, as if the hardest and most mournful part of the whole wretched affair would be the telling to Madame Bernot that her only child was a murderer.

"The servants," said Margaret, "will learn of it through the daily papers, and they may perhaps betray it to the attendant who waits upon my aunt, or they may speak of Hubert in such a manner as to cause his mother to suspect something."

"Tell them," said the priest, "tell them to-night before you retire, briefly what has happened. Eighteen months ago when the papers were full of this case, and they themselves played important parts in it, they were careful at your desire to keep everything pertaining to it from your aunt. Surely you can trust them again."

And mingling a blessing and encouraging words with his kind adieu, the old clergyman saw her depart.

The evening had passed heavily in the servant's hall of the Bernot house. Some of the domestics, according to their Sunday wont, had gone to church, or to visit their friends; but all had returned by a certain hour, in order to be in time for a brief season of festivity which was according to their nightly custom.

Margaret, aware of this practice, waited until the hour arrived; then she rang for Annie Corbin and announced her desire to speak to the assembled help.

"Faith, I am afeard there's something bad up," said McNamee when he heard the order; and Hannah Moore paralyzed. A chorus of exclamations, and questions and surmises burst from the others, in the midst of which the door opened and the young mistress entered.

Silence instantly reigned, and every face wore an expression of sympathy. She approached slowly, as if she were not sure of how her communication would be received, and pausing when she reached the centre of the room she looked about her. Every eye was riveted upon her with something more than respectful attention—with a kind of sorrowful tenderness as if her fair, fragile appearance had struck at once the kindest chords in their warm Irish hearts.

Some one in respectful silence had placed a chair for her, but she waved it back with a smile, and as if the survey of their faces had given her confidence, she began:

"Eighteen months ago all of you were summoned to give evidence on a sad and peculiar murder case. There were circumstances connected with that affair sufficient to arouse not only your curiosity but your suspicion; yet you forbore to wound me with either. I asked you at that time to aid me in keeping from my aunt all knowledge of it: you faithfully did so. I have come to-night to make a similar request. Your master, your kind, young master, lies in a prison cell, accused of the murder of this man who was found dead on the street eighteen months ago."

She paused as if she was startled by the sudden blanching of the faces about her; then, recovering herself, she resumed:

"The papers to-morrow will probably contain full, though not strictly correct, accounts of the manner in which his arrest was affected, and all of you may be summoned again to give evidence. You may even hear a strange confession from Hubert's own lips, but I ask, for his sake who was always a kind master to you, that whatever you may read, however startling the rumors you may hear, you will faithfully keep every syllable from reaching my aunt. It will be necessary to tell her sometime, but she must not know yet, perhaps not

for some days. A single unguarded word uttered in her presence might cause her instant death. I know I have your sympathy my good, faithful people; shall I have your promise as well—your promise to aid me in keeping this unhappy affair from my aunt? Give no hint of it to her attendant, and as she does not read English, and has no friends in the city whom she can visit, she will learn nothing about it."

The help looked at McNamee as if they expected him to answer for them. Either because of the fearless, genuine honesty with which he always gave his opinion, or the true kindness of his frank nature which won for him popularity wherever he went, or, maybe, both, the coachman was looked up to by his fellow-help, and on any occasion where leadership became necessary, John was assigned the prominent position. On this occasion he understood what was required of him, and stepping slightly forward while a blush dyed his face, he began in his simple, hearty way to thank Miss Calvert in the name of his fellow-servants for the confidence she had again given them, and which he promised in the name of them all, should be sacredly kept, adding as the continued sound of his own voice made him less abashed:

"If we should be summoned again, we have only the same evidence to give that we gave before; whatever any of us think, whatever any of us know"—his eyes rested on Hannah Moore's face—"we have only to tell what we told before."

"Thank you, my kind friend," said Margaret, and she extended her hand to McNamee.

"Thank you all," she repeated, bowing to the others, and then with a kind "good-night" she retired.

McNamee's words, "whatever any of us know," had caused her heart to beat quickly, and as she ascended the stair she tried to think what it might be that any of them could know. She hurriedly reviewed every incident of the past eighteen months, back to the terrible night, or rather morning, when Hubert first told her of his crime. She felt certain that no one of the servants had seen or heard anything at that time which might cause suspicion. Then what could they know? But, remembering in a moment that Hubert intended to accuse himself in open court—that, as he had said to her, he would tell her everything, she thought how little difference it made whether the help had become possessed of any of the facts or not.

Too sad to retire, she sat listlessly at her dressing table trying to look into the dark and impenetrable future.

A timid knock sounded and to her invitation to enter Hannah Moore presented herself her face flushed and her eyes red from weeping.

Margaret kindly pointed to a chair, and the cook sank into it.

"You seem unwell," said Miss Calvert, gently, "what is the matter?"

"I'm trying to get courage to speak to you," answered Hannah with a burst of tears, "knowing what you'll think of me after, and you so kind and considerate yourself."

"It is not that you intend to leave us?" asked Margaret with a sort of wail in her tones; for the thought flashed upon her, that perhaps the very servants would refuse to remain in a house, the master of which was charged with murder, and that this was but the foreshadowing of how all Hubert's friends would eventually desert him.

"God forbid, miss, that I'd want to leave a home where I've had more happiness than ever I had since I left the old country! It's not that—thank God—but it's something that will make you think me bold and impertinent, and stepping out of my place; but it's laid heavily on my heart this many a day, and it'll give me no peace till I tell you."

Margaret Calvert's face grew whiter. Was it something connected with Hubert's crime that she was going to tell—something which must be told when he should be brought to trial?

"It's about Mr. Plowden," resumed Hannah. "He comes to see you, and you seem to think kindly of him; and sure that's none of my business, only to bid you be careful. Don't trust him further than you can see, for his deep and smart, an' maybe he's only laying a trap to take your cousin in, the poor, dear boy that didn't do the deed at all." Margaret sprang terrified from her seat.

"What do you mean? what do you know about my cousin?"

"Poor girl! the rapid succession of alarming events had totally unnerved her. Every moment she was for getting that Hubert was bent on bringing himself to justice, and she was as wild with fear at the thought of still another possessing his secret, as though he had not already revealed that secret.

"Calm yourself, miss, for God's sake!" exclaimed the cook, as she rose, terrified also at Miss Calvert's wild manner.

"God knows," she continued, "I didn't mean to speak of your cousin, but in my trouble it slipped from me."

"Tell me what you know about him," said Margaret, and she spoke with such trembling eagerness that the words came forth brokenly.

"Oh, miss, it's only the night that he came back after we thought he had gone away to travel. I couldn't sleep that night with my rheumatism pains, and I was up when the door bell rang. I thought it was sent for; but on my way down I heard the door opened, and I heard some one come in. I listened, for I was anxious about Madame Bernot, but I could hear nothing more.