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LITERARY EXTRACTS.

THE LADY OF ELM-WOOD.

CHAPTER I.

The evening shadows were stealing on at the close of a cold, bright winter's day. Stretched on a bed of sickness, pale, wasted, silent, lay the lady of Elmwood. The curtains of purple velvet, dark and gloomy in the fading light, hung heavily round her, and through an opening, at the foot of the bed, a gleam of red light from the blazing fire now and then fell on her face, but did not rouse her from the deep thought in which she seemed plunged.

There was much beauty, even yet in her large, dark eyes, and delicately curved features; but her cheek was hollow, and the tightly closed lips looked as if no smile of joy had ever parted them.

A hired nurse, the only watcher by that sick-bed, was dozing in an arm-chair, before the fire, rousing herself now and then to glance at the lady who was totally regardless of her presence. The old woman began to tremble as the evening closed in, and she was trying to draw the curtains, before the window, when the clear, gay laughter of a child rang on the frosty air, floating up from the garden below. A look of misery passed across the lady's face, and she sighed heavily.

"Did you speak, my lady?" asked the nurse, moving to the bed side.

"No, nurse," answered a sweet, yet feeble voice; "I want nothing—nothing—that you can give me," she murmured, as the old woman turned away. "Oh, for a loving voice to cheer me in this dark hour!"

Again she lay silent and thoughtful as before; but after a time, she called the nurse, and, as if by a strong effort, said, "Go to him—my husband—and tell him I am very, very ill. Say that for the love of Heaven, I entreat him to come to me."

She had raised her head from the pillow to listen to the old woman's slow footsteps, till the sound died away in the long and distant corridors. The slamming of a door gave her notice when the lady had reached her destination, and she clasped her thin hands in an agony of impatience, as it seemed, to know the result of her mission.

"Surely, surely, he will come now," she said; "for does not love me; he has taught my child to scold at me; and yet, now surely he will feel something for me!"

The door was heard again, the nurse tottered back, and stood once more beside her charge.

"My lord bids me to say to you, he is engaged now, but will come by and by."

The lady's head fell back on the pillow, and the colour that had risen to her cheek for a moment faded away. The nurse had been used to look on scenes of suffering and sorrow, and perhaps age, too, had blunted her feeling; for she had not established her self in her comfortable chair, and sank into doze. The lady's voice once more roused her.

"Go to him again, nurse! say, that I am dying—you see am;—tell him, I entreat him to send for Mr. Paterson to pray for my departing soul. Beg him earnestly to grant me this, only this!"

Again the messenger departed, and again the lady listened anxiously for her return, yet with less hope in her sorrowful eyes than before. Her heart sank evidently when she heard the nurse returning immediately.

"My lord says," said the old woman, "that it is only your fancy that is sick."

"And did you tell him, nurse, that you knew I was dying?" interrupted her listener.

"Yes, my lady; but he said, of course I should speak to anything you bid me say."

"And Mr. Paterson?" inquired the lady.

"My lord said, No; he would have no casting priests here."

The old woman hobbled back to her seat, and the lady, covering her face, sobbed aloud.

"Cruel even to the last!" she said at length.

"This life, that some call so happy, how dreary has it been to me! long, miserable years, ending in a death like this!" And words of long-suppressed anguish, thoughts that had burdened the heart with a weight of misery for years, burst from her lips.

"Poor Lady!" muttered the nurse, "her mind wanders. I've heard strange stories about her. To be sure, there was something wrong, or my lord would never have kept her mewed up so close; and I dare say the thought of it troubles her now."

happy with him!" So by degrees a belief had gained ground that all was not as it should be with the beautiful lady of Elmwood, and some dared to speak scornfully of her, even those who were unworthy to wipe the dust from her feet.

For the suspicions that had gone abroad, the undefined mysterious whispers against her, were unjust as they were cruel. There was nothing of shame, though, God knows, there was enough of bitter sorrow in her blushes and her tears. Her spirit was too utterly broken by daily and hourly trials, of which the coarse world knew nothing, to resent insult or reply to impertinence. None knew how should they know!—how a course of petty oppression, beginning of her earliest years, had conquered all cheerfulness and crushed all hope; and, during her married life, to none but to her God did she breathe a word of the troubles which subdued her, and to which she submitted without a struggle.

The little world about Elm-wood had only seen her brought in triumph, as it seemed, a bride to her husband's ancestral home. They had seen at first, a gay succession of guests at the old hall, and the young bride presiding at brilliant entertainments. But the number of guests fell off by degrees, ladies ceased to be among the few remaining visitors, and when an occasional party met at Elm-wood, the lady was no longer seen among them.

Her husband thought it necessary, at first, to excuse her absence on the plea of ill health, but it was soon understood that there were other reasons (although none knew what those reasons were) why she appeared no more, and her name was never mentioned. She was sometimes seen by persons who visited Elm-wood on business, wandering along the woods near the house, like a pale but beautiful spirit, or tending the flowers in a snug garden, sheltered by the stretching walls of the old hall. Some who had purposely thrown themselves in her way, said, that she replied gently to their greeting, but always in a tone of sadness. On Sunday she never failed, unless when detained at home by severe illness, to walk to the church in the neighbouring village. It was built upon the edge of Elm-wood's park, and a little path led to it from the great house, through old woods, and by a little stream, that stole away at last singing as it went, into the fields below the churchyard.

The whole village was part of the Elmwood property, and the church contained many monuments to the memory of its possessors. The family pew had still its velvet cushions and deep reds, faded though they were, and here the lady knelt alone Sunday after Sunday. Rain and cold, frost and snow, seemed all alike to her. The good rector, who soon learned to take an interest in her pale and melancholy face, never failed to glance at that humble worshipper, so constant at her attendance. Sometimes he saw that she was weeping, and his kind heart longed to breathe comfort to her evidently wounded spirit.

His attempts to make her acquaintance at her own house had all proved vain. Her husband, whose manner to the good old priest was full of scarcely suppressed contempt, always replied to his inquiries about the lady, by saying, she received no visitors. To speak to her on her way to or from the church was his only chance of proving to her how much he felt interested in her welfare. She always waited till all others had left the church, and then stole quietly across the graveyard, and through the little gate into the park. One wet and stormy Sunday, when the congregation was very scanty, the clergyman Mr. Paterson, to his surprise, saw a delicate form of the lady of Elm-wood kneeling in her usual place, her meek head bowed in prayer. When the service was over, he went to her, and offered to assist her in getting home. She took his arm in silence, and feeling that she was trembling with cold, he led her towards the rectory, whither his wife and daughter had preceded him. He looked compassionately upon her, as he endeavored to shield her from the beating rain; for she appeared so feeble, that without his help she must have fallen.

"This is trying weather for one who seems so delicate and weak as you," he said gently. "Surely you should not venture to leave home on a day like this."

"I come here for consolation," she answered sadly; "you know not how much I need it."

"But God is in every place, dear lady. From your secret chambers, he hears your prayer arise, and surely it is not well to risk your life thus."

"My life!" she exclaimed, in a tone of grief that brought tears into the old man's eyes; "my life!—Why should I nurse and cherish it, as if it were a precious thing? Who would miss me if I were gone? Forgive me! oh, forgive me!" she added, after a short silence; "I know these are wild and sinful words. Forget that I have spoken them. Think of me only as of one sorely tried, to whom your ministrations have given more comfort than aught else on earth. Good and kind I know you are. Let my name be sometimes on your lips when you pray to your God. We are told the prayer

of a righteous man availeth much. Will you do this?" she said, earnestly, raising her eyes to his face.

"As I hope for peace I will," answered he, with much emotion.

"And when you hear that I am dead, do not grieve for me, but thank God that a wounded spirit has found peace."

"Do not speak so sadly, dear lady," said the rector. "You must be familiar with God's Word; you have read there, that He who made the worlds, even He, 'healeth the broken in heart.'"

"Yes, I feel it," she replied. "He, indeed, healeth them, but it is by taking them to himself. I have looked round me here," she continued, pointing to the graves by which they were surrounded, "and envied those who have gone before me to that home where the weary are at rest."

Some few words of comfort the good rector spoke, as he approached his own house, and opened the glass door that led into the little study where his daughter awaited him. The lady hesitated and seemed half fearful of entering, but he led her in, and seated her beside the fire, while her daughter divested her of some of her damp garments, and insisted on wrapping her in her own cloak.

There was something so humble in the lady's gratitude, something so sorrowful even in her extreme beauty, unscarred for and neglected as she seemed, that the kind hearted family at the rectory could not but feel a touching interest in her; and when at length her carriage, for which a messenger had been despatched, arrived to convey her home, many kind words were spoken, and none could have supposed that, till that day the lady had been a stranger.

The next Sunday was fine and bright, but the lady was not in her usual place. She was seen no more even in her garden; and the rector, who made several vain attempts to be admitted to her presence, heard that she was very ill. He doubted not, remembering her weakness and her wan looks, that the tour for which she longed was approaching, and gladly would he have endeavored, as the minister of God, to smooth the way before her to the grave. We have seen that she, too, wished for the comfort of his presence, but even this was denied her. Young (for she was only in her twenty-sixth year,) innocent, beautiful, yet broken-hearted, she was left to meet her death alone.

CHAPTER II.

It is time that we should say something of the cause of that grief which oppressed the Lady of Elm-wood; and which the ignorant and unkind attributed to some error of her past life. For this purpose, it is necessary to turn to the history of her early years. Her mother died when she was an infant, and her father, a man of extravagant habits, married a second time within a year of his first wife's death. His marriage with a wealthy heiress freed him from a whole from pecuniary embarrassments, but destroyed forever the peace of his home. His bride was haughty, vain, and ill tempered, and the indifference he had felt for her at first quickly deepened into positive dislike. For a time, he seemed to find in the care of his child a consolation for the disagreeableness of his domestic life; but his weak mind soon thirsted for excitement, and he found it at the gaming table. By degrees a passion for play absorbed every other feeling. The birth of an heir, though it appeared to give him pleasure, did not long keep him from his daffing pursuit, and as years passed by, he saw less of his family, and appeared to become totally indifferent as to their welfare, his daughter left a victim to the caprice and ill-humour of her vain and frivolous step-mother. Few were the remembrances of her childhood, which she, even in the deep trials of her after-life, could recall with anything of pleasure. The spoiled and petted son of her step-mother, imitating the small tyranny of his parents, on every occasion asserted his superiority over the gentle girl, whose spirit was already learning its lesson of humility and submission. When she had grown to womanhood, her extraordinary beauty, though it did not increase the good will of her step-mother, was yet looked upon by her father with something of selfish pride, and he already calculated the advantages which might accrue to himself from her making what is termed a good match.

It was while these thoughts were maturing into plans for the accomplishment of his object, that he made acquaintance with the lordly owner of Elm-wood—a man in the prime of life, yet, like himself, an habitual gambler. In their frequent meetings, those two men became intimate, and frequently played together—up to a certain time, with about equal success. At length the younger gambler began to lose; one by one he pledged all his possessions, and in the end, rose from the table a ruined man. He might raise the money to pay his, but only by injuring his property—past the hope of recovery. His companion observed the struggle in his mind; he balanced the advantages of insisting on the payment of the debt; for, while he wanted money, he yet did not wish for the publicity which the present affair, if persever-

ed in, must give to the nature of his residence. Come! he said, after some reflection, I know it would be inconvenient to you to pay a sum like this. Let us compromise the matter. I have a daughter, beautiful as an angel, marry her, and I will take your doing so as three quarters payment of your debt.

You must be very fond of your daughter, said his auditor, sarcastically, very fond indeed. Does she at all resemble yourself?

I have told you she is beautiful, was the reply. You may even see her, if you will before you decide.

The young man remained for a while in a state of moody abstraction, and then exclaimed, No no! I don't want to see her. I'll marry her, if she is as ugly as Sin. There's my hand upon it!

They sat down again, called for writing materials, and wrote,—the one a promise of marriage to a woman he had never seen; the other, a discharge of three fourths of the debt due him on condition of the fulfilment of the pledge agreed upon. The two papers were duly signed; and the parties separated. And thus the father bartered away his child—thus the lord of Elm-wood obtained his bride!

She was told to prepare to receive her future husband, and she obeyed; for she knew resistance would be in vain. Her father had become so entirely estranged to her, that she dared say nothing in opposition to his commands; and her step-mother showed too openly the joy she felt in the prospect of being rid of one, whose very patience was a tacit reproach to her conscience, for the poor girl to entertain a hope that she would intercede for her.

The future husband came, and was not slow to perceive the repugnance of his betrothed. His pride and self love were interested at once; and he devoted his attentions to the hitherto neglected girl, filling her ear with the sweet voice of praise and seeming love, till he won not only her gratitude, but her affection. In a very few weeks she became his bride, and went with him to his stately home, where, for a while, she deemed herself happier than she had ever been before. But soon slackened in his attentions, and sometimes betrayed the bitterness and violence of his temper even to her. One day, when he had spoken to her with cruel, and, as she felt, undeserved harshness, the feelings that were for some time gathering in her heart found utterance, and she passionately entreated to know what she had done to forfeit his love.

"My love!" he said contemptuously, did you never hear why I married you?

I thought—I hoped you loved me, she answered, in a low, timid voice.

You thought—yes, you hoped! Did your father never tell you of our bargain? I gave you my hand in payment of a gambling debt to your excellent and respected father. Mighty innocent you are, no doubt, and never knew that you were forced upon me; and that now your every look reminds me of the most hateful hours of my life! There,—dry your eyes. Your revered parent has, no doubt, made you a capital actress; but we need not pretend to misunderstand each other. We have each won our reward in this best union: you are mistress of Elm-wood, and I am saved from ruin, which would have been enough, and exposure which would have been worse.

My father! stammered the lady.

Yes. No doubt his conduct proceeded from the purest affection for yourself. He had, of course, every reason to believe I should make an excellent husband. There was nothing of self-interest in what he did—no desire to make use of my house and fortune, or to make a tool of myself. It matters not, he added, with increased bitterness, I have made myself a promise that he shall never cross my threshold; and I never broke my word yet, as you know, bowing to her with mock civility.

He left the room, and his bewildered hearer remained long standing in the same attitude, utterly confounded by the words he had spoken. Was it true? Had he, indeed, said he did not love her? Was every hope gone from her for ever? Was her very presence hateful to him? Oh, that she had died in the blessed belief that he loved her! Where could she turn for help, for advice? Her dream of happiness was past: nothing could restore it? Such were the thoughts that passed across her mind again and again; and in truth, it was a hard thing for a heart so young, and so loving, to feel itself desolate and forsaken.

After a time, the hope of winning his affections rose within her, and long and patient she strove to realise it; but alas, in vain! Months passed on, and the hour drew near, in which she expected to become a mother. When a son was born to her, once more her hopes arrived. Surely, she thought, for the sake of his child he will love me. But again she was disappointed. He had returned to his old friends, and to his old amusements; and she felt at last, however unwillingly, that she could never fill a place in his heart.

Eight years elapsed between the time of her marriage and the scene with which we

now opened. All that she had endured in that interval, none may know. Her eldest boy as soon as he was able to talk, became his father's plaything, and quickly learned to laugh at his mother's authority. A second one, still dearer to her than the first, because she was still more unhappy at the time of his birth, lived only a few months; and she wept alone beside his grave. Her youngest darling, a bright, rosy girl, with dimpled smile, and eyes full of gladness, was little more than a year old at the time the lady of Elm-wood lay on her death-bed.

We return to that death-bed, where we left the dying sufferer breathing aloud the sorrows that had weighed down her spirit for years. Exhausted at length, she had once more sunk into silence, when a slight knock was heard at the door, and in a few moments, the nurse admitted a woman carrying a lovely infant. The lady clasped the child in her arms, kissed again and again its cheeks and lips, and almost smiled when she felt the touch of its cool hand on her brow. You must leave her with me to-night, Alice, she said turning to the young woman who had carried the child. I will undress her. Nurse, help me to get up.

It was in vain that old nurse remonstrated, the lady persisted; and, supported by pillows, she sat up in her bed, and tenderly caressed the baby's clothes, and wrapped it in its little night-dress. She even played with it as of old, and smiled to hear its merry laughter. She dismissed Alice, but, recalling her as she was leaving the room, said, earnestly,—Alice, you love this child; she will soon be no more, there will be no one to care for her. Oh, be faithful to your charge! Cherish her, do not desert her; and may the blessing of her dying mother be with you to your last hour!

The young woman left the room in tears. The nurse sighed as she turned away; and the lady lay down with a beautiful baby on her bosom. Her heart was full of prayer, though her voice was hushed; lest she should disturb the slumber that was stealing over the child. Its calm, regular breathing was music to her ear; the smiles that broke, like gleams of sunshine, on its sweet sleeping face, soothed her and stilled into her thoughts. Full of faith and hope, she commended that precious one to the care of her Saviour; and when some struggling wish would arise, she might have lived to protect and cherish it, that she could say, in sincerity, in fullness of heart,—

Long ago midnight the old nurse was awakened from deep sleep by a hasty step advancing across the apartment. It was the lord of Elm-wood, who thus tardily—his evening's amusements being concluded—answered his wife's summons.

I am here, Eleanor, he said, withdrawing the curtain; why did you send for me? No voice replied, and he moved the lamp so as to throw its light on the bed. The light that met his eyes touched even him. There lay his wife dead; on her bosom, in racy cheeks, touching her cold lips, its round arm thrown about her neck, lay her infant, in its calm, happy sleep. He leant over them—gazed upon that faded form, now awful in its stillness, and on that joyful infant so full of life and happiness. He remembered, as he looked on the dead, her patience, her humility, her unflinching submission to his capricious will; he remembered to what a life of solitude he had condemned her, and then he thought of her as she was when he first saw her, and when those eyes looked lovingly upon him. Only a few hours ago, she was even as his slave, trembling at his word, obedient to his will. Now perhaps, she was pleading her cause against him before the throne of God. Oh, if he had but come earlier! if he only could have heard one word of forgiveness from those lips, which, in their silence, seemed yet to whisper that he had been a murderer.

He turned away: Take the child, he said, hoarsely. Take it away from her,—she is dead. He left the room. The nurse followed, and put a paper into his hand:—My lady bade me give you this after she should be gone, she said.

He thrust it into his bosom, and hurried into his study, where having carefully closed the door, he again drew it forth, and began to read. It was a short letter, dated but two days back.

Something I must say to you,—so it was worded, something I must say, of all the thoughts that now, in my last hours, crowd upon my brain. I have no friend to sit beside my death-bed, and listen to my last words; no friend to go with me to the threshold of the grave, and uphold me when my faith falters.

Alone, and unaided for, I wait for death; sometimes full of fear, sometimes eagerly looking for its coming. For years I have had no other friend but my God; he alone has heard the voice of my sorrows, and he alone is with me now.

Do not fear a word of reproach from me. My short life has been a sad one; but it is to you I owe the only dream of gladness that has cheered it. For those few months, during which I believed I was dear to you, I was perfectly happy. I know my belief was vain