

A LITTLE CHILD'S PRAYER

OR, THE DUEL IN THE GLEN.

CHAPTER XXII.—(Cont'd)

As these words fell upon Esmond's ears he looked smilingly down into Irene's amused face.

"Well, Irene," he said, "if you are going riding this afternoon, what is the reason you cannot take Ruby?"

"I am going with three ladies," responded Irene, "and as you have heard the maid just say, there would be no room for her in the victoria; still, the strongest reason in not making room for her is, we are going to visit the hospital to carry fruit and flowers to the sick. I have not been there for months, I am sorry to say. You know I could not take Ruby there, dear."

"No, certainly not," he responded, promptly.

"Always an angel of charity; doing some good deed to make others happy, my Irene," he added, tenderly, catching up one of the little white hands that lay so lightly in her lap and pressing it to his lips, in the most gallant lover-like fashion.

"Why should I not, when I am so happy myself," murmured Irene. "Do you know, Frederick," she said, raising those great dark eyes to his face, "it often seems to me our happiness is too bright to last."

"Why, Irene?" he asked, in good-natured astonishment.

"It is perfect happiness, and that seldom lasts long—on earth."

Esmond threw back his fair, handsome head with a hearty, ringing laugh and looked at her.

"Shall I do anything to make you a little less happy, my dear?" he asked, quizzically. "Shall I, for instance, form a phantom friendship with some of the beauties of the neighborhood? Shall I try to be impatient or quarrelsome?"

"No, certainly not," replied Irene, flushing.

Esmond raised the beautiful face with one hand, and looked down tenderly into the dark, dreamy eyes.

"Are you really so well content, Irene?" he asked.

"Yes," she murmured. "I have not one shadow of care, not one wish unfulfilled. Our home seems to me a veritable Eden."

"Without the trail of the serpent over it," he says.

He saw her shudder and turn pale; he wondered vaguely why.

"I see my friends coming up the walk," said Irene, rising hastily. "I must go to them. Good-bye, Frederick," she said, wistfully.

"Not good-bye; Au revoir, my dear Irene," he said, smiling.

How fair she looked as she passed out of the morning room! Never again was she destined to wear a happy smile on her face, for from that hour she was advancing steadily to the cruellest fate that ever threw its shadow over a woman's life.

How little Esmond thought as he watched that beautiful and most accomplished woman, of the dark, terrible secret coming at her heart, which was to burst upon the scandal-loving world all too soon.

With slow tread, greatly at variance with her usual elastic step, Irene had passed down the long corridor.

"I almost wish I had not promised to go with them, to-day," she murmured to herself. "I feel so unlike myself—so depressed. I am filled with vague presentiment, and fears that have no tangible shape."

Then she laughed at herself. Why should she, who had everything the world held dear, wealth, luxury, love, feel depression, nervous fears? It was absurd; she must throw off such gloomy forebodings. She told herself she would laugh them away.

By the time Irene reached the drawing-room, where her friends awaited her, she was quite her usual self. More like the Irene of old, Miss Reynolds's who had been one of her bridesmaids, declared, than she had seen her for many a day.

"How good my lady is to the poor and the sick," remarked one of the maids, as she watched the carriage containing the party drive out of the great arched gateway.

"Such hampers of delicacies as she had the butler pack and stow away under the seats. Hot-house fruits, rich cake, and old, rare wines that were worth a fortune in themselves."

Meanwhile, the party were bowling along at a rapid pace down the boulevard.

"When shall we make the first stop?" asked Miss Stables, glancing over her list of places she had marked down to call at.

"To the St. Thomas hospital, of course," laughed one of the young ladies. "Jessie Reynolds couldn't pass that."

"Why?" asked Irene, looking wonderingly at Jessie's flushing face.

"Oh, I really forgot you did not know about it, my dear Irene," laughed one of the young ladies. "You have been away from London several months. Well, the fact is, Jessie's lover is connected with the St. Thomas Hospital in the capacity of doctor; that's why she takes so much interest in visiting the sick lately."

"For shame, Miss Staples!" cried Jessie, "how can you malign me so. I should go to the hospital just the same if Dr. Lennox, was, or was not, there."

"Oh, of course," chorused her companions, laughing merrily at her evident embarrassment.

So at St. Thomas Hospital they halted.

Again that indescribable sensation of depression and heavy gloom swept over Irene's heart, like the foreboding of some terrible calamity about to transpire. Ah, if she had but obeyed that impulse and turned back even as she stood within the portal, her life would have been different, and this work would never have been written.

But who can foresee the end of fate, to guard against dire calamities, even though they lead to a tragedy?

CHAPTER XXIII.

The visitors were shown into the main reception-room; where they were met by one of the matrons, who consented to conduct the party through the main wards.

In one of the corridors, they saw a fair-haired young man—the typical type of an Englishman, whom Jessie introduced to her friends, Dr. Lennox.

"Where have I seen that gentleman before," thought Irene, in puzzled wonder, as the party moved on, all save Jessie, who hung back to have a word in private with her lover.

Suddenly Irene caught her breath with a sudden gasp; as in a glass darkly, the past rose up before her; she remembered this was the identical young man who had tossed the paper down on the bench of the waiting-room, and which she had by chance picked up, and learned the fate, and the true character, of the man she had wedded within that very hour.

Was this sudden shock she had received, the meaning of the depression that had weighed upon her heart all the morning. With a great shudder, Irene turned away. The past was past—she would not rake up its dead ashes—she would forget it.

Jessie Reynolds was, at that instant having quite a spirited discussion with her lover, who had just made a very elaborate bow to another party of young ladies, who had just passed down the corridor.

More than once Jessie had noticed this very party at the hospital, and they usually lingered longest in the wards upon which Dr. Lennox was in attendance—and the one rock ahead in Jessie's life was—jealousy. She could not endure to see her lover smiling down into a lovely face, or even courteously polite to a beautiful woman.

Her brows darkened, as the party to which the young doctor had just raised his hat, with an elaborate bow, passed down the corridor.

"Walter!" she said, passionately, "if you don't stop flirting with other girls, I'm going to break off our engagement again!"

"I really mean it," she really meant it. "My dear Jess," he replied, in a decided English accent—"you've been doing nothing but break off our engagement ever since it was first entered into; there won't be much left of it after awhile. But really, Jess, if the pretty creatures admire me, it isn't my fault, pon my honor."

"You encourage them; you look after them; you put yourself in their way on every possible occasion, I don't doubt," declared Jessie, ready to cry with vexation.

"He'd be rather a tame sort of fellow to close his eyes when a pretty girl passes, don't you know," returned the young doctor, languidly.

"You ought not to think any other girl but one—pretty," flashed out Jess, bitterly.

"Now, Jessie, if you're going to turn out to be a jealous woman, I'll—"

"Being a hospital doctor has just spoiled you," cut in Jessie, hotly; "I won't listen to you—I am going to join my friends," and she turned abruptly away.

"Walter," she said, hesitating a little, "you can talk to Mrs. Esmond as much as you like, for she's a married lady, but if you so much as look as Miss Desmond or Miss Staples, I'll never speak to you again while I live, so there!" and off she started down the corridor.

"I say, Jess," he called out, after her—"there's a head more danger in smiling at the married beauties than the single ones, any day."

But Jessie did not hear, she was already half-way down the long corridor.

As Dr. Lennox was passing the door of one of the main wards, he encountered an associate physician, who had but that morning joined the force of hospital physicians. As Dr. Ross was of much experience, study and travel, with a large practice, he was considered a most valuable acquisition to the staff.

They had exchanged a few words ere they were joined hastily by one of the matrons of an adjoining ward.

"Oh, doctor," she cried, appealingly, turning to Lennox, "will you please come and see No. 23? He's raving and cursing like a maniac. He utterly refuses to take his medicine; and, by the way he's going on, he will be in a brain fever by midnight. It's as much as a nurse's life is worth to go near him. He's a new patient, brought in only this morning."

"I ought to look in at a few other patients just now," said Dr. Lennox, meditatively.

"If you like, I will relieve you in—say ten minutes—fifteen, at the outside," said Dr. Ross, pleasantly, "I shall get around to that ward at about that time."

"I should be glad if you would," responded Lennox.

The two physicians separated, and Dr. Lennox followed the matron to the ward indicated. She passed on, and he entered the long, wide room alone casting his eyes hurriedly about for cot No. 23.

It was in the centre of the room, and he approached it at once, smiling to observe the patient was apparently in a deep sleep—having exhausted his vocabulary of wrath which he had hurled at the nurse he had succumbed to heavy slumber.

Lennox drew down the counterpane which the man had pulled up over his face; and then a low, astounded whistle broke from the doctor's lips.

"My God! it's Heathcliff—or Forrester, rather," he exclaimed, below his breath, in the utmost amazement. "I am not mistaken; it is he as sure as I live. I thought he perished in that horrible holocaust of a prison five years ago. He must have escaped and been in hiding ever since."

"The question is," pondered the young doctor, "shall I give him up to the authorities as an escaped convict, or shall I not? By George, now, I don't feel as though I could, although he did cheat me out of fifty pounds, and put me in a beastly fix for the want of it."

While the doctor was pondering over the strange discovery he had made, the matron re-entered the room.

"If you please, doctor," she said, "here are lady visitors, who would like to come through this ward."

"Show them right in, my good woman," responded Lennox. Glancing through the partly open door he beheld his fiancée, and her companions approaching. In an instant he had forgotten his great discovery.

"It's Jessie and her party," he exclaimed in dismay. "If I should remain here, and be even civil to those pretty girls with her, why the engagement would be broken off again," and the English accent was more strongly marked than ever, as he muttered the words under his breath.

He made a hurried exit through an opposite door, barely escaping being observed by a party who entered, headed by the matron.

"If you are tired, you might rest by this window, Irene, and we will make a tour of the ward; the scenery from this window is perfectly delightful," declared Jess; and to this Irene assented, and they moved on; the matron lingering by Irene's side, explaining the regulations, the regularity with which everything around and about their famous institution moved.

"This is an isolated ward, and here are to be found our very worst cases, madame," she continued. "There, for instance," pointing to cot No. 23, "is a very hard patient to manage. He came off a steamer, tripped on the gang plank, breaking his ankle and dislocating his shoulder, and was brought here cursing and swearing like a madman. You cannot see his face from here; we will cross the room, whenever you are ready, that side may have a better view of him. His face, explaining the traces of beauty, marks of dissipation have nearly stamped it out."

"He is really the most vicious patient we have had for many a day—even in his sleep, dreadful imprecations burst from his lips; and he goes off into almost a frenzy, raving wildly about some woman whom he is in search of. I fancy it is his wife for whom he searches, for even in his delirium he is always vowing though his life be black and stained, he will force her to go with him though he should choose to take her to the furthest end of the earth; she will be obliged to go with him even though she has learned to hate him."

"If it is his wife for whom he searches, I pity the poor creature, when he does find her—he is such a desperate man."

"Why his face is awful to see when he works himself up into these paroxysms of rage, like a wild animal, spots in his eyes glare like two balls of fire, and his purple lips are flecked with foam. No wonder the nurses are afraid to go near him. Poor things, who can blame them; he is a subject more fit for the insane asylum than a quiet hospital like this."

"The only doctor who can do anything with him is Dr. Ross, a physician who has just come to London to take charge of this place; he seems to have a deal of patience with the man. I do hope his recovery will be rapid, and that he will leave here soon. He has only been here since this morning—a few hours—but it seems like many months."

They proceeded, as the matron speaks, nearer the cot.

The man starts up with a fierce imprecation as the footsteps draw near, turning his face toward them.

One glance at that face—and a shriek the nurse uttered, nothing human from Irene's lips. She has recognized Leon Forrester!

CHAPTER XXIV.

That was the one awful epoch of beautiful, hapless Irene's life. The length of eternity seemed crowded into that one moment; the light of the sun and the blackness of Hades to unfold her; the room to whirl around her and her heart to break with one great throb. How wild the wind moaned outside of the open window, and how harsh the notes of a bird sounded, as it flew away in full song.

She did not fall down dead, she did not utter one cry after that first desperate pitiful moan, but stood there like one paralyzed, incapable of speech or action, gazing down in awful terror into the dark, revengeful face before her, her own face white as death.

Had she turned toward her, her own face white as death, the grave opened and given back its dead?

This was Leon Forrester and no other. She raised her white hands as though beseeching Heaven to save her. A chill so deep, so bitter, she thought it must be death crept over her, for the dark face leered toward her, and two burning eyes met her own.

The shock was so awful, so terrible, there was such a ringing in her ears, she could not catch the words the matron was uttering.

She trembled like a leaf in the wind, she quite expected him to grasp her, cry, "I know you, even though you shrink from me—you are Irene—my wife!"

His first question would be, where was she living? and then, the whole story would come out; she must tell him all, even though he struck her dead, then and there, in furious rage after she had told him.

She would tell him the truth, of what avail to hide one detail? She must tell him how she had read that he had perished in the prison fire; and that a year later she had married again, believing that she would never see him again.

How his harsh laugh would ring out on the summer air, and he would cry out with fierce exultation: "You are not his wife; you are mine! You shall leave him, and come with me!"

"My dear lady," said the matron, touching her forehead, "do not cause your terror; the man cannot harm you, he is blind, totally blind."

The words fell upon Irene's ears like an electric shock. Blind! could it be possible that in the dark, vacant eyes that seemed to meet and hold her own, there was no sight? If this be true he had not surmised her as Irene, he could not see her.

In that moment the thought came to her to turn and fly from him, fly to the other end of the world, he could never find her, never, for he was blind.

Irene staggered back, clutched the matron's chair for support and sunk into it.

"See," said the matron, "we startled him from his slumbers, he has sunk back on his pillow again, and his labored breathing shows us he is dropping off into a deep sleep again."

Irene was watching the dark, sneering, revengeful face, with bated breath.

And as she watched, one of the nurses entered quickly, and there was a hurried consultation between the nurse and the matron, and the woman as quickly withdrew again.

"You and your friends have been so kind in coming in this past, madame—helping us out of difficulties—might I be so bold as to ask a favor of you now?" asked the matron appealingly.

"What can I do for you?" said Irene, and she was startled at the sound of her own voice, it sounded so harsh and unnatural.

"If you would but kindly watch by No. 23 for ten minutes," she said, hesitatingly. "There has just been a great railway disaster near here, and hundreds of the dying and wounded are being brought into the hospital, the vast staff of nurses and doctors, the matrons as well, are all summoned quickly to aid the sufferers, they must have immediate attention."

"No. 23 is not troublesome now, he is under a strong opiate, yet there needs to be some one of great reliability left here to watch over him, his life hangs by a single thread."

"It is—there is so much—danger?" Irene managed to articulate.

"So great," returned the matron, "that if this vapor should fail to be inhaled by him exactly on the hour stroke—which is exactly ten minutes from now—his life would pay the forfeit; so the doctors said when they held their consultation a little while ago."

"It is easy, the inhaling; you see the vial to which this rubber tube is attached; press the tube and as the vapor is sprayed out, hold it beneath the patient's nostrils. With care he will pull through. Will you watch by him, madame?"

"Irene could not refuse; she bowed her head in token of assent.

"Many thanks, madame," returned the matron gratefully. "I see your friends have passed on into the other apartment." She added, "I will inform them of your kind concession," and she hurried away, leaving Irene alone with her mortal foe, alone save for the presence of the other patients in the cots that lined either side of the apartment, and they had



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evidently succumbed to the chloral impregnated atmosphere, for they slept.

When the door closed after the matron's retreating form, Irene rose from her chair, and with tottering feet drew nearer to the couch.

"There is not the faintest shadow of a mistake," she said. "I am not mad nor am I dreaming; the grave has given back its dead; it is he, the wretch who wrecked my life with a cruel lie."

"My God! what am I to do. The full horror of my position bursts upon me," she moaned, dropping her white face in her hands, and she wept as few women weep in a lifetime, crying out to Heaven that she had married another believing this man dead.

"He has come back from the grave to part me from my love," she wailed out, "Heaven save me from going mad at the thought of it."

Suddenly she starts to her feet, clutching her hands tightly over her beating heart.

"Let me remember the matron's words," she murmured, in a shrill, piteous whisper: "The patient's danger is so great that if he should fail to inhale this vapor exactly on the hour stroke—which we leave with you—his life would pay the forfeit. His life! And it lacked but three minutes to that time now."

Irene reached out her white hand for the vial, but something seemed to clutch at her nervous fingers and hold them spellbound. Her heart beat. What strange thought came to her in that moment?—suddenly, she clasped her hands together and raised them to heaven.

"He stands between you and your husband and child," whispered a still, small voice to her throbbing heart. "If he were dead, you would be free!"

A great gasp broke from her lips. If he were dead! The thought seemed to burn its way into her brain and take possession of her. The pity of it was, that she dared to listen to that strange, sibilant voice, that was whispering to her heart.

The great folly of her life first commenced in not putting the thought from her. There was danger in ruminating over it, a peril so horrible she should have shrunk from it. And the same still, small voice whispered more boldly because she had listened to it:

"Why should you save this wretch who wrecked your young life? He did not spare you. He stands between you and your husband and little child. If he lives he will part you from them. You hold his fate in your hands. See the dark terrors the future holds if you save him. Love and happiness. Can you doom yourself to eternal misery by saving him? You would but have to sit still and motionless in your chair, with your hands clasped together in your lap while the moments dragged themselves by. The result would be, he would pass into that deep sleep that knows no waking, and you would be free."

"Oh, I cannot. I cannot," moaned Irene. "I am not wicked enough for that. I must save this wretch's life, no matter what happens after. It would be murder if I did not; yes, murder!"

Never did good and evil fight so valiantly for a human heart as they struggled in that supreme moment for Irene's. She grasped the vial with her death

cold hands, and drew nearer the couch with faltering steps, her face white as marble.

"Can you give up love, life, hope, and happiness, doom yourself to a life of misery with this man?" cried the small still, mocking voice again.

"Heaven help me! I am tried beyond my strength," cried out Irene, with a bitter sob.

Some one opened the door, but she did not hear. She did not see the tall form of Dr. Ross approaching, in her intense excitement; she did not heed that he had spoken to her, was standing near her, transfixed with horror as he listened to the wild words that fell from her lips.

"His life is in my hands," she muttered, bending over the dark, revengeful face on the pillow. "If he dies the world will never know that I was once this man's wife; and, believing him dead—Heaven help me—I married—again. If he were to die no one would ever know of that horrible past. The world would never know, Frederick would never know. I could keep it buried deep in my heart forevermore, carrying it down to the grave with me."

Irene had listened too long. The terrible force of the mightiest temptation that ever sued for the mastery of a human heart overcame her. She had listened too long to the tempting voice of conscience. With a bitter cry she dashed the vial from her.

The supreme moment had come and gone. Irene threw up her hands with a wild, hushed cry, and fell by the couch of him whose fate she had decided in a deep, death-like swoon!

CHAPTER XXV.

For one moment Dr. Ross had stood transfixed with surprise as he had entered the door, murmuring under his breath, "Irene, by all that is wonderful! Thus do we meet again after six long years, and in all that time I could not forget her. Irene," he exclaimed, advancing. She did not hear him. He stood quite still, transfixed by the deathly whiteness of her face, and struck dumb by the words that fell from her lips, revealing to him her painful secret, and leaving her at her old lover's mercy.

As Irene falls at his feet, he catches the slender form in his strong arms, and then, the clock on the wall slowly tolls the passing hour in slow, measured strokes.

Dr. Ross has no time to think of aught else save his patient in this vital moment. He seizes the vial from Irene's clenched hand, and holds the tube to the patient's nostrils. The quivering breath and the faint moisture assures him the man is inhaling the life-giving draught which will save his life.

Before he can turn to Irene's assistance he sees signs of returning consciousness. A sudden, unconquerable desire seizes the doctor to know what her waking thoughts will be, believing that her foe is no more, and as he sees her dark eyes open, he steals all unobserved into the shadow of the adjacent curtains, and watches Irene with bated breath.

(To be continued.)

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