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George Leatrim;

OR,

THE MOTHER'S TEST

BY

SUSANNA MOODIE

AUTHOR OF 'ROUGHING IT IN THE BUSH,' ETC. ETC.

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1875.



GEORGE LEATRIM;
OR, THE MOTHER'S TEST.



CHAPTER I.

'One of the most terrible instances of dishonesty I ever knew,' said a lady friend to me, 'happened in my own family, or, I should say, in one of its relative branches. You were staying last summer at Westcliff; did you hear Dr. Leatrim preach?'

'Yes; my friends resided about a mile from the parsonage, and were constant in their attendance at his church. The Doctor was one of the principal attractions of the place—one of the most eloquent men I ever heard in the pulpit'

'Did you ever meet him in company?'

'Never. I was told that he seldom went into society, and lived quite a solitary life; that some great domestic calamity had weaned him entirely from the world; that his visits were confined to the poor of his parish, or to those who stood in need of his spiritual advice; that since the death of his wife and only son, he had never been seen with a smile upon his face. To tell you the truth, I was surprised to hear sermons so full of heavenly benevolence and love breathed from the lips of such an austere and melancholy-looking man.'

'Ah, my poor uncle!' sighed my friend; 'he has had sorrows and trials enough to sour his temper and break his heart. He was not always the gentle, earnest Christian you now see him, but a severe, uncompromising theologian of the old school, and looked upon all other sects who opposed his particular dogmas as enemies to the true faith. A strict disciplinarian, he suffered nothing to interfere with his religious duties, and exercised a despotic sway in the church and in his family. He married, early in life, my father's only sister, and made her an excellent husband; and if a certain degree of fear mingled with her love, it originated in the deep reverence she felt for his character.'

'He was forty years of age when the Earl of B——, who was a near relation, conferred upon him the living of Westcliff. The last incumbent had been a kind, easy-going old man, who loved his rubber of whist and a social chat with his neighbours over a glass of punch, and left them to take care of their souls in the best manner they could, considering that he well earned his £700 per annum by preaching a dull, plethoric sermon once a week, christening all the infants, marrying the adults, and burying the dead. It was no wonder that Dr. Leatrim found the parish, as far as religion was concerned, in a very heathenish state.'

'His zealous endeavours to arouse them from this careless indifference gave great offence. The people did not believe that they were sinners, and were very indignant with the Doctor for insisting upon the fact. But he spared neither age nor sex in his battle for truth, and fought it with most uncompromising earnestness. Rich or poor, it was all the same to him; he spoke as decidedly to the man of rank as to the humblest peasant in his employ.'

'His eloquence was a vital power; the energy with which he enforced it compelled people to listen to him; and as he lived up to his professions, and was ever foremost in every good word and work, they were forced to respect his character, though he did assail all their public and private vices from the pulpit, and enforced their strict attendance at church on the Sabbath day. This state of antagonism between the Doctor and his parishioners did not last long. Prejudice yielded to his eloquent preaching, numbers came from a distance to hear him, and many careless souls awoke from a state of worldly apathy to seek the bread of life.'

'Just to give you a correct idea of what manner of man George Leatrim was in these days, contrasted with what he is now, I will relate an anecdote of him that I had from an eye-witness of the scene.'

'A wealthy miller in the parish, a great drunkard and atheist, and a very hard, unfeeling, immoral character, dropped down dead in a state of intoxication, and, being a nominal member of the Church, was brought there for burial. When the Doctor came to that portion of the service, "We therefore commit his body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ," he paused, and looking round on the numerous band of relations and friends that surrounded the grave, said in the most solemn and emphatic manner, "My friends, the Prayer-book says this; but if there is any truth in God's word, it cannot be applied to this man. He denied the existence of a God, ridiculed the idea of a Saviour, was an irreligious and bad member of the community, and died in the commission of an habitual and deadly sin; and it is my firm conviction that such as he cannot enter into the kingdom of God!" [1]

'The Doctor was greatly censured by the neighbouring clergy for boldly declaring what he felt to be the truth; but it produced an electrical effect upon those present, and the son of the deceased, who was fast following in his father's

steps, became a sincere and practical Christian.

'Mrs. Leatrim was quite a contrast to her husband—a gentle, affectionate, simple-hearted woman. She never thwarted his wishes in word or deed, and was ever at his side to assist him in his ministrations among the poor, in teaching the children, and reading to the sick and inquiring. She had been the mother of several children, but only one, and that the youngest-born, survived the three first years of infancy. It is this son, named after his father, George Leatrim, who forms the subject of my present story, which, though a painful one in its general details, is *strictly true*.

'If the good Doctor had an idol in the world, it was his son George. The lad possessed the most amiable disposition, uniting to the talent and earnestness of the father, the gentle, endearing qualities of his mother. He was handsome, frank, and graceful; the expression of his face so truthful and unaffected, that it created an interest in his favour at first sight. Religious without cant, and clever without pretence, it is no wonder that his father, who was his sole instructor, reposed in the fine lad the utmost confidence, treating him more like an equal than a son, over whom he held the authority of both pastor and parent.

'There was none of the nervous timidity that marked Mrs. Leatrim's intercourse with her husband in the conduct of her son. His love for his stern father was without fear, it almost amounted to worship; and the hope of deserving his esteem was the motive power that influenced his studies, and gave a colouring to every act of his life.

'The father, on his part, regarded his son as a superior being—one whom the Lord had called from his birth to be His servant.

'There was another person in the house, whom, next to his wife and son, Doctor Leatrim held in the greatest esteem and veneration, not only on account of his having saved him, when a boy, from drowning, at the imminent peril of his own life, but from his having persuaded him, when a youth, to abandon a career of reckless folly and become a Christian. Ralph Wilson was an old and faithful servant, who had been born in his father's house, and had nursed the Doctor when a little child upon his knees. When his master died, Ralph was confided to the care of his son; and as he had never married, he had grown grey in the Doctor's service, and his love for him and his family was the sole aim and object of his life.

'Everything about the parsonage was entrusted to Ralph's care, and he was consulted on all business matters of importance. All the money transactions of the family went through his hands; and, like most old servants, his sway over the household was despotic. The Doctor gave him his own way in everything, for it saved him a great deal of trouble. His mind was too much engrossed with his ministerial duties to attend to these minor concerns. Ralph was a better business man, he said; he could manage such matters more skilfully and economically than he could.

'If Mrs. Leatrim came to consult him about any domestic arrangements, it was always put a stop to. "Don't trouble me, Mary; go to Ralph, he can advise you what to do." Poor Mrs. Leatrim did not like Ralph as well as her husband did, and would much rather have had the sanction of the legitimate master of the house.

'By his fellow-servants the old grey-headed factotum was almost detested. "They could receive orders from the rector, and yield to him a cheerful and hearty obedience; but to be under the control of a stingy, canting old hypocrite like Ralph Wilson was hard to be borne. The Bible, that was so often in his mouth, might have taught him 'that no man can serve two masters.'" This fact was fully illustrated in their case, for they loved the one and hated the other. There was always trouble in the household—a perpetual changing of domestics, greatly to the annoyance of Mrs. Leatrim; but the matter was one of small importance to the rector, provided he was left in peace to pursue his studies.

'Amiable and gentle as George was, he could not force himself to feel any affection for Ralph Wilson. He treated him with respect for his father's sake, more than from any personal regard, though the old man was servile in his protestations of love and devotion. Some minds are surrounded by a moral and intellectual atmosphere, into which other minds cannot enter without feeling a certain degree of repulsion. Such an insensible but powerfully acknowledged antagonism existed between the faithful old servant and his young master. They did not hate one another—that would have been too strong a term—but Doctor Leatrim often remarked with pain that there was no love lost between them, and often blamed George for the indifference he manifested towards his humble friend.

'You remember the beautiful old church at Westcliff, surrounded by its venerable screen of oaks and elms, and the pretty white parsonage on the other side of the road, facing the principal entrance to the church? The house occupies an elevation some feet above the churchyard. The front windows command a fine view of the sacred edifice, particularly of

the carved porch within the iron gates at the entrance, and the massive oak door through which you enter into the body of the building. A person standing at one of these windows at sunset, and looking towards the porch, can see everything there as distinctly as if he were in it. Recollect this circumstance, for it is connected with my story.

'In the porch Dr. Leatrim had placed a box against the wall, on the right-hand side as you went in, for receiving contributions for the poor. It was only unlocked twice a year, at Christmas and Easter, and its contents distributed to the most needy among his parishioners. There were many wealthy people in the neighbourhood, and the poor-box generally yielded a plentiful harvest for the destitute.

'The key of the box was always kept in the rector's study, and occupied the same hook with the key of the church. The windows of this room were directly opposite to the church. No person had access to this apartment but Dr. Leatrim, his wife and son, and old Ralph. The latter kept it in order, for fear the women folk should disarrange his master's papers. He performed all the dusting and cleaning, and never was there a room kept more scrupulously neat. He had a private desk for his own use under one of the windows, in which he kept all the accounts that passed through his hands; and it was not an unusual sight to see the Doctor composing his startling, soul-awakening sermons at the large table in the centre of the room, and the little shrewd-looking, grey-haired house-steward dotting down figures quietly at the desk below the window. His presence never disturbed his master, who often read to him portions of the discourse he was writing, for his approval. Ralph's applause gave him confidence; he considered his judgment in spiritual matters more correct than his own.

'On opening the poor-box at Christmas, the rector was surprised to find that an unusually small sum had been deposited. He could not account for the falling off, but made up the deficiency from his own purse, and thought no more about it.

'At Easter, the Earl and Countess of B—— always gave liberally, and their example was followed by all the wealthy landholders in the parish. There was always a good sprinkling of silver and gold to set against the weekly donations of coppers and small coin, to make glad the widows and orphans of Westcliff, to comfort the lame, the halt, and the blind.

'The Sunday after Easter was the day Dr. Leatrim had always appointed for the distribution of these alms to the poor. The box was opened the morning previous, and the different sums allotted according to the necessities of the recipients; and, to avoid all confusion, the portion of each individual was enclosed in a sealed packet, and addressed to the respective parties. After the morning service was over, the Rector met his poor in the vestry, and George delivered to each claimant the packet inscribed for him. This was always followed by a short address, and an earnest prayer from Dr. Leatrim. It was a happy day for him and George, who seemed to enjoy it as much as his father.

'You may imagine the consternation of the Rector, when he opened the box on the Saturday morning, and found the same deficiency which had struck him as so remarkable on the previous Christmas.

'The Earl of B—— generally gave a five-sovereign gold piece at Easter, and his numerous lordly visitors always followed suit. The Doctor was never behind-hand with his noble neighbours, and many of the well-to-do yeomen gave their sovereigns and half-sovereigns, and there was no lack of silver.

'This day not a single gold piece was to be found in the box. The conviction was unwillingly forced upon the Rector's mind that the church had been robbed both before and now. But by whom? It was a Bramah lock, the secret only known to himself, Ralph, and his son George.

'The good man felt fear clutch at his heart with an iron grip. But the thing had to be investigated, however repugnant to his feelings.

'Before he mentioned it to his family, and in order to satisfy his own uneasiness, Dr. Leatrim thought it best to obtain a private interview with the Earl, and inquire what he had given, as a foundation upon which to ground his own investigations. The information he obtained from this quarter did not lessen the difficulty.

'The Earl told him at once that he had given five sovereigns in gold, and that he believed the Duke of A——, who was a guest at the castle, had done the same; that a maiden aunt of the Earl's, who was very rich, had put in ten; and all the members of his household, not excluding the servants, who were constant attendants upon Dr. Leatrim's ministry, had given liberally; that the box must have been robbed, and that to a considerable amount. My uncle returned home a miserable man. A great and heinous sin had been committed. To suspect any of the members of his household was a sin almost as great. What was to be done?



CHAPTER II.

'Dr. Leatrim's was not a spirit to brook delay. As stern as Brutus, like Brutus he could be as unflinching in the performance of his duty. He called Ralph into the study, and after carefully closing the door, addressed him in a voice hoarse with emotion:

"Ralph, the church has been entered, the poor's box opened, and money to the amount of twenty pounds been abstracted. My dear old friend," he continued, grasping his hand, "can you throw any light upon this dreadful transaction?"

The old man was as much agitated as his master. A deadly pallor overspread his face, and tears came into his eyes. "The church entered! money stolen to such a large amount! My dear sir, can it be possible?"

"Only too true. But the thief, Ralph; who can be the thief? It must be some one well acquainted with the premises, who could gain access to the key, and must have known the secret of the lock. It is this which distresses me—that fills my mind with the keenest anguish." He looked hard at the old man—not a look of suspicion, but one of intense inquiry, as if he depended upon his answer to solve his doubts.

Ralph trembled visibly. His voice became a broken sob. "Oh, my dear, my honoured master, you cannot surely suspect me, your old and faithful servant?"

"I would as soon suspect myself!"

The old man continued, in a deprecating tone: "You know, your reverence, that money is no object to me. I have neither wife nor child, and my wants are liberally supplied by you. I shall have to leave *you* the money saved in your service, for the want of an heir; and I generally give half my wages to the poor through that very box, being more anxious to lay up for myself treasures in heaven than upon earth."

"Yes, yes, I know all this, my good Ralph," cried the Doctor impatiently; "your character is above suspicion. I want you to give me some clue by which the real culprit could be brought to justice."

The old man cast a hasty glance at his master, as if he could do so if he pleased, but remained silent.

The look did not escape Doctor Leatrim's keen eye. "Speak, Ralph! Speak out like a man. I feel certain that you know something about it."

"And suppose I do,"—he came a step nearer to his master, and spoke in low, mysterious tones,— "that something had better remain unsaid. You are a rich man; twenty or thirty pounds are nothing to you. You gave twice that sum last week to get Hall out of jail; replace the money, and depend upon my word that the felony will never be repeated."

"And let the culprit escape without the punishment due to his crime—and such a crime! Would that be just, old man?"

"It would be merciful," returned Ralph, drily. "A knowledge of the truth would do no good; it would only make your reverence unhappy."

"I must not consult my own feelings on the subject," said the Rector, greatly excited. "No; though the felon were my son, who is dearer to me than my own life, and I could effectually conceal his guilt, he should pay the penalty due to his crime."

The old man shuddered and drew back a few paces. "Your reverence has made a pretty shrewd guess. It was Master George!"

"George? my George?" The Doctor sank into his study chair. He grasped at the arms convulsively. His broad chest heaved and panted, his breath came in hoarse gasps. He was too much stunned to speak. Ralph poured out a glass of water, and held it to his white and rigid lips.

"'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.' The Lord help and comfort you, my dear master, under this heavy affliction. We are all liable to temptation. Try and forgive your son."

"My son! Never call him my son again. I disown him—cast him off for ever. George, George, this will kill me! I loved and trusted you so much—would have given my life to save yours any day—and you have disgraced my name and

calling, and broken my heart.—But are you sure, old man?" he cried, clutching Ralph by the shoulder; "sure that my George did this horrible thing?"

"For God's sake, sir, moderate your anger. Master George is very young; he may never do the like again."

"That is no answer to my question," cried the wretched father, tightening his grasp upon the old man's arm. "I do not ask you to palliate his guilt. It admits of no excuse. Did you see him do it? Tell me that—tell me quickly. I am in no humour for trifling."

"Ay, seeing is believing," said the old man, sullenly. "As your reverence knows the worst, it is of no use hiding the details. I saw Master George take the money."

'The Doctor groaned in anguish of spirit.

"How—when—where did you see him do it? May you not have been mistaken?"

"Impossible, sir. I would not advance a thing of this nature without I had positive proof. I repeat to you again, on my word of honour, on the faith of a Christian, that I saw him do it. What more do you require?"

"It is enough," sighed the miserable father, covering his face with his hands. "George, George! my son, my only son; have I deserved this at your hands? The trial is too great for flesh and blood to bear. O my God! my just and righteous God! Thou hast shattered my idol of clay to pieces, and my heart lies broken and trampled in the dust. Ralph, tell the wretched boy to come to me directly."

'The old man hesitated. "Not while you are in this excited state, my dear master. Wait a while, until your passion calms down; it is apt to betray you into sin. I implore you to deal leniently with the lad. Remember it is his first offence. He may repent, and you may save your son."

"Yes; if I could believe that it was his first offence. The same thing happened at Christmas. He has become hardened in successful villany. The crime is not against me alone; it is against the Church, and must be punished accordingly. Don't raise your hands in that deprecating manner, Ralph, or attempt to plead for him," and he stamped his foot impatiently; "I must and will be obeyed. Why do you loiter, old man? Go for him directly."

'Just then a rap came to the door.

'Ralph opened it, for he knew the step, and the accused stood before them, smiling and serene, unconscious of the thunder-clouds that lowered above his head. He advanced a few paces into the room, then stood still. His eyes wandered from his father's death-pale face to the downcast countenance of the old serving-man. Surprised and distressed, he wondered what it could mean. His mother had been confined to her chamber for some days with a serious attack of lung disease. The doctor had just seen her, and pronounced her out of danger; he came to bring the glad tidings to his father. The first thought that struck him was, that anxiety about her had produced the dreadful agitation that his father, with all his stoical philosophy, found it impossible to restrain, and which was so painful for him to witness. He hurried to his side. "Don't be alarmed, my dear father, mamma is better. She sent me to tell you so, and that she wishes to see you for a few minutes."

'He met the stern severity of Dr. Leatrim's glance; it chilled him to the heart. He drew back, regarding him in wondering surprise.

"What is the matter, my father? Something dreadful has happened. Are you ill?"

"Yes, sir, I am ill—sick at heart—sick of a malady that will bring my grey hairs in sorrow to the grave. My wound is incurable, and the hand of a wicked son has dealt the blow."

"Father! what do you mean? I do not understand these terrible words;" and the boy raised the calm, inquiring glance of his clear, candid eyes to the father's clouded brow and rigid face. "In what manner can I have offended you?"

"Miserable boy, if you had only offended *me*, I could bear it and forgive you; but you have committed a crime against God—a crime so great, that the felon who will be hung next week at N—— for murder is innocent in comparison."

'George gazed steadily into his father's face as he said slowly, and with blanched and quivering lips, "What have I

done?"

"Robbed the poor! Stolen thirty pounds in gold from that box" (pointing to the poor's box on the table before him); "and you dare to ask me what you have done, and, knowing your guilt, to raise your hardened eyes to mine!"

The hot blood rushed in a crimson tide into the face of the accused; he drew up his slight figure to its full height, and looked a man in the strength of his indignation. "The guilty alone are cowards," he said, softening the vehemence of his manner; "it is only truth that dare look at justice without quailing. If I am guilty of the crime of which you accuse me, father, I am no longer worthy to be your son. Who, then, is my accuser? Who charges me with the guilt of a crime so base? Who dares to tell me to my face that I did this foul wrong?"

"One who saw you do it."

"The man does not live who saw me do it. The spirit does not live who read in my heart a thought so vile. The God to whom the secrets of all hearts are open knows my innocence, knows that I am belied. O father! dear, honoured father! do not look so sternly upon me. I have thought at times that you could read my heart with that searching gaze. Oh, read it now! It is bared for your inspection. I do not shrink from the investigation. Do not pronounce me guilty until you have sifted the matter thoroughly. Innocence is stronger than guilt. I never took the money. I know nothing about it, so help me God!"

Dr. Leatrim's heart was touched. His eyes were full of tears. He made a motion to Ralph Wilson to speak.

"Master George," said the old man, coming close up to the agitated youth, and laying his hand upon his shoulder. The lad shuddered, and shrank from his touch as if he had suddenly come in contact with a viper. "How can you speak in that hardened manner to your father? Are not you ashamed of what you have done? Will you add falsehood to theft?"

"Peace, old man! This is no business of yours. I appeal to my father, not to you." Then, looking sternly in the old man's face, he added in a bitter tone: "Perhaps you are the traitor who has poisoned his mind against me. If so, speak out. I do not fear you. I defy your malice."

"Bold words, Master George, and boldly spoken. But facts are hard things to disprove." Then, going close up to the lad, he said in a cool, deliberate tone, "I saw you take the money out of that box."

"Old villain, you lie!"

"George!" cried the Doctor in an angry tone, lifting his pale face from between his supporting hands, "how dare you use such language to my friend—my father's friend?"

"No friend to you, sir, when he charges your son with a crime he never committed. I spoke rashly; anger is always intemperate. You must make some allowance for my just indignation." Again he turned and confronted his grey-haired accuser: "You saw me take the money out of that box? When did I take it?"

"Last Friday afternoon. You came into the study while I was writing out a receipt at my desk. You were in a great hurry; I don't think you saw me."

"I did see you."

"Ha!" cried the Rector, who was now sitting upright in his chair, intently listening to the conversation. "You own, then, that you were in the study at that hour?"

"I have no wish to conceal the fact," returned George.

"It would be of little use his attempting to deny it," said Ralph, pointedly. "He came in and took the key of the box from the hook on which it always hangs."

"I did not take the key of the box; in that, at least, you are under a strange delusion."

"O Master George!" Ralph shook his head, and raised his hands in pious horror.

"Where did he go, Ralph, when he left the study?" asked Dr. Leatrim.

"I am not quite certain, sir. I think he went first into the garden, and then across the road into the churchyard. When he took down the key, he seemed very much confused. There was a look in his eyes which made me mistrust him, and I went to the window, which commands a view of the inside of the porch. If you come here, sir," continued Ralph, advancing to the window, "you will see everything as plainly as if you were there."

"I know it."

"Well, sir, I saw Master George take down the box, place it on the bench by the door, unlock it, and take out something. You may guess what that was, for he was some minutes examining the contents."

George Leatrim turned very pale, and visibly trembled; but he never took his eyes, from the old man's face.

"George Leatrim," said the Doctor, "you are now at liberty to give your explanation of this extraordinary conduct. I charge you to answer truly the questions I put to you. I do not mean to condemn you unheard. What did you want in the study last Friday afternoon?"

"I went there to seek you, and not finding you, I took down the key of the iron gates that open into the porch of the church, and went to look for you in the garden."

"What did you want with me?"

"You gave me on my birthday a silver crown piece."

"I did so. My father gave it to me when a boy of your age. It was one of the coins struck in commemoration of George III.'s coronation. What of that?"

"I wished to give it to God. I went into the study to ask your permission to do so, as it was a present from you. I found Ralph Wilson writing, as he says, and you absent. I took the key of the church—not of the poor's box, as he affirms, for I could make my deposit without that—and went into the garden, hoping to find you there. I then made up my mind to put the piece into the box, as it was getting late. This I did without taking down the box, a fact which that man knows as well as I do. I returned to the study and replaced the large iron key. Ralph was no longer there. This is the truth—the whole truth; so help me God!"

The lad, before so calm, now flung himself in an agony of tears at his father's feet, and clasping his knees, cried out in piteous tones, "Father, do you believe me?"

The Doctor pushed him aside. "The evidence is too strong against you. I wish I could."

"Father, did I ever deceive you?"

"Never, that I am conscious of, until now."

"Did you ever detect me in an act of dishonesty?"

"Never."

"Then how can you condemn me? You will say, upon the evidence of this *honest* man. Am I not as worthy of belief as Ralph Wilson?"

"His character is above suspicion."

"So ought mine to be," said the lad proudly.

"Ralph is incapable of falsehood. How dare you to insinuate that he could be capable of such a crime? What inducement could that pious, grey-headed old man have for slandering the son of his friend and benefactor? I am so certain of his fidelity, that I know he would rather bear the brand of shame than bring dishonour upon me and mine."

"It is strange," mused George, unconsciously uttering his thoughts aloud, and half repenting the harsh language he had used to the old servant. "If he has not plotted this accusation against me to hide his own guilt, he has made a grievous mistake."

"It is no mistake!" cried Ralph indignantly. "I saw you take the money. You can't persuade me out of my senses. I have borne an honest character all my life. It is not a beardless boy that can rob me of it in my old age."

"It may be possible, Ralph, that you were mistaken," said Dr. Leatrim, after a long and painful silence, in which he had been summing up the evidence on both sides. "The boy's account of himself is very clear. George, I will give you one trial more. If I find that crown piece in the box, I will believe that Ralph is in error, that some villain unknown to us has been the robber."

"Most joyfully, dear father!" exclaimed George, springing from his knees beside the Rector, and bringing him the box. "God will attest my innocence, and prove to you that I have spoken the truth."

'A gleam of hope shot through the thick gloom that had gathered round Dr. Leatrim. With a steady hand he unlocked the box. The crown piece was not there!

"Liar!" he cried, in a tone of mingled contempt and horror. "What have you to say for yourself now?"

'George uttered a sharp and bitter cry of disappointment. He pressed his hands tightly over his breast, as he murmured in a hollow, broken voice, "Nothing."

"You plead guilty?"

"I should prove myself a liar, sir, if I did."

"Liar and thief! Base hypocrite! Kneel down and ask pardon of that worthy man for the injurious language you have used towards him."

"Never!" George Leatrim fixed his brow like iron. "I will die first."

"You deserve death, sir," cried his father, rising in great anger; "and I would inflict upon you the utmost penalty of the law were it not for your poor mother."

"Oh, my mother!" said George, in a low, heart-broken voice; "this disgrace will kill her."

'Dr. Leatrim was too much overcome by passion to hear that despairing moan, his pride too deeply wounded to pity and forgive; and he continued, with the utmost severity of look and manner: "Ay, wretched boy, you should have thought of that before; but not even to spare her feelings can I neglect my duty. I cannot demean myself by touching a thing so vile. Ralph, whom you have calumniated, shall inflict upon you a punishment suited to the baseness of your crime. Wilson, you will find a light cane in that corner; bring it here."

"You do not mean to chastise me like a dog, father?"

"Never address me by that title again, sir, until deep repentance and a long-continued course of well-doing restore you once more to my love and favour—though never, never can you again occupy the place you once held in my heart. You have acted like a felon, and shall receive a felon's reward."

"Beware what you do, sir," cried George, frowning in his turn. "Get your menial to punish me in this degrading manner, and you will repent it to the last day of your life."

"Oh, monstrous depravity! Do you dare to threaten me? Take off your jacket, sir.—Ralph, give him twenty lashes, and don't spare the whip."

'The man drew back. "I cannot strike my master's son."

"Do as I bid you."

'The boy stood firm as a rock, his lips compressed, his brow rigid, and his face livid in its ghastly pallor. Turning from his stern parent to the old man, he said, with an air of calm indifference:

"I am ready; perform your task. I am not the first victim who has suffered wrongfully. My Saviour endured a harder scourge; I will learn patience from His cross."

"What barefaced wickedness!" groaned the Doctor. "God grant him repentance, and save his miserable soul."

"Amen," said Ralph, as he turned to his abhorrent task with an energy equal to the guilt of the criminal.

George bore the severe castigation without a murmur. When it was over, Doctor Leatrim told him to go to his own room, and pray to God to soften his hard and impenitent heart.

As the boy passed his father on his way out, he gave him a look full of love and compassion, and said, in a firm voice:

"Sir, I pity and forgive you. If you have erred, it was under the full conviction that you were doing your duty."

He closed the door softly, and staggered up to his own chamber.

What was there in that look that went so home to the heart of the stern father—in those loving, broken words of the poor abused boy? If they did not stagger the conviction of his guilt, they made him feel most unhappy. Had he acted well, or wisely, or like a Christian? Was the punishment that he had inflicted—so harsh and degrading to a sensitive mind—likely to produce the desired effect? He could not answer the question in a manner at all satisfactory to his mind, or still the sharp upbraidings of conscience; and flinging himself upon his knees, he buried his face in his hands, and offered up to God an agony of repentant tears.



CHAPTER III.

'George Leatrim's first thought was to go to his mother; but then she was ill, and happily unconscious of what had taken place. Besides, like his father, she might believe the evidence that Ralph had witnessed against him, and he had not the fortitude to bear that. As his passion subsided, he had courage to recall the painful events of the past hour, and to acknowledge that the circumstances by which he was surrounded were suspicious enough to condemn him in any court of law, and must be maddening to a proud, sensitive man like his father. Struggling with the shame and agony of his position, he could not recognise this before, or admit that both his father and Ralph might be deceived.

'He had never felt the severe corporeal punishment during its infliction. His mind was in too violent a state of agitation to care for bodily suffering; but now that he was alone, the fiery indignation that had upheld his spirit in the hour of his humiliation flickered and went out, and the sense of degradation and intolerable wrong alone remained.

'He remembered how his father had spurned him from his feet, had called him a thief and a liar, and witnessed unmoved the infliction of a cruel punishment, administered by the hand of the menial who had accused him of the crime; and had ordered him from his presence without one word of pity or affection.

'These after-thoughts were terrible. George felt that he had not deserved this severity, and the tears which pride had restrained while under the weight of Ralph Wilson's unsparing hand now burst forth in a torrent, and he wept until the lamp of life flickered to extinction in his panting breast.

'The mother whom he wished to save from the knowledge of his degradation awoke suddenly from a short and disturbed sleep. She heard the sobs and moans in the adjoining room, and recognised the voice of her son. The next moment saw her seated upon his bed, her arms around the weeping boy. All sense of her own sickness, of her weak state, was gone. She was only conscious of his intense mental agony.

'He placed his aching head upon her faithful breast, he wound his trembling arms around her slender neck, and poured into her sympathizing ear the terrible tale of his wrongs,—how he had been falsely accused of the commission of a heinous crime, his protestations of innocence disregarded, and had been sentenced by his father to receive a punishment more galling to him than death; that he had been tempted to rebel against his father's authority, and curse the hand that smote him—to hate where he had loved with such fond idolatry.

'The good mother listened attentively, and weighed every circumstance. The frankness of his unreserved confession convinced her of its truth. When all the sad tale was told, she took him in her pitying arms, and told him that, though all the world should believe him guilty, she felt that he was innocent from her very soul.

"God bless you, dearest, best mother," sobbed the poor boy, covering her hand with kisses. "I knew you would not condemn me. I never have, nor ever will give you cause to be ashamed of me. But my father—it seems unnatural, monstrous that he should believe me guilty at once. I shall never get over it. It crushes my heart; it presses out my life. If I could only convince him of my innocence, I could die in peace."

"Don't talk of dying, George. Leave your cause to God. He can bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make the black cloud that now envelopes you as clear as the noonday. Let me go to your father, George; I think I can convince him of your innocence, and that he has acted too hastily."

'Exhausted as he was, George grasped his mother's hand, and held her fast. "I could not see him again while this conflict is going on in my mind—not while he looks upon me as a felon, a disgrace to his name and family. The brand must be removed from my brow before I meet him face to face. I want to love him as I once loved him. I feel as if I never could love him again."

'Again the voice became choked and hoarse, and the lad gave way to a fresh agony of tears. After a while he grew calmer, and said in a whisper: "Mother, pray for me—pray with me, that I may bear this cross with Christian fortitude, and be taught to forgive my enemies—yes, as He, the dear Master, forgave them," he continued, reverently folding his hands together, "and gave His life for sinners like me, and died, the just for the unjust."

'They prayed long and earnestly, that sorrowful mother and son. At length a light broke over the pallid countenance of the youth; he raised his head slowly and with difficulty from that dear mother's supporting arms, and gazed into her tearful

eyes with a look of unutterable love. "Mother, blessed mother," he whispered, "the agony is over; I feel calm and happy now. Our prayers are accepted; the divine peace which Christ bestowed upon His disciples, His last, best gift, is filling my heart, and the anger I felt at my dear father's unjust suspicions is lost in pity and love. My sorrows are over; his, alas! are to come. To you, dearest mother, I leave the task of reconciliation. You will vindicate my memory, and teach him to respect me in death. And that miserable old man—tell him to deal gently with him for my sake. Tell him that I forgive him, that he must forgive him also, and lead the sinner back to God." He paused, and panted for breath. "George," cried the terrified mother, "you are ill; let me send for Dr. Aldis, and call your father."

"Too late! who can heal a broken heart? It will soon be over. God is dealing very gently with me, beloved mother. Let the thought console you that you have a son in heaven. But my father, my dear, unhappy father, may God comfort him! It grows very dark; I cannot see your sweet face, mother, but all around is joy and peace."

A shade passed over the noble young face, a tremor shook the slight frame of the dying boy, and the enfranchized spirit, throwing off the last coil of clay, followed the unseen messenger to the land of the hereafter.

A shriek, a loud, piercing shriek, rang through the silent house. Dr. Leatrim started from his knees and rushed up-stairs. The next moment he was standing beside the bed of his son, upon which his wife was sitting with the head of the dead boy in her lap.

The Doctor staggered like a drunken man, and held to the bed-post for support. He comprehended the awful truth at a glance, but the conviction was too terrible to receive at once. It was an illusion of the senses, a ghastly vision; it was too dreadful to be a hard, everyday fact. He had poured out his soul to God; had deplored to the great Judge that his sentence had been too severe, that kindness would have done more to soften the proud heart of the boy than the violent course he had adopted. He had just made up his mind to go to George, and once more address him with love and confidence, when that horrid cry, wrung from a mother's breaking heart, closed the doors of mercy for ever, and left him desolate and childless.

"Mary," he gasped out, "do not say that he is dead! It is but sleep or exhaustion. It cannot be that he is dead?"

His wife was quite calm now. With a mournful smile she pointed to the beautiful face of the dead. "The seal of God is on that brow. Your severity could only destroy the body; God has claimed the soul. I cannot weep for him; he is happier than his parents. Can you now look in that pure face and believe him guilty?"

"O woman, great is your faith. But the proof—how can I do away with the proof of his crime?"

"Leave that to me. I have a solemn duty to perform for my murdered son. May God give me strength for the task. Call Ralph Wilson, but do not tell him what has happened."

Humbled and subdued, but still unconvinced of his son's innocence, the Doctor left the room, and shortly returned, followed by the old man.

Mrs. Leatrim motioned to him to approach the bed.

Rigid and immovable, the Doctor resumed his place, still grasping the bed-post to support him from falling. Mrs. Leatrim spoke slowly and with some effort, but every word fell distinctly upon his ear.

"Ralph Wilson, this is your work!"

"I, my lady? I did not kill him! I did not strike him hard enough for that. It was the Doctor that ordered me to do it. I begged him to have mercy on the lad. O Lord! who would have thought of his taking a little beating so to heart?"

The old man turned from the bed, and cried aloud.

"A slanderous tongue is sharper than a two-edged sword; to noble natures like his, it strikes home to the heart. Ralph Wilson, you are an old man standing on the very verge of the grave. You accused my son of theft, and declared on your word of honour as a Christian that you saw him commit the robbery!"

"Yes, my lady. A dreadful business, my lady, but too true."

"I demand, in proof of this, that you come here and lay your hands upon the brow of your victim, and swear by the living

God, by your hopes of salvation through the blood of Christ, that you saw George Leatrim commit this crime."

'The man made a few steps forward. His face became livid, large drops of perspiration trickled down his forehead, his teeth chattered together, and a universal spasm convulsed his features.

"You dare not do it!" said Mrs. Leatrim, pointing to the calm, majestic face of her son. "To witness against him now were to lie in the face of God!"

"I have murdered him!" sobbed the old man, sinking on his knees at his master's feet. "It was I who stole the money."

"You, Ralph?" and the Doctor tried to shake himself free from the grasp of the withered hands that clutched his garments. "Oh, my poor injured boy!"

"Yes, I did it," continued Ralph, in a tone of despair. "The devil tempted me, as he did Judas to betray his Master. I have been a hypocrite all my life. I loved gold—I worshipped it—I lost no opportunity of obtaining it when I could escape detection; but it has destroyed my miserable soul."

"But why lay the robbery of the box on George?" asked Dr. Leatrim. "You were safe from detection; I never suspected you."

"But *he* did," returned the old man bitterly. "He never loved me. I saw it in his eye. I knew it by his manner. He believed me to be a rogue, though he dared not express his opinion in words. I hated him because he knew my character; and to ensure my own safety, I denounced him."

"And what do you think of your work?" and the Doctor turned Ralph's face towards the dead.

"Mercy! mercy!" shrieked the felon. "I would rather die upon the gallows than look in that face again."

"You will have to meet it once more, and that before long, Ralph Wilson, to answer for this foul murder at the judgment-seat of Christ."

'With a heavy groan the old man fell down in a swoon at his master's feet.

"Deal gently with Ralph," said a low voice from the bed. "George made it his dying request. He not only forgave him his sin against himself, but charged you to do so for his sake. My dear afflicted husband," continued Mrs. Leatrim, "let us be thankful to the heavenly Father that He has cleared the stain of guilt from the memory of a beloved son, and placed him beyond the power of sin and temptation for ever."

'And what became of the wicked old man?' said I eagerly.

'That night Mrs. Leatrim died. Her son's tragic end brought on a fatal return of her dangerous malady. When Ralph heard of her death, he went out and hung himself. What Dr. Leatrim's feelings were at this unlooked-for desolation of all his earthly hopes, one can only imagine, it is impossible to describe. One grave contained the mortal remains of the mother and son, and the sad story created for the bereaved husband and father a world-wide sympathy.

'It was some years after the occurrence of this domestic tragedy before I visited Westcliff. Time had softened the anguish of the wound, but it was still unclosed, and left the traces of a deep, incurable grief in my uncle's face. He had become a drooping, white-haired man, but was still at his post, a faithful and zealous minister of the gospel.

'Sorrow had worn smooth all the harsh angles in his character, and made him simple and affectionate as a little child. He had borne the cross and worn the crown of thorns, and, purified by self-denial and suffering, had found love a more powerful weapon than fear in bringing souls to Christ. His calamities had endeared him to his people, and he had become their pastor in the truest sense of the word.

'On the anniversary of the day when George and his mother died, Dr. Leatrim holds a solemn fast, and excludes himself from every eye, spending the long day in meditation and prayer.

'One fine summer evening last July, I was strolling through Westcliff churchyard, and found the dear old man lying on the turf that covered the remains of his wife and son. He called me to him.

"This little hillock of green sod," he said, "contains all that was once dearest to me on earth. My heart rebelled against

God when my treasures were taken from me; but the Judge of all the earth knew what was best for my eternal peace. It was not until these idols were shattered in the dust that I discovered that I was poor, and blind, and naked, and not a righteous man, wiser and better than my neighbours. In my deep sorrow and humiliation I was taught the knowledge of myself; that I was still in my sins, a proud, unregenerated man. Yes; I can now acknowledge with the deepest gratitude, that, heavy and maddening as the blow was, it was necessary to bring me to God, and make me a true Christian."

'I went up to the monument. It was a simple urn of white marble, surrounded by beautiful flowering shrubs. The inscription that recorded the untimely death of his son made me start, it was so painfully characteristic of the truthfulness of the father:

"Here repose in peace the mortal remains of George Leatrim, who died at the age of 15, of a broken heart, caused by a false accusation and the unchristian severity of his too credulous father. Reader, mourn not for the dead, but weep sore for the living."

'I saw that my uncle was watching me with his eyes full of tears.

'He told me the sad story you have just read, sitting beside that grave in the dim twilight. How much I respected the undying love of the faithful heart, that never sought to spare himself in the mournful narration.

"Ah," he said, rising from his recumbent posture, and speaking in a cheerful, hopeful voice, "How little we 'know of the spirit of which we are made.' I have reason to rejoice—ay! and I do rejoice—that God gave me such a son, and that he died a true Christian martyr, forgiving and praying for the wretched sinners that caused his death."

FOOTNOTES:

[1]A fact.

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