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THE UNFAITHFUL GUARDIAN.

CHAPTER III.

THE early morning light stole through the closed curtains into the room where Mr. Lennox was lying. He was so changed that one might have thought whole years had elapsed since the terrible scene of the preceding day. His breath came with a labored effort, and he lay back against the pillows so weak and faint, that life seemed ebbing away upon each troubled respiration.

In a chair, by the bedside, sat Mr. James, with writing materials before him, engaged in putting upon paper the directions which the sick man dictated—it was his will.

"I leave everything in your charge," he said, with slow and difficult utterance, "I know that I can trust you."

"I am glad to have your confidence," Mr. James replied, softly, "very glad."

"The whole of my fortune will be placed in your trust for the child Nellie; you will love her, care for her, as I would have done; for were she my own daughter I could not regard her more tenderly."

Mr. James wrote on for some moments, in silence, until the sick man's hand laid heavily upon his own, made him pause.

"I have been thinking," he said, speaking with added pain, "that I ought to mention in some way—"

Mr. James waited for him to proceed, with his eyes calmly fixed upon the contracted features.

"I am very sick," continued he, "and it is difficult for me even to think; but it seems to me now—"

He broke off for a moment, and turned his face to the wall, while one or two hot tears rolled slowly down his cheek, the first evidence of softening that he had given. But he wiped them away as well as his poor strength would permit, and strove to speak again in a faint but trembling voice.

"You know what I mean, James."

"Pardon me, my friend, but I am really at a loss; perhaps you allude to the age at which the little girl shall enter upon the management of her own fortune?"

"No, no, that is all arranged—you will direct everything, paying her an income until her marriage, then, of course, her affairs will be placed in her husband's hands. I spoke of another."

"Some relative—your nephew, perhaps?"

"Of my—my—" the words came forth with a gasp, and he pressed his hand upon his breast to still a violent paroxysm of pain, "my wife."

He put his handkerchief to his lips to wipe away the specks of foam that had gathered there, in his effort to speak, and when he removed it a single drop of blood stained the white folds.

"What place can this lady possibly have in your will?" Mr. James asked, coldly.

"This—this; oh! if I had only more strength; I am suffocating—call the doctor again!"

The medical attendant entered in obedience to the summons, and bent over his patient with a look of solicitude.

"I feel as if I were choking, doctor, do give me something to stop it."

The physician took a phial from the mantel, poured a few drops of some clear liquid into a spoon, and gave it to him to swallow.

"I am better now," Mr. Lennox said, raising himself on his pillows with a sigh of relief, "Leave me for a little, doctor."

The physician left the chamber, and the sufferer lay for a few moments, absorbed in thought.

"Write this," he said, at length, speaking more rapidly, and with energy, "There

is no positive proof and should she ever—"

"No proof—and these letters?"

"True, true; what can I do! Write! write!" he said, flinging his hand down upon the table, "If she ever succeeds in proving those letters false, she enters into possession of this entire fortune!"

Mr. James made no movement to obey, and the sick man reiterated his words more energetically.

"I will have it so; write! write!"

The man still hesitated, sitting there, upright and cold as a figure carved from stone; but Mr. Lennox repeated the words again and again until they grew into a command.

"It is done," the lawyer said, writing a few hurried lines, "what else is there to be said?"

"Let me see it," urged he, clutching at the paper with feverish impetuosity. Mr. James made a slight movement, as if he would have drawn it from his reach, but the sick man threw himself forward with such force that his face almost struck against the table, snatching the document, and falling back again exhausted with the effort.

"Where is it? I cannot find it—there is a dimness over my eyes—show it to me—quick!"

Mr. James leaned over him with the same deliberation which had characterized every movement, and pointed to the words.

"That is not clear enough," said the sick man, "say more—more—that is too vague."

Mr. James took the paper and wrote the lines slowly and carefully, watching always the restless form upon the bed, as if he were counting every pulsation of that tortured heart, and marveling how long the unnatural strength would endure.

"It is all right, now," he said, there is nothing more to add; we must have the signature."

But the listener was not to be quieted; again he seized the paper and perused the lines with more eagerness than before.

"You are mad, James, that will not do—write this!" He raised his hand, pointing his finger toward the paper, and proceeded to dictate some words whose sense was incapable of mis-construction, and the writer obeyed his command, but with his eyes fixed upon the page as if he would have burned the record out with their steady fire.

"It is eight now—all right—should the time ever come; ah! could I—but know the truth."

"Have you a doubt?" asked the lawyer, sternly; "will you read again one of the letters you found among her papers?"

"No, no!" he exclaimed, shrinking away, and closing his eyes as if to shut out the sight. "Don't remind me; I am a dying man. I cannot go into eternity with hatred in my heart."

He lay back shuddering from another spasm of pain, but still struggling for strength to carry out his purpose.

"I cannot even trust myself," he gasped, pointing to the will, "my uncle must see this and understand what I mean."

Mr. James went again toward the door, but very slowly, his deliberation irritated the sick man, and he said, peevishly, "Do make haste, every second is an age!"

The lawyer went out, and in a moment returned with a venerable-looking man, whose majestic bearing was full of the honest truth and unwavering firmness, which stamped his every thought and act.

"I have made my will," said Mr. Lennox, in a more assured tone, "before it is signed I want you to read it."

The old man took the paper from the table, wiped his glasses, as if the dimness which obscured his sight had been upon them, and read it carefully through.

"Do you understand?" asked Mr. Lennox, pointing with his quivering finger to the concluding words, "if my wife proves her innocence at any time, no matter how distant, my entire fortune reverts to her."

"Who shall decide?" asked the old man; "you would not wish this brought into a court?"

"No, no, screen her always—always! She has enough to support her well from that portion of my property which the law gives a widow—spare her name, I charge you—remember that, both of you, remember that!"

"Then who shall be the judge of the truth of the proofs she may bring?" continued he, while Mr. James stood intently listening.

"You," returned Mr. Lennox, eagerly. "You are a good and just man—I can confide in you."

"Put that in the will," said the old

man, turning toward Mr. James; "write it so that it cannot be misunderstood—as we value our peace hereafter, let us deal fairly by that woman."

"And kindly," whispered Mr. Lennox, "let no suspicions go abroad against her—remember I trust in you both!"

Mr. James added the desired clause, and when he finished, the hesitation which he had betrayed was entirely gone. He returned it to the venerable man who was bending over his chair, and he read it aloud.

"That is all, I can die easy now!" exclaimed Mr. Lennox. "The time may come—uncle, never forget this—should you die before then, leave the charge also in your will to some just man—we do not know—years hence, perhaps, she will have it in her power to prove her truth."

The proud old man turned his face away, even his sternness shaken by the depth of anguish in that voice.

"As I hope for peace hereafter," he said, in a tremulous tone, which only added to the solemnity of his words, "I will carry out your every desire, and as I deal by that unfortunate woman, may God in his justice deal by me."

"A dying man's blessing rest upon you!" murmured Mr. Lennox, stretching out his hand, which the old man took between both his own, while the great tears rolled down his furrowed cheeks, and some murmured words of prayer escaped his lips.

"The witnesses—the signature!" exclaimed Mr. Lennox. "Call the doctors in."

The two men entered softly and stood by the bedside. The old uncle assisted Mr. Lennox to rise, and supported him in his arms.

"This, in your presence, I declare to be my last will and testament," continued the sick man, "and I call upon you both to witness it."

Mr. Morris placed the pen between his fingers, and supported him while he wrote his signature in feeble characters, regarding it for a moment, then allowing the quill to fall from his nerveless fingers.

"I can die easy now—uncle, remember!"

"I have promised," returned he, "and before my God!"

The two witnesses signed the document and went out.

Mr. James took up the paper which contained that great fortune to his entire control—folded and laid it aside.

"The child," pleaded Mr. Lennox, "let me see the child."

The little girl had been brought from the city the night before, and an attendant bore her weeping and frightened into the chamber—a fair, fragile-looking little creature of eight years, and appearing even younger, with her hair like pale floss silk falling over her neck, and her violet eyes dilating with grief and fear.

"Papa Lennox," she sobbed, "papa Lennox!"

Mr. Morris seated her on the bed, and she twined her arms about the neck of the sick man and lay sobbing upon his breast, while he laid his hand softly on her forehead murmuring a blessing.

"I can't find sister," she whispered "and they won't tell me where she is gone—I want sister."

He drew her face toward his, struggling to repress the emotions that sent the great drops in a cold rain over his forehead.

"She had better be taken away," suggested the lawyer, "she only disturbs him."

"Let her stay for a moment longer—I cannot lose you yet, my little girl."

"Are you going away too?" exclaimed the child; "are you going to leave Nellie as sister has? Don't go papa Lennox, don't leave me all alone!"

The old man shook with the grief he could not repress.

The nurse and the physicians turned away, unable, indeed as they were to scenes of suffering, to look upon that dying man and the helpless child without emotion; but Mr. James stood there, erect and calm, never once stirring, or with a shade of softness visible in his features.

"Papa is dying," murmured the sick man, "poor little Nellie!"

"Dying?" repeated the child, wonderingly; "Shan't I see you any more? Oh, don't die, don't die, papa Lennox!"

"Nellie will have another friend—"

"No, no, I want you and sister, I can't have anybody else! Do let me have sister—why don't she come here—oh, is she dead too?"

She hid her little face in the bed-clothes, sobbing with a violence that terrified the bystanders. They lifted her up, but she struggled so that Mr. Lennox was aroused

from the partial insensibility into which agitation had thrown him, and motioned them to allow her to remain, so she lay quite still by his side, moaning faintly,

"Sister—I want sister!"

There was a sound in the room below, but it did not reach the ears of the dying man—he heard only the rushing of the dark waves which were rapidly bearing him away, and the low moaning of the child. One of the attendants went out silently, but the other watchers stood there as before.

A carriage had driven up to the house, and a woman was striving to force her way into the hall past the housekeeper who had met her at the door.

"Mr. Lennox is dying, madam," she said, "nobody must come in."

"Don't you know me?" exclaimed the woman, throwing back her veil, and revealing her wan features—"I am your mistress."

"Yes, I know you now, madam; but a day has brought great changes here, I daren't let you go up—they are making his will."

"Let me pass—my husband is ill, dying, I must see him."

"You can't go up stairs, ma'am—I have my orders."

"Who gave them—not Mr. Lennox?"

"They were positive, ma'am—you cannot go up—indeed you cannot!"

"Woman, let me pass!" exclaimed Mrs. Lennox, wrenching her cloak from the housekeeper's grasp, "I tell you that I will see my husband."

The housekeeper still held her firmly, while two or three servants stood watching them in silence. Then the door of the drawing-room opened, and a tall, gaunt-looking woman stood on the threshold, holding a handkerchief and smelling-bottle in her hand.

"What is the meaning of this noise?" she said.

"I was forbidden to let anybody else go up stairs," said the housekeeper, "and she will do it."

The lady gave a little scream—starting back as if from some horrible object.

"Take her away," she said, "take her away, how dare she come here!"

"Because it is my right," exclaimed Mrs. Lennox, moving toward her; "because my husband is here, dying, and they will deprive me of my sister."

"Take her away somebody, do!" reiterated the lady, "I am sure I shall faint—my nerves are in such a state—I can hardly stay in the house—and to think of this woman desecrating it by her presence, and my poor, dear nephew dying."

"Dying, and you here!"

"She insults my grief!" exclaimed the woman, with a burst of hysterical sobs. "Send her away—I cannot witness my nephew's agonies, much less be tortured by her presence."

She motioned to the servants as if she would have had the intruder removed by force, but they did not stir.

"Where is my sister?" Mrs. Lennox shrieked, "only tell me if she is here."

"Yes, she is, ma'am," broke in one of the men, "they shan't treat you in this way—she is here."

"Bless you, heaven bless you!"

She turned and rushed up the stairs—it was impossible to stop her now, and none of the domestics heeded the remonstrances of the housekeeper, or the commands of the sobbing relative.

The physician was still standing at the door of the sick room, but she pushed abruptly past him, saying only,

"I must go in, my husband shall not die till I have seen him."

The sound of her voice startled those within—it reached even the ear of the dying man, and he opened his eyes with a wild gesture.

"I was dreaming," he murmured, "I thought I heard her voice!"

"Sister! sister!" shrieked the child, but Mr. James caught her from the bed and placed her in the arms of the nurse, who carried her away by another door before she could repeat her cry, while he shrunk out of sight as the accused wife entered the chamber.

She looked at no one, but moving to the bed, fell on her knees by the dying man. He recognized her—uttered a sort of cry, but whether of joy or dismay, none could tell.

"Speak to me!" she exclaimed, "do not die without a word—take back the terrible things you said that day! They were false—oh, how false!—I am not guilty!"

His lips moved—his eyes, brilliant with departing life, grew leaden.

"Not guilty!" he murmured, "oh, not guilty—bring—bring—"

"She is gone," said the doctor, understanding the appealing look, "they have taken her out of the house."

"My child! my own sister!" shrieked the woman. "Speak, tell me where she is!"

He heard and seemed striving to comprehend her words.

"Listen," she continued, "I tell you I am innocent, try and understand it—for I must have my sister!"

Her voice might have won belief from a heart of stone—he opened his eyes again—a smile flitted like a sunbeam over his mouth.

"She is innocent!" he murmured, "she is innocent!"

Her quick ear caught the tone which was like a thanksgiving.

"He believes me," she exclaimed, turning toward the old uncle, "he believes me! My child—only speak—you have given her to another's control—I cannot see her—a single word or let me die too!"

His eyes had closed—but the smile still lingered upon his lips, though her frantic entreaties were unheard.

"Innocent!" he murmured still, "innocent!"

"Robert, my husband—answer me—it is your wife—you will not die and take my sister from me—revoke that terrible sentence—give me the child again!"

She was leaning over him—chafing his hand already cold in her own—but all in vain—there was no sign!

"Robert," she cried again, "the child!"

He looked toward her— anxiously, pitifully—strove to utter some words, but they died in his throat. She laid her face down to his.

"Again—again! Oh, my God, give him a moment's strength!"

It was too late—the thought had gone—her prayers and moans were idle—the sunlight came back to his face—the lips moved once more—then all was still! He had gone into eternity without a doubt upon his soul!

The woman could not believe that he was dead—she still called his name—still bent over the motionless form with pleading words. One of the attendants strove to lead her away.

"All is over, madam, he is gone."

"Dead? No, no, he could not die without a word! He believed me, and would have given me Nellie."

They led her out of the room very gently, and she sank upon a seat in the hall. No one noticed her—there was no tumult in the house—one relative dried her eyes in the stately drawing-room below, and the other inmates moved carelessly about in the necessary employments of the sad time.

The wife sat there stupefied by her great despair—they passed and repassed her, but took no heed! At length the servant, who had spoken to her below in pity of her anguish, approached and whispered,

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but the lady insists upon your going out of the house—I wouldn't stay if I was you—the little girl is gone."

"Where? where?" The woman sprang up!

"I couldn't find out, but she is gone!"

Mrs. Lennox turned from him and fled along the gallery—the door of the room which she had occupied on that day was open, and she mechanically entered. Nothing had been changed or removed—the chair in which she had kept her solitary vigil was by the fire—on the floor were the broken fragments of the desk her husband had shattered in his wrath. A whole life seemed to have passed since—she could not realize that she was the woman who had sat there pale with prophetic fears.

Upon the table lay those fatal letters—she stood there for a moment looking at them with unutterable horror, then impelled by some inexplicable feeling which she could not resist, gathered them up, bound them together with the ribbon which lay upon the carpet, where the husband had crushed it beneath his heel, and concealed them in her robe, all the while shuddering, but powerless to overcome the impulse which directed her movements.

She looked around the chamber, calm from the very intensity of her despair, then moved slowly out and returned to the apartment where the dead man was lying. She bent down and kissed the cold forehead; as she did so, the uncle, who was kneeling at the other side of the bed, rose and looked silently upon her.

"He knows that I am innocent," she whispered, "the angels themselves have told him now that the first kiss I gave him was not more pure than this."

"Have patience, madam," said the old man, with the solemn composure of sorrow; "leave this to time and God!" To be continued.