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I have sworn upon the Altar of God, eternal hostility to every form of Tyranny over the Mind of Man.—Thomas Jefferson

H. WEBB, EDITOR AND PROPRIETOR.

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MISCELLANEOUS.

A SAD STORY.

THE LADY OF ELM-WOOD. CHAPTER I.

The evening shadows were stealing on at the close of a cold bright winter's day. Stretched on a bed of sickness, pale, wasted, silent, lay the lady of Elm-wood. The curtains of purple velvet, dark and gloomy in the fading light, hung heavily around her, and through an opening, at the foot of the bed, a gleam of red light from the blazing fire now and then fell on her face, but did not rouse her from the deep thought in which she seemed plunged. There was much beauty yet in her large, dark eyes and delicately formed features; but her cheek was hollow, and the tightly closed lips looked as if no smile of joy had ever parted them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The lady's head fell back upon the pillow, and the color that had risen to her cheek for a moment faded away. The nurse had been used to look on scenes of suffering and sorrow, and perhaps age, too, had blunted her feelings; for she had re-established herself in her comfortable chair, and sank into a doze. The lady's voice once more roused her.

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

Again the messenger departed, and again the lady listened anxiously for her return

yet with less hope in her sorrowful eyes than before. Her heart sank evidently when she heard the nurse returning immediately.

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

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

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

"And Patterson?" inquired the lady. "May I send for him?"

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

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

"Cruel, even to the last!" she said at length.—"This life that some call so happy, how dreary has it been to me! long miserable years, ending in a death like this!—And words of long suppressed anguish,—though that had hardened the heart with a weight of misery for years, burst from her dying lips.

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

"To be sure there was something wrong!"—The words had been in many mouths, till it came to be believed that some dark secret, some hidden error, was the cause of the seclusion in which she was kept by her husband. The sadness of her countenance was held to be occasioned by remorse, that the tears that were sometimes seen to fall as she knelt in prayer in the house of God were looked upon as tears of penitence. The patience and meekness with which she bore the impertinence of some, who looked even in her presence, the suspicions they entertained, only confirmed them in their belief that in some way, she had erred grievously.—"And then my lord," they said, "is so very easy and good-humored, and any body might be happy with him!" So by degrees a belief had gained ground that all was not as it should be with the beautiful lady of Elm-wood, and some dared to speak scornfully of her—even those who were unworthy to wipe the dust from her feet.

For the suspicions that had gone abroad, the undefined mysterious whispers against her, were as unjust as they were cruel. There was nothing of shame, though, God knows, there was enough of bitter sorrow in her blushes and tears. Her spirit was utterly broken by daily and hourly trials of which the coarse world knew nothing, to resent insult or reply to impertinence. None knew—how should they know?—how a course of petty oppression, beginning in her earliest years, had conquered all cheerfulness and crushed all hope; and, during her married life, to none but to her God did she breathe a word of the troubles which subdued her, & to which she submitted without a struggle. The little world about Elm-wood had only seen her husband's ancestral home. They had seen, at first, a gay succession of guests at the old hall, and the young bride presiding at brilliant entertainments. But the number of guests fell off by degrees, ladies ceased to be among the few remaining visitors, and, when an occasional party met at Elm-wood, the lady was no longer seen among them. Her husband thought it necessary, at first, to excuse her absence on the plea of ill health, but it was soon understood that there were other reasons, (although none knew what such reasons were) why she appeared no more, and her name was never mentioned.

She was sometimes seen by persons who visited Elm-wood on business, wandering alone in the woods near the house, a pale yet beautiful spirit, or tending the flowers in a small garden sheltered by the far-reaching walls of the old hall.—Some who had purposely thrown themselves in her way, said that she replied gently to their greetings, but always in a tone of sadness. On Sunday she never failed, unless when detained at home by severe illness, to walk to the church in the neighboring vil-

lage. It was upon the edge of her husband's park, and a little path led to it from the great house, through old dark woods, and by a little stream, that stole away at last, singing as it went, into the fields below the churchyard. The whole village was part of the Elm-wood property, and the church contained many monuments to the memory of its possessors. The family pew had still its velvet cushions and drapery, faded though they were, and here the lady knelt alone Sunday after Sunday. Rain and cold frost and snow, all seemed alike to her. The good rector, who soon learned to take an interest in her pale and melancholy face, never failed to glance at that humble worshipper, so constant in her attendance. Sometimes he saw that she was weeping, and his kind heart longed to breathe comfort to her evidently wounded spirit. His attempts to make her acquaintance at her own house, had all proved vain. Her husband, whose manner to the good old priest was full of scarcely suppressed contempt, always repined to his inquiries about the lady, by saying she received no visitors. To speak to her on her way to and from the church, was his only chance of proving to her how much he felt interested in her welfare. She always waited till all others had left the church, and then stole quietly across the graveyard, and through the little gate into the park. One wet and stormy Sunday, when the congregation was very scanty, the clergyman, Mr. Patterson, to his surprise, saw the delicate form of the lady of Elm-wood kneeling in her usual place, her meek head bowed in prayer. When the service was over, he went to her and offered to assist her in getting home. She took his arm in silence, and, feeling that she was trembling with cold, he led her towards the rectory, whether his wife and daughter had preceded him, or looked compassionately upon her, as he endeavored to shield her from the beating rain, for she appeared so feeble, that without his help she must have fallen.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

her of some of her damp garments and insisted on wrapping her in her own cloak. There was something so humble in the lady's gratitude, something so sorrowful even in her extreme beauty, uncareed for and neglected as she seemed, that the kind-hearted family at the rectory could but feel a touching interest in her, and when at length her carriage, for which a messenger had been despatched, arrived to convey her home, many kind words were spoken, and none could have supposed that, till that day, the lady had been a stranger.

The next Sunday was fine and bright, but the lady was not in her place. She was seen no more even in her garden; and the rector, who made several vain attempts to be admitted to her presence, heard that she was very ill. He doubted not, remembering her weakness and her wan looks, that the hour for which she had longed was approaching, and gladly would he have endeavored, as the minister of God, to smooth the way before her to the grave. We have seen that she, too, wished for the comfort of his presence, but even this was denied her. Young, (for she was only in her 26th year,) innocent, beautiful, yet broken-hearted, she was left to meet her death alone.

CHAPTER II.

It is time that we say something of the cause of that grief which oppressed the lady of Elm-wood, and which the ignorant and unkind attributed to some error of her past life. For this purpose it is necessary to turn to the history of her early years. Her mother died when she was a child, and she was reared by a man of extravagant habits; married a second time within a year of his first wife's death—His marriage with a wealthy heiress freed him for a while from pecuniary embarrassment, but he stayed forever the peace of his home. His bride was haughty, vain, and ill-tempered, and the indifference he felt for her at first quickly deepened into a positive dislike. For a time, he seemed to find in the caress of his child a consolation for the disagreeables of his domestic life, but his weak mind thirsted for excitement, and he found it at the gaming table. By degrees a passion for play absorbed every other feeling. The birth of an heir, though it gave him no pleasure, did not keep him long from his darling pursuit, and, as years passed by, he saw less of his family, and appeared to become totally indifferent to their welfare. Thus his daughter was left a victim to the caprice and ill-will of her vain and frivolous stepmother. Few were the remembrances of her childhood, which she even in the deep trials of her after life, could recall with anything of pleasure. The spoiled and petted son of her stepmother, imitating the small tyranny of his parent, on every occasion asserted his superiority over the gentle girl, whose spirit it was already learning its lesson of humility and submission. When she had grown to womanhood, her extraordinary beauty, though it did not increase the good will of her stepmother, was yet looked upon by her father with something of selfish pride, and he already calculated the advantages which might accrue to himself from her making what is termed a good match.

It was while these thoughts were maturing into plans for the accomplishment of his object, that he made acquaintance with the lordly owner of Elm-wood—a man in the prime of life, yet, like himself, an habitual gambler. In their frequent meetings, these two men became intimate, and frequently played together, up to a certain time, with about equal success. At length the young gambler began to lose; one by one he pledged

all his possessions, and in the end, he rose from the table a ruined man. His night only by injuring his property past recovery. His companion observed the advantages of insisting on the payment of the debt; for a while he wanted the money, he yet did not wish for the publicity which the present affair, if protracted, must give to the nature of his reverses.

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

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

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

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

They sat down again, called for writing materials, and wrote—the one a promise of marriage to a woman he had never seen; and the other, a discharge of the three fourths of the debt due to him, on condition of the fulfilment of the pledge agreed upon. The two papers were duly signed, and the parties separated. And thus the father, the lady of Elm-wood obtained his bride! She was told to prepare to receive her future husband, and she knew resistance would be in vain. Her father had become estranged from her, that she dared do nothing in opposition to his commands, and her step-mother showed too openly her joy she felt in the prospect of being rid of one, whose very presence was a tacit reproach to her conscience, for the poor girl to entertain a hope that she would intercede for her.

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

"My love," he said contemptuously, "did you not hear why I married you?"

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

"You thought—you hoped? Did your father never tell you of our bargain? I gave my hand in payment of a gambling debt to your excellent and respected father. Mighty innocent you are, no doubt, and never knew that you were forced upon me; and that now your every look reminds me of the most hateful hours of my life! There has, no doubt, made you a capital actress, but we need not pretend to misunderstand each other. We have each won our reward in this blessed union—

you are mistress of Elm-wood, and I am sordid, from ruin, which would be had enough, and exposure, which would be worse."

"My father?" stammered the lady.

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

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

After a time, the hope of winning his affection rose within her, and long and patiently she strove to realize it; but alas! in vain! Months passed on, and the hour drew near, in which she expected to become a mother. When a son was born to her, once more her hope revived. "Surely," she thought, "for the sake of his child he will love me. But again she was disappointed. He had returned to his old friends, and to his old amusements, that she could never find a place in his heart.

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

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

It was in vain the old nurse remonstrated the lady persisted, and supported by pillows, she sat up in her bed, and tenderly loosened the baby's clothes, and wrapped it in its little night dress.—She even played with it as of old, and smiled to hear its merry laughter. She dismissed Alice, but, recalling her as she was leaving the room, she earnestly.—"Alice, you love this child; she will soon be motherless, there will be none to care for her. Oh, be faithful to your charge! Cherish her, do not desert her; and may the blessing of her dying mother be with you to your last hour."