

THEIR PUNISHMENTS.

The Angelus bell rang from the tower of the old abbey. Away down the broad nave, quite dark and deserted, a woman was praying. Was she praying? Or was she merely lost in the intense melancholy of the hour and place? Kneeling on the stone, she had fallen, her arms lowered, her hands crossed, in an inert and wearied attitude.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the tinkling of a bunch of keys, which echoed through the church, while a voice cried out:

"We close!"

Hearing this, the lady rose hastily and withdrew, gathering about her waist as she went the long black cloak which covered her tall and slender figure. She left the church, and as she passed along the narrow streets of the village the few passers-by turned to look at her with actual curiosity, but yet without actual wonder.

Every day at the same hour for 18 years had that lady been seen passing by, wrapped in her black cloak, her face covered by her thick black veil. For 18 years her mysterious presence in that far-off valley had furnished a subject to the imagination and gossip of the inhabitants. And yet, little by little, before that impenetrable mystery, imaginations had ceased to work, and tongues were now reduced to silence.

Accompanied by her husband she arrived one evening, as already stated, about 18 years previous to the time we are describing. They had come alone, without servants, and with but little luggage. They had alighted at the hotel, where they lived for several months, while the house they had bought on the outskirts of the town was being repaired. It was a pretty cottage, surrounded by a full garden of roses.

From the day they had settled in their modest abode they had led a very quiet life. They were known as Signor and Signora Nicolini, but on their silver plate there was a monogram bearing a crown.

The husband, a strong, tall man, with an almost athletic physique, appeared, at the time of his arrival, to be about 50 years of age, his wife not more than 25.

They were never seen together. He went hunting or took long walks, always alone. She wandered among the roses of her garden; and every day, morning and evening, she went to the abbey and came back, walking with the same slow and mechanical step. They received papers, magazines, books, but never a letter.

Both seemed sad, of a gloomy and desolate sort of sadness, which those who approached them felt themselves. Many a servant, indeed, had gone away, unable to endure that icy atmosphere. It is certain that they never wrangled nor spoke harshly; on the contrary there was always between them a dead silence, interrupted only by those short phrases which daily contact made necessary.

Reaching the garden gate, as if fighting an inward repugnance, the lady stopped and passed by. Then she turned back and again passed the gate. At last she entered.

In the hall she found a servant, who, to the mute question of her look, answered:

"Still in the same condition, Signora."

She put her cloak and bonnet on a chair and went up stairs. There she stopped, hesitating again, before one of the doors on the first floor. Opening it rudely, she entered a large, dismal room. Here on an iron bed, a bed befitting a soldier, lay her husband.

Noislessly she drew near, listening to the sick man's heavy and painful breathing, and bending over him, she tried to see his face.

Little by little her eyes growing accustomed to the darkness, she could perceive his convulsed and livid features, his nose, drawn and emaciated, stood out above his blue, half-opened lips, from which came a short and whistling breath. He was dying!

A woman who had been watching at the bedside had left the room as soon as signora had come in. And now the latter was alone with the dying man gazing on that human face that had held her in subjection so many years, and that was now fading away. This hour looked forward to for 10 years; this hour longed for, prayed for, in the silent revolt of her downtrodden heart; the hour of her liberty had come at last.

The lady seated herself and let her mind turn once more to the past.

She was still beautiful, and with in her heart sweet sentiments still could dwell. He, a stern and imperious man, was born to lead an army to battle, rather than to live by the side of a delicate and sensitive woman. His age was twice hers and they had no children. She had no one on whom she could lavish her tenderness, she had not a single person to whom she could confide her dreams or illusions. Her mother had settled in a far away province, and her only sister was a nun.

It was the old, old story. She met a young man. Their souls blended. At first it was innocent friendship; then the storm of passion. One day her husband on returning home, had found them together, their hands clasped!

Oh, the terrible recollection! The thought of it made the blood rush to her heart, and she again felt the same shame, the same terror, which had wholly overpowered her before her judge's revolver and stern face. Everything had assumed a strange rapidity. She had faced her husband crying: "Mercy! mercy! I will promise never to see him again." Her husband had hesitated a moment; looked at him crushing them under the weight of contempt; then, without lowering his revolver, had dictated these conditions:

"Promise on the Gospel, on your

eternal life, that you will never see this creature again; that you will obey me in all, and that you will accept the punishment which I may please to inflict."

In the anguish of her fear and love she had promised word, for what he had insisted upon.

On a sign of her husband, the young man, humiliated and vilified, had departed, and her expiation had begun.

Her husband had resigned his command in the army, and had gone to live on the mountain slope, assuming a false name, hiding his secret from all. Like two stones that fall to the bottom of the sea they had disappeared from society without leaving any trace.

Twice a year she wrote to her mother; her husband reading all her letters, would mail them himself in some far-off place. Finally her mother had died and from that day no letters were sent.

In that terrible isolation she had gone through all the stages of despair. For several days she declined to eat, wishing to starve; but her inexorable judge had said to her:

"You are a Christian, you have promised to obey; therefore, eat."

And she obeyed, because even in her excess of despair and revolt, even amid her thoughts of suicide, the idea of failing her promise had never crossed her mind. That promise was, in a certain sense, the supreme inheritance of her love, the painful tie that bound her to the past.

As she had lived, hope alone remained. She hoped that her husband, after he had noticed her sweetness, docility and patience, would relent; and for many years she had observed his pensive forehead day by day, hoping to see once a sign of forgiveness.

He never treated her rudely, he never allowed himself to be wanting in respect toward her, nor to speak to her a harsh or sharp word. Only once, having found her sobbing in a fit of despair, he had said to her:

"My life is no better than yours, yet I have betrayed no one."

He had, in fact, sacrificed everything—his ambition, career, family, pleasures—to bury himself with her in the same atonement.

She had hoped, but in vain. Days, weeks, years had glided on in an inflexible monotony; self-control vanished; she became the sport of moods, according to the time and humor—now weary of life, now tormented by remorse, now irritated and full of hatred. How many a time she had said to herself:

"He is old and I am young! he will die and I shall be free! When shall I be free?"

And now he was dying. At this thought she felt a strange, spirit-like feeling which startled her. At last she was about to be free; her own mistress; her actions free! her thoughts free—free to love and to be loved!

Al! the joy of escaping from her prison, of seeking other horizons, of grasping friendly hands!

She felt a kind of intoxication in her brain, and rose, feeling the need to walk, to move; stillness was death, and she had enough of death, silence, coldness, solitude.

And as the moon, which was high above the horizon, sent its pale rays through the window, she went to lean against the mantelpiece, seized by a kind of uneasiness. She turned her face to the mirror, and stood there looking at herself.

She was still beautiful. Then her lips parted with a smile. Those who had known her would know her still. But who would still remember her? And what had become of her friends, of her acquaintances?

And what had become of him? At this question she felt herself seized upon by fear; not that she would appear to him less handsome, or that she had been forgotten. She feared that she might find him unlike the image he had left in her heart; that she might find him changed physically and morally, and not recognize him; that he would be a stranger to her.

While she heaped such thoughts she saw before her, in the mirror feebly illuminated by the reflection of the moon, two dilated eyes gazing on her like coils; being frightened by the gaze of the dying man, who seemed as if he wanted to follow her guilty reverie, turned with an irresistible motion, and went toward the bed, obeying, in spite of herself, a kind of imperious and magnetic call.

Then it seemed to her as if a deep and desperate voice came from the face which was growing stonelike.

"I have loved you, I have worshipped you all my life, and you have betrayed me. For years and years I have waited with a painful desire, a word that would put balm in my bleeding wound, but you have let me suffer. I was innocent, and shared your expiation. I took on me half of your punishment, hoping that at least repentance would come to your heart; and lo! with a murdering wish you would like to hasten my death, and as you find it too slow your thoughts turn against your marriage vows. Foolish and faithless that you are! My death cannot free you! Did you not say 'Never'?"

She understood all this as plainly as if he had really spoken, and suddenly she felt the horror of the evil she had done. Yes, he had loved her, he had adored her always, before and after her guilt, and she had placed the coldness of her passive obedience over against that man's passion.

Then, before the terrible impotence of that conscious agony, she felt that pity, together with remorse, was entreating her heart, and, being moved by an irresistible power, she bent over the dying man, stretched her arm to the cross that hung over his pillow, and with a low but distinct voice she repeated her promise:

"I promise I will never see him again!"

The contracted face of the dying

man beamed with serenity, his eyelids lowered over his dim eyes, while the only two tears which she had ever seen flowing from those severe eyes came down his cheeks, already cold.

These two tears were to her like the baptism of pardon which washed her guilt away, and a great peace descended upon her heart.

She opened the window, saw the starry heavens among the snowy peaks, over which the moon shed its pale and serene smile: then lowering her eyes to the deep valley, she saluted, as if she saw it for the first time, that prison where her life would be spent. She well knew that, to keep her promise, so that fate should not bring the lovers of former days together, it was necessary that she should remain exiled from all, unknown, forgotten, forever.

The tomb which had opened for an instant, had closed forever, and closed in peace.—Boston Transcript, from the Italian.

A HUMAN INCIDENT.

BY MRS M. L. RAYNE.

The furies of civilization are as bitter and unrelenting as the warfare of savages. But civilization restrains by the terrors of the law, and hatred of an enemy burns and seethes in the heart and escapes the period of suffocation, by an ebullition of wrath in words that wound and sting, but do not slay. So to-day many a man walks our city streets with murder in his soul, but never seeks any outward expression, yet as surely kills as if materialized into a tangible form, and armed with a deadly weapon.

But it is not the hatred who is slain—it is the hater, who, harbouring this deadly presence, insures the killing of every good impulse, and the destruction of his own soul. Curses, like boomerangs, come back to him who sends them out.

Joseph Downs was a carpenter, like that other Joseph whose Son taught the divine doctrine of forgiveness. And he, too, was acquainted with grief. His little daughter Muriel had gone home to grow up in the eternal youth of Heaven. It had well-nigh broken his heart, and for a while he had let material things go to follow with vain haste the little traveller on her far journey. We have all essayed that futile wall—a wall in which there is no door save the one that death opens. Through this Muriel had escaped—I use the word advisedly—escaped into the sunlight on the other side. When her father realized his own impotency to bring her back, he took up the cross of life again and went to work.

Said a great soul: "Work—it is better than what you work to get." Muriel's mother had never laid down her work. She knew that it was well with the child, and she kept her grief in subjection, and took up the next duty that lay at her door. That is the highest form of practical Christianity.

In Henry County, this state, some years ago, a young woman who was suing her former sweetheart for breach of promise was put on the witness stand, and the lawyers, as usual, began making all sorts of inquisitive interrogatories.

"You say," remarked one, "that the defendant sat very close to you?"

"Yessir," was the reply, with a hectic flush.

"How close?"

"Close enough so's one cheer was all the sittin' room we needed."

"And you say he put his arm around your waist?"

"No, I didn't."

"What did you say, then?"

"I said he put both arms around me."

"Then what?"

"He hugged me."

"Very hard?"

"Yep, he did. So hard that I came purty near hollerin' right out."

"Why didn't you holler?"

"Cause."

"That's no answer. Be explicit, please; because what?"

"Cause I was afeard he'd stop."—Chicago Post.

so little. She had worked and suffered and lost, ever since she had joined her lot with his, and she had never seen flowing from those severe eyes came down his cheeks, already cold.

"Take care, Downs! If you should give the joint a touch with your elbow it would fall to the street. We mustn't have an accident of that sort on our hands."

It was the "boss" who was speaking, and Downs turned his head and his eyes glanced to the street far below, and saw as in a dream his enemy walking briskly in his direction, and the next moment the devil of suggestion had put a thought in his head, that, carried out was to make him another Cain.

Yes, Simon Kent was at that moment taking the final step in the process that was to leave Downs homeless, and in a few seconds he would pass the exact spot where far above his head was poised an instrument of sudden and awful death.

It seemed to Downs that here was the supreme moment of fate, when by simply remaining in a state of muscular inefficiency he would be relieved of the man who was bent on destroying him.

At that moment, without any reason for so doing, since he did not know where Downs was employed, Kent raised his eyes to the height directly above him, and saw the face of the man he hated. He knew nothing of hypnotic phenomena, nor dreamed that the intense gaze of the other man was focused on him. But in that one look he read his doom.

Then he gave a great sigh of relief and passed on.

Downs had seen more than hatred in the eyes of his enemy. A child's face, crowned with an aureole, had looked out for a swift passing second, from the background of these hard eyes, and at the same time a voice breathed into his soul the simple litany of compassion, "I'm sorry."

That night when he went home his wife met him at the door.

"Isn't it good," she said, "I was afraid Kent was coming to order us out, but he says it is all right—that you are to have your own time to pay him, and that you would understand."

Downs did not tell his wife of his temptation, and what saved him, and I think it was right. Confession may be good for the soul of him who confesses, but I regard it as an indulgence to condone sin. Kept between the man and his Maker it is a hold on him he cannot shake off. It is a safeguard and salutary.

A Frank Witness.

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