

THE MINISTER'S CRIME

By MACLAREN OBAN

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CHAPTER III.

It was put gently and carefully, but the meaning of the communication to the minister plainly was that it had come to a contest between him and the young Mr. Lloyd, and that whichever should acquit himself in this debate most to the satisfaction and admiration of the audience would straightway be chosen as minister.

It was a terrible situation for the minister—how terrible none but himself knew, and none, not even the wife of his bosom, could ever sufficiently understand. He was a bad debater, and, worse than that, he was the most nervous, hesitating and involved extempore speaker in the world. His sermons and discourses were always written, but he delivered them so well that very few would have guessed that he had manuscript before him. With his writing in his hand he was easy, vigorous and self-possessed; but when he had to speak extempore a panic of fear shook him; he had neither ideas nor words, and he was completely lost.

It was simply a question of nerves with him, and whenever he knew beforehand that he was expected to speak extempore the strain upon him was crueler than man can tell. The strain imposed now upon a body weakened by the past year's privations and anxiety could not have been crueler if he had been under sentence of death; and, indeed, life or death seemed to his overwrought nerves to hang upon the issue. If he failed, and he feared he would fail, fall signally, for he did not doubt but that the young and boisterous Mr. Lloyd was without nerves, and was a glib and self-confident talker—then Upton was lost, and his wife was condemned for Heaven alone knew how long to grievous poverty, and his child to a lingering death. If he succeeded—but he had no reason to hope he would—then Upton was won, and with it life and health and happiness for those he loved.

It was Wednesday morning when he got the letter, and all that day he considered, with a frequent feeling of panic at the heart, and a constant fluttering of the nerves, what he could possibly do to insure success. He thought he would write down something on the subject of the debate, and commit it to memory. He had sat down and written a little, when he bethought him that he did not know when he would be called upon to speak, nor whether he might not have to expressively answer some one. He threw down the pen and groaned in despair; there was nothing to be done; he must trust to the inspiration and self-possession of the moment.

When he went to bed his sleep was a succession of ghastly nightmares. He dreamt his wife and child were struggling and choking in a dark and slimy sea, that Mr. Lloyd stood aloof unconcernedly looking on, and that he, the husband and father, lay unable to stir hand or foot or tongue. Then he awoke with a sharp cry, trembling with dread and bathed in perspiration, and found, lo! it was but a dream!

So the night passed and the day came with its constant wearing fear and anxiety. He could not eat, he could not drink, he could not rest; and thus the day passed and the hour came when he must set out for the fatal meeting. As he passed along the street people paused to glance at him; he appeared so pale and seared.

When he entered the lecture-room at Upton he was met by his friend, the chairman of committee, who looked at him, and said:

"Don't you feel well, Mr. Murray? You look very faint and pale. Let me get you a glass of wine."

"No, thank you," said the minister. "I am really quite well."

"We shall have a good debate, I think," said his friend, then leading the way forward.

"I hope so," said the minister; "though I am afraid I can do little; I

his parched mouth (which, for all the water, remained obstinately dry) and he felt his hour was come. He glanced round him, but saw only shadows of men. One only he saw—the man opposite him, the very young and boisterous Mr. Lloyd, who clasped his hands and lustily said: "Hear, hear!" when anything was said of which he approved or which he wished to deride. The minister's eyes burned upon him till he seemed to assume threatening proportions as the boastful and blatant Apollon whom Christian fought in the Valley.

At length young Mr. Lloyd rose, large and hairy, and then the minister listened with all his ears. He missed nothing the young man uttered—none of the foolish and ignorant opinions, none of the coarse and awkward phrases—and as he listened amazement seized him, and then anger, and he said to himself: "This is the man, this is the conceited and ignorant snatterer, who would supplant me, and rob my wife and child of health and happiness!" He rose at once in his anger to answer him, to smash and pulverize him. What he said in his anger he did not know; but when he had finished he sat down and buried his face in his hands and was sure he had made an egregious ass of himself. He felt very faint and drank more water, and it was all over. In a dazed and hurried fashion he said his adieu and went away to the train, convinced he should never see Upton more.

He had entered the carriage and sunk back with body exhausted, but with brain on fire; the train was starting, when the door was flung open, and Mr. Lloyd burst in and sat down opposite him.

"Hallo!" he cried. "I did not think to find you here. What a splendid debate it was, wasn't it?" He did not



"HALLO! I DID NOT THINK TO FIND YOU HERE!"

wait for an answer, but hurried on in his loquacity. "I think I woke them up. They need waking up, and I'll do it when I'm their minister."

It clearly did not occur to him that his vis-à-vis might be minister instead; and Mr. Murray, in his exaggerated dread and humility, thought that the question who was to be minister must really have been settled before the young man left. Mr. Murray said nothing, but that did not embarrass Mr. Lloyd.

"I shall soon settle," he continued, "the hash of some of those frightened old fogies who want things to go on in the old, humdrum way. It's a fine place and a magnificent chapel, and can be made a popular cause; and I'll make it, too, when I'm among them. Good, rousing, popular stuff—that's the thing to make a success; don't you think so, Murray?"

"No doubt," said Murray, scarce knowing or caring what he said in his bitterness and despair; "only make noise enough."

Young Mr. Lloyd merely laughed boisterously, and Mr. Murray only kept saying to himself: "This is the man who has robbed me of my chance, and my wife and child of health and happiness! But for this ignorant, conceited, and incompetent braggart I should be minister!"

An uncontrollable dislike—and in his nervous, overstrained condition, hatred even—rose in him against the young man.

As Lloyd went on with his ding-dong, maddening talk, Mr. Murray, who could have cried aloud in his pain and despair of the loss he believed he had endured, observed absently that the inner handle of the door showed that the catch was open. The train slowed down, for some reason, in the middle of a tunnel, and Lloyd rose in his lusty, boisterous way, banged down the window, and looked out.

"These trains," quoth he, "are confoundably slow."

Mr. Murray kept his eye on the brass handle of the door. It was a dangerous position for Mr. Lloyd; if he leaned too heavily, or if the train went on with a jerk, he was likely to be thrown out. Should he warn him? Should he say: "Take care, you may fall in your rashness." Yet why did not the foolish, unobservant young man see for himself the condition of the door?

Still, the handle of the door fascinated the minister's eye, and he kept silence. At that moment the train started off again with a jerk and a screech; the door swung open, and Lloyd fell, and as the minister put out his hands and head to catch him, with a horrified: "Oh!" he saw the fiery eye of a train rushing down upon him from the opposite direction. It came on with thunderous roar

and passed, and the minister sank back in the carriage alone and fainted!

CHAPTER IV.

He came to himself only outside the London terminus at which he had to arrive, when the train drew up, and a man came along for the collection of tickets. In a half-dazed condition (which the ticket-collector probably considered intoxication), he surrendered his ticket without a word, and then the train went on and presently he was on the platform, stumbling out of the station on his way home, but no more in touch with the people and things he passed among than a man in a dream.

What had he done? What had he done? To what a depth of misery and infamy had he cast himself? It was impossible to sound the black bottom of it. "I have slain a man to my wounding; a young man to my hurt!"

The old words rose in his mind unbidden—rose and sank, rose and sank again. He felt that the young man must be lying crumpled across those rails. And it was his doing; he had not warned the young man of his danger; he had consented to his death, and therefore, he had killed him! Oh, the horror! Oh, the pity of it!

When he reached his lonely lodging it was late, and he was dull and tired. He was conscious of having walked a long way round, and to and fro, but where he did not know. The strain was now off his nerves, and dull, dead misery was upon him. He mechanically undressed, and went to bed and sank to sleep at once; but his sleep was unrefreshing; it was troubled all the night through with alarms and terrors, with screeching and roaring trains and falling bodies; and when in the morning he was fully awake, his misery settled upon him like a dense fog of death.

The morning postman brought a letter from his wife. She was in good spirits, and the boy was improving rapidly. Then tears—bitter, bitter tears!—came to his relief, and he sobbed in agony. What had possessed him? What kind of anger and hate had entered into him to make him commit that deed? He was agitated at the atrocious possibilities of his own nature. He felt as if he could not look in the face of his wife again, or again venture to take her in his arms. Would she not shrink from him with horror when she knew? And would not his boy—his little Jim!—when he grew up (if he ever grew up) be ashamed of the father who had so dishonored his name?

"Oh, my God!" he cried, in his misery and grief. "Let me bear the utmost punishment of my sin, but spare them! Punish not the innocent with the guilty! Let my dear wife and child live in peace and honor before Thee!"

He could not eat a morsel of breakfast—he had scarcely tasted food or drink for two whole days—and he could not rest in the lodgings. He wandered out with his load of misery upon him. He was a man who seldom read the newspapers, and he did not think of buying one now, nor did it even occur to him to scan the contents-bills set outside the news-vendors' shops. He merely wandered on and round, revolving the horrible business that had brought him so low, and then he wandered back in the afternoon faint with exhaustion.

When he entered the sitting-room he saw a letter set for him on the mantelpiece. It was from his friend at Upton, and it declared with delight that, after the stirring debate on Thursday evening, he (Murray) had been "unanimously elected" minister. That was the unlooked-for stroke of retribution! To think that he had committed his sin—nay, his crime!—in headlong wantonness! To think that at the very moment when he had committed it he was being elected to the place which he had believed the young man had been chosen to fill! Bitter, bitter was his punishment beginning to be, for, of course, he could not, with the stain of crime on his soul, if not on his hands, accept the place—not even to save his wife and child from want.

The writer further said that it was desired that he (Murray) should occupy next Sunday the pulpit which was henceforward to be his. What was to be done? Clearly but one thing—at all costs to occupy the pulpit on Sunday morning, to lay bare his soul to the people who had "unanimously" invited him, and to tell them he could never more be minister either there or elsewhere.

He sat thus with the letter in his hand, when the door opened and his wife came in with the boy asleep in her arms; he had omitted to write to her since Wednesday. He rose to his feet and stood back against the fireplace.

"Oh, my poor dear!" she cried, when she saw him. "How terribly ill you look. Why didn't you tell me? I felt there was something wrong with you."



"LET ME BEAR THE UTMOST PUNISHMENT FOR MY SIN."

when I had no word." She carefully laid the sleeping child on the couch and returned to embrace her husband.

"Don't, Mary!" said he, keeping her back.

"Oh James, dear!" she said, clasping her hands. "What has gone wrong? You look worn to death!"

"Everything's gone wrong, Mary!" he answered. "My whole life's gone wrong!"

"What do you mean?" she asked in breathless terror. "What have you in your hand?"

He held out to her the letter, and sat down and covered his face.

"Oh, but this is good news, James!" she exclaimed. "You are elected minister at Upton!"

"I can't go, Mary! I can no longer be minister there or anywhere!"

"James, my darling!" She knelt beside him, and put her arms about him. "Something has happened to you! Tell me what it is!" But he held his peace. "Remember, my dear, that we are all the world to each other; remember that when we were married we said we should never have any secret from each other! Tell me your trouble, my dear!"

He could not resist her appeal; he told her the whole story.

"My poor, dear love!" she cried. "How terribly tried you have been! And I did not know it!"

"And you don't shrink from me, Mary?" said he.

"Shrink from you, my dear husband?" she demanded. "How can you ask me? Oh, my darling!"

She kissed his hands and his face, and covered him with her love and wept over him.

They sat in silence for awhile, and then he told her what he proposed to do. She agreed with him that that was the proper thing.

"We must do the first thing that is right whatever may happen to ourselves. Write and say that you do not feel you can take more than the morning service. I'll go with you, and you shall do as you say—and the rest is with God."

Thus it was arranged. And on Sunday morning they set off together for Upton, leaving the boy in the care of the landlady. They had no word to say to each other in the train, but they held close each other's hand. They avoided greetings, and introductions, and felicitations save from one or two by keeping close in the vestry till the hour struck, and the attendant came to usher the minister to the pulpit. He went out and up the pulpit stairs with a firm step, but his face was very pale, his lips were parched, and his heart was thumping hard, till he felt as if it would burst. The first part of the service was gone through, and the minister rose to deliver his sermon. He gave out his text: "And Cain said unto the Lord: 'My punishment is greater than I can bear.'" and glanced around upon the congregation, who sat up wondering what was to come of that. He repeated it, and happening to look down, saw seated immediately below the pulpit, looking as well and self-



"MY PUNISHMENT IS GREATER THAN I CAN BEAR."

satisfied as usual, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel! The revulsion of feeling was too great; the minister put up his hand to his head, with a cry something between a sob and a sigh, tottered and fell back.

There was a flutter and a rustle of dismay throughout the congregation. The minister's wife was up the pulpit stairs in an instant, and she was followed by the chairman and the young Mr. Lloyd. Between them they carried the minister down into the vestry, where a few others presently assembled.

"Will you run for a doctor, Mr. Lloyd?" said the chairman.

Hearing the name "Lloyd," and seeing a man in minister's attire, Mrs. Murray guessed the truth at once.

"I think," said she, "there is no need for a doctor; my husband has only fainted. He has been terribly worried all the year, and the last week or two, especially, has told on him."

"I thought the other night," said the chairman, "that he looked ill."

"He has not been well since," said she; and she continued, turning to Mr. Lloyd, "I believe he was the more upset that he thought an accident had happened to you in the train, Mr. Lloyd."

"Oh," said the young man, "it was nothing. It really served me right for leaning against a door that was unlatched. I picked myself up all right."

The chairman and the others stared; they clearly had heard nothing of that. "He is coming round," said the wife. "If some one will kindly get me a cab, I'll take him home."

That is the story of the unconfessed crime of the minister of Upton chapel, who is to-day known as a gentle, sweet and somewhat shy man, good to all, and especially tender and patient with all wrong-doers.

[THE END.]

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HE WAS MET BY HIS FRIEND, THE CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE.

am the worst extempore speaker you can imagine."

"Is that so?" The friend turned quickly and considered him. "I should not have thought so. Ah, well, never mind."

But the minister felt that his friend's hope of his success was considerably shaken.

The chief persons of the assembly were gathered about a table at the upper end of the room. The chairman introduced the matter for debate; one man rose and spoke on the affirmative side, and another rose and spoke on the negative. The minister listened, but he scarce knew what was said; he drank great gulps of water to moisten