

THE MINISTER'S CRIME.

By MACKENZIE OBAN
In Standard Magazine.

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, 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 thought him that he did not know then he would be called upon to speak, nor whether he might not have to expressly 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 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 wear 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 scared.

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

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

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 clapped 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 demoniac proportions as the boastful and blatant Apollyon 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 smatterer, 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.

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

"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 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, 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

"These trains," quoth he, "are confined slowly."

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.

"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-

assured as the minister, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!

The revision 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.

The minister's wife, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel!