

*Measure for Measure*  
by Amy Randolph

“Two years’ hard labor in the State’s Prison!”

The dull, stolid face of the prisoner at the bar turned a shade paler – the heavy underlip drooped slightly – and that was all. But from a shabby woman in the crowd there rose up such a shrill wail of agony as pierced its way to the very roof.

“No, no, your honor! Surely you wouldn’t be so hard on a poor widow woman as that, and he the only son I’ve left in the world! He never did it, your worship --- it was only them rascally fellows he was with. Surely, surely, your worship---”

“Be still, woman!” said the officer, authoritatively. “What do you mean by raising such an outcry as this in court?”

As the judge stood with one foot on the step of his handsome little *coupe*, a tall figure rose up, almost from underneath the horses’ feet, with an uplifted, menacing finger.

“You’ve shown no mercy to me, Judge Emerson – may be the time’s comin’ that Heaven’s face will be turned away from you. I’ll never cease calling down curses on you, day or night!”

“The lower classes have such a propensity for making scenes on the slightest provocation,” thought the judge, leaning snugly back among the crimson cushions.

A hard, stern man, Judge Emerson had never learned the lesson of tempering justice with mercy. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” was his code, and even the shadow of affliction in his own home had not bent the nature that was like cast iron.

The clear, white moonlight was glimmering brightly over the crusted surface of the snow that had not yet been cleared entirely away, and the bitter wind swept keenly across Judge Emerson’s face as he alighted in front of the brown stone mansion where the light shown like red stars through the silk draperies of the plate glass windows.

“Bitterly cold,” said the judge to himself, shivering even through the folds of broadcloth and sable fur. “The thermometer can’t be far from zero – perhaps below. Well, it’s very seasonable weather!”

He stopped short; for, close to the broad flight of stone steps, cowered two tiny forms, ragged and pinched and forlorn, over which he had very nearly fallen – a boy of seven years old, and a girl perhaps a year younger.

“What are you doing here, you little vagabonds?” sternly demanded the judge, contracting his magisterial brow.

“Please, sir,” faltered the boy, as well as he could speak for shivering muscles and chattering teeth, “the servants drove us away and ---“

“Drove you away?” repeated the judge, with austerity. “I should think they would! How dare you come here begging? Do you know that I’ve the greatest mind in the world to call a policeman and have you both sent to the station-house?”

“Sir, if you please ---“

“But I don’t please!” stormed the irate judge. “Now I don’t want to hear another word of your stereotyped story – I just want you to understand that I am not the person to practice your art upon. Begone!”

The little girl, clinging tightly to her brother’s arm, broke into a terrified cry; the boy, sullenly casting down his eyes, crept away like some repulsed animal. Once he paused and looked back with wild, hungry eyes, as if yet cherishing some grain of hope.

“Begone, I say!” thundered Judge Emerson, as he stood on the steps waiting for the door to be opened.

He had forgotten the old Scripture words, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have it done unto me?”

So Judge Emerson crossed the echoing marble vestibule and entered the handsome room with its ceiling of pointed stucco and its crimson velvet walls, where his invalid wife sat among her cushions, idly fingering the fringe of her rich silk dress.

“How are you feeling to-night, Helen?”

In the depth of Judge Emerson’s adamant heart there were just two soft spots – one for his sick wife, the other for a son, whom long ago, his own severity had driven from the hearthstone of home. And, as he spoke, he bent tenderly over the white, weary face.

“About as usual,” she answered. “Have you no news to-night?”

“None.”

She turned her face away with a sort of sobbing sigh.

“It is this suspense that is killing me, John. If I only knew where he is – if I could only be sure that he would one day come back to me!”

“My dear, try to compose yourself,” said the more practical judge. “I tell you that the machinery I have set in action cannot fail sooner or later to discover his whereabouts. It’s a mere question of time.”

“Time – time,” sighed the invalid. – “And I have so little time left! Oh, my boy – my son!”

Judge Emerson sat down, biting his lips and contracting his brows moodily. For years the dearest object of his heart – that of bringing this lost son back to his home – had been frustrated; now he had just begun to cherish a faint hope.

“Helen,” he said, “Charles was my son also. I loved him as dearly as you can do. Only have patience, my dear, and all will be right.”

And this was the skeleton whose bony ghastliness looked out from the luxuriance of Judge Emerson’s brown-stone mansion.

Meanwhile the two little children, clinging closely to one another for warmth, were sitting in the angle of a brick archway, where the moonlight streamed in white and freezing on the December night.

“Guido,” said the little girl, in soft Italian accents, “what did the cross man say to you?”

“He told us to go away, or he would put us in prison,” said the boy, answering in her own tongue. “Francesca, are you very cold?”

“Oh, yes, very. Cannot we go home Guido?”

“No!” he shook his head resolutely. “The woman said she would kill us if we came back without money – and nobody would give me money. Here’s my coat, Francesca; it’s thin and ragged, but –“

He tied the sleeves round his little sister’s throat as he paused.

“Are you warm now?”

“No – but come close to me, Guido.”

The two child-faces, white and pinched, turned upward to the starry concave of heaven – what a study they would have been to the wiseacres who believe that “whatever is, is right.”

“Guido, do you see the great, bright star, like an eye of gold? Is it in heaven?”

“I suppose so,” said Guido, thoughtfully.

“Do you believe it is warm in heaven, Guido?”

“The priest says it is always summer there, Francesca.”

“Oh, I wish I were there! I am so cold – so cold!”

“Don’t cry Francesca – the tears are turning to ice on your cheek. Come closer, closer still; we can go to sleep, and perhaps it will be warmer when we wake up.”

And so, sweeter than the breath of lotos islands, more soothing than the ripple of golden waves over drowsy sands, the fatal sleep came down upon the two little ones clasped in each other’s arms in the icy moonlight of the bitter December night. While the golden eye of little Francesca’s “great bright star” watched them with tireless light, one of Heaven’s sentinels.

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“I think I’ve found the clue at last, Judge.”

The shrewd-looking detective pulled his fur collar up over his crimson ears with a jerk as Judge Emerson walked by his side through the foul, narrow turnings of an obscure downtown street.

“Mind, I don’t hold out any hopes for certain – I only say I *think* we’re on the right scent at last.”

“How did you discover it?”

“Well, it was in one of these emigrant boarding houses – this is the very place.”

The officer walked up stairs, and through the dark entry, with the air of a man who was entirely accustomed to this sort of place, and opened a door at the end of the passage.

“Don’t run away, Mother Hutchings – it’s only I.”

An old crone rose hurriedly up from her seat over a few smoldering coals, rubbing her withered hands obsequiously together.

“I’m sure anything *I* could do, gentlemen –“

“I want the effects belonging to Charles Elleringham Emerson, who died November the eighth, on his passage out from Palermo.”

“Died on his passage out!”

The Judge grew pale, and staggered as if he had been shot in the heart.

“I’ve made a mistake,” thought the detective, who was apt to forget that people ever had hearts. “I should have prepared him.”

The woman, apparently quite aware that evasion and denial would be alike unprofitable, went to a mouldy old mattress in the corner, and fumbled beneath it, bringing out a rudely tied parcel.

“They came to me honestly; the captain left the children here, and then was to pay their expenses.”

“Left what children?”

“Mr. Emerson’s”

“Was there no mother?”

“The captain said she died in Palermo.”

The old woman had answered these questions with subdued meekness; but her eyes glittered as the detective slowly undid the parcel.

Very few relics appeared – only a pair of tarnished gold sleeve buttons, a few articles of dress, and a picture, minus its frame.

“The frame warn’t of no consequence, I s’pose,” said the old woman, apologetically. “I pawned it to get a new coat for the dear little boy.”

Judge Emerson had taken the picture in his trembling hands – through the tremulous mist of tears he could see the beloved, familiar features of the son who was lost to him forever!”

“And the children?” he gasped.

“Dear little things,” whined the old hag; “I sent ‘em out on a little errand – Betsey, what are you hangin’ round for? – and they hain’t got back yet.”

She busied herself with re-arranging the charred brands of wood as she talked. Through all the discussion her eyes had never fairly been raised to the faces of her interlocutors.

“Very well,” said the officer. “I shall leave Miner below stairs to look out for ‘em—and–”

“But you’re not goin’ to take away them gold things?”

“I should rather think I am, Mother Hutchings. If there’s anything due to you, you’ll probably get paid; if not –“

And the detective walked quietly out of the room.

When he had reached the end of the long hall, he stopped and turned round abruptly, confronting the girl called “Betsey,” who had slunk noiselessly after them.

“Now, then, what have *you* got to say?”

“It’s a lie – it’s all a lie!” gasped the girl. I *will* tell it, if she kills me for it! She sent ‘em out to beg – she sends ‘em out every day!”

“The children?”

“Yes, the children! She struck me this morning, and I’ll be revenged!” went on Betsy, with flashing eyes. “And – hush! is that her? no, it’s only Blind Jake – I heard her tell ‘em she’d beat ‘em to death if they came back without money! Hush! it is her; I can’t tell you more; only go to the station-house in --- street. I heard ‘em talking over it this morning.”

Betsey glided away like a shadow as Mother Hutchins’ cat-like step sounded on the creaking boards; while Judge Emerson and his companion slowly left the house.

“The station-house in --- street,” musingly repeated the officer. “I didn’t anticipate this. I knew that Betsey had something to say all the time, but – it looks badly, it looks badly.”

Judge Emerson made no comment – he could not speak.

Arrived at the station-house, the detective whispered one or two words in the ear of the man sitting behind a tall desk, and was silently motioned towards a room beyond.

“The names?” questioned the officer.

“Charles Guido and Mary Francesca Emerson – testified to by the inmates of No. ---, --- street; frozen to death in Brick Alley last night!”

The detective opened the door, and Judge Emerson stood before the dead children of his dead son – all that remained of his fated race – and recognized, with a keen pang of remorse, the little ones he had turned from his own door scarce twenty-four hours ago.

Frozen to death – white and beautiful as broken lilies, with their long lashes darkly veiling the pale cheeks where no flush of roses would ever mantle more.

And when Judge Emerson knelt, stricken down by the stern strength of Fate, beside the two corpses, he remembered the curse that had been called down on his head by yet another stricken parent, and knew that God’s hand was heavy on him!

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--- The truly generous is the truly wise; and he who loves not others lives unblest.

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