

Retribution

by Kate Meriden

Of this thou needs't not stand in doubt,
Be sure thy sin will find thee out.

There was an unusual commotion in the rural district of W——, for Sefton Hall, one of its principal country-seats, which had so long been left a resort for lawless boys—not to speak of the bats and owls who had found a shelter amid its sombre shades—was about to receive other denizens.

First came a troop of artists, in the shape of architects, ornamental gardeners, &c.

The shrubbery which had overgrown the wall was carefully pruned and trimmed, and parterres of choice plants appeared, where unsightly weeds had before accumulated.

Nor was the renovating process visible only in the arrangements of the grounds, for in the interior of the hall as thorough a scouring and cleaning had been going on.

The oaken galleries had been polished to the last degree of brilliancy; the mouldy tapestry aired; and general destruction offered to the winged tribe that for a score of years, at least, had reveled in peaceful security.

Many years ago Squire Sefton, with his wife, two sons, an orphan niece, and a goodly number of faithful servants had dwelt at the hall.

The Squire was known among the country gentry for a genial-hearted, hospitable country gentleman, of the old school, who had always a ready welcome for a friend, and could deal leniently with a foe.

In disposition, at least, his younger son resembled him, for a more light-hearted, generous lad than Harry Sefton, it would have been hard to find; and, while his brother held himself aloof from his neighbors, and treated even his near relatives with a chilling reserve, Harry's amiable disposition daily won for him new friends.

We say Ralph held himself aloof from his neighbors, yet there was one exception to his general rule of conduct—his cousin Lucy, Squire Sefton's orphan niece, whom we have before mentioned.

Lucy Dunn was a gentle girl, who would gladly have extended a hand of equal fellowship to each of her cousins, yet she could not help recoiling from the savage watchfulness of Ralph, who regarded with a jealous eye the most trifling attention which she bestowed on another.

It was with a feeling of relief, rather than any stronger emotion, that Lucy turned from her gloomy cousin to the light-hearted Harry, who, always ready to assist her in her search for floral treasures, was her chosen escort. Yet, alas!

It was a warm day in August; yet, oppressive as was the heat, it did not prevent the preparations for a grand feast which Squire Sefton gave to his tenantry about this time of the year.

The baking and brewing had been completed, and nought remained but to arrange the long tables in a shady grove, the spot chosen for the feast.

This arrangement, with the assistance of her cousin, Lucy generally superintended, for her aunt had been an invalid several years.

“It seems to me, Harry,” she said, as they placed the dishes, “we might have more wreaths. But as John says I’ve already spoilt some of his choice plants, I shan’t venture in the greenhouse. Suppose we go in the woods and look for some laurel. Won’t you come with us, Ralph?” she added, in a lower tone.

His only answer was a deep scowl, and he turned away.

For a moment, a pained expression rested on Lucy’s features, yet it soon vanished, and they pursued their walk gaily.

“Look at those beautiful berries,” she exclaimed, pausing suddenly, and pointing to a gnarled oak, around which a vine with crimson clusters had twined itself. “If you like, Harry, I will wait here and gather them, while you get the laurel. You will know where to find me.”

“As you like, Lucy,” he returned. “I shall not be gone long.”

She seated herself at the foot of the tree and began gathering the berries. Presently she heard footsteps, and looking up saw Ralph hurrying along at a rapid rate, in an opposite direction.

Wondering what object her gloomy cousin could be in such hasty pursuit of, she continued her work until the berries were all gathered; then it occurred to her that Harry had been gone a long time, and she was preparing to go in search of him, when she was startled by his sudden appearance and wild manner.

“I am undone, Lucy!” he exclaimed, in an excited tone. “Yet, I swear to you, I am innocent.”

“Innocent of what?” screamed the terror-stricken girl. “Of what are you innocent?”

“Of the murder I suppose he would say, ma’am,” said a man, coming up. “Yet your flight, young man, will tell against you. An innocent man should not run.”

“What murder?” asked Lucy, with blanched lips.

“Old Hatherill as lives in the little cot at the extreme end of the forest has been foully murdered.”

“And they say Harry is his murderer? Impossible!” gasped the terrified girl. “Who dare think of such a thing!”

“Why you see, Miss, it just amounts to this:

“Jim Varie was in the forest gathering wood, for the old man, his father, had the Squire’s leave to gather what he needed. Jim said he had piled up a heap of dry sticks, and he thought he’d go to Hatherill’s and borrow a barrow. When he came near the cot he heard a loud scream, and going round to the door, he heard old Hatherill scream a second time; and when he went in the old man was laying with his face to the floor, and Harry Sefton was bending over him. What makes the matter still worse, his gun was found not a dozen yards off. His brother, who happened in, could not deny it; and as sure as I’m a living man, Miss,” continued the man, excitedly, “a bullet from that gun, killed old Hatherill.”

Lucy sat as one nailed to the earth; for that Harry, her light-hearted, generous cousin, who had always a good word for every one, could be accused of such a crime, was past belief.

Yet she had no time to collect her scattered senses, for already in the distance were heard the sound of voices, and soon the suspected man was surrounded and borne off by the multitude to a place of confinement.

We shall not linger over the long and painful trial which ensued. ’Tis only necessary to know that the Squire spared no pains to clear the unfortunate son of the dreadful crime of which he was accused. Yet, alas! all in vain was his time, money, and every effort expended. Lucy’s simple statement was fully weighed, the appearance of her cousin Ralph was all duly considered, yet no further light was thrown on the dark subject; for Harry, and Harry alone stood suspected, and the only leniency shown on account of his youth and his hitherto spotless reputation, was a commutation of his sentence from execution to imprisonment.

From this hour his mother rapidly declined. She did not live to see her youngest bound as a perjurer. The Squire grew prematurely old. As for Ralph, he grew, if possible, more taciturn and silent.

Restless and full of trouble, and having vainly exhausted every effort to clear his unfortunate son, the Squire could no longer bear to abide in a place where circumstances were constantly reminding him of the great calamity which, alas, he might never forget.

The hall was shut up, and with Ralph, Lucy, and the faithful servants who still clung to their master, the old gentleman left the place.

The seasons came and went, luxuriant flowers blushed amid unsightly weeds, and the stranger’s hand gathered them. The family still remained abroad. Five, ten, twenty years elapsed, and then there came a rumor that the old Squire was dead, and Ralph, the elder son, would return to Sefton; and this brings us to the beginning of our story.

It had been a sultry day in the beginning of July, and towards sunset the thick clouds that had been gathering poured their torrents to the earth, and peal after peal of thunder rent the air; yet, amid the violence of the storm, a close travelling carriage dashed up to the grand entrance to the hall.

There had been eager eyes awaiting its approach, yet only an occasional gleam of lightning enabled them to catch a faint glimpse of the coach and its occupants; which doubtless accounted for the contrariety of opinion which existed among the anxious watchers, for while some stoutly

maintained that a lady had been carried bodily from the carriage, others as strongly protested that naught but buffalo robes, a travelling shawl, &c., had been carried from the coach; yet all agreed that time would settle the question; and it was with a feeling of no little interest that intelligence from the hall was solicited.

For a time it appeared as though the curious were to remain unsatisfied, when suddenly, in a way least expected, the first dainty morsel of news was gathered.

The intelligence was conveyed by no less a personage than Mistress Bridget O'Mackerty, who had been installed as chief cook of the hall several weeks, and who suddenly left the premises, swearing "never to return to them same agin."

On being questioned, the worthy damsel declared "That [instead] of the place bein' occupied by a dacent female, divel the un was thar tu be seen, barrin' hersel' the laundhress an' chambermaid; but one thin' she'd confess tu the howly father himsel', an' that was that she'd seen a ghost, as sure as her name was Bridget O'Mackerty, an' might she find no rest for the sowl of her fut if they ever got her in such a place agin."

Her anxious listeners looked from one to the other, and there were whispers that the ghost of the murdered man had appeared to torment the dwellers of Sefton; and from that period its gloomy master was left to his own companionship; for none intruded on his solitude; and so another twelve months glided on, when suddenly inhabitants of W—— were thrown into a new commotion. It was announced that Jim Varie lay upon his death-bed, and he'd a startling revelation to make ere he could die in peace; and now with the curious we may enter the bed-chamber of the dying man, and listen to his thrilling announcement.

"Talk to me of peace!" he cried to the clergyman who bent above his couch—"talk to me of peace! Man, you rave. There is no peace for the wicked." And he endeavored to wipe the beaded sweat from his brow, while he continued—"Can he who has sheltered a viper and doomed the innocent to a living death, find peace?—Listen, and I will tell you a tale that shall chill the blood in your veins, and then say peace, if you dare, old man!

"There were two brothers, the younger guiltless and open as the light of day, the other dark, turbulent and silent. The elder loved a fair maiden, and because she turned from his dark, gloomy nature, his mad jealousy led him to suppose that she loved his brother, and in this state of mind he sallied forth one morning, no one knew wither. I said no one, yet the statement is not quite correct, for there was a single witness of his madness, who saw him enter the forest, apparently intent on some desperate act, and who traced him to [Hatherill's] cot, and heard him demand the gun which the old man had been cleaning for his brother, and which he flatly refused to give him, in his present state of excitement.

"This only served to exasperate him the more, and before any interference could be offered by the single observer of the scene, he sprang forward, snatched the weapon, and shot the old man through the heart.

"You would say a witness to such a scene would turn with loathing from murderer; yet he did not, *for Ralph Sefton's gold swore away his brother's life*; thus riding that infamous man of his

supposed rival, and rescuing him from the gallows. Yet, his gold has cursed me. It curses my last hours. I cannot die in peace.”

The sun shone bright and beautiful on that May morning, yet terrible were the scenes that were enacted ere it sank to rest.

Jim Varie was dead. He had died raving of his guilt to the last, and an indignant crowd, with *retribution written on every face*, was rapidly gathering around the old hall. Yet an avenging hand had gone before them, and meted out a terrible death to the miserable man they sought.

No sooner had the wretched Ralph learned that the dying man had made a full confession of the terrible crime, than he made an effort to escape from the infuriated populace, by suspending himself from the lofty tower of the hall to a deep chasm below, but fearful, indeed, was the fate that awaited him, for while plunging forward, the rope slipped from his grasp, and from the awful height he was dashed headlong into the yawning chasm.

After the death of the miserable man, another startling disclosure was made, which effectually silenced the believers in Bridget O’Mackerty’s ghost. It was nothing more nor less than the existence of Lucy Dunn being discovered, for during his last sojourn at Sefton, the wicked Ralph had kept her in close confinement; for unable to gain her affections, and imagining that she had guessed his terrible secret, he determined no one in W—— should know of her existence.

We have only to add that after undergoing the hardships of a prison life several years, Harry Sefton was released, to take possession of his estate. He had suffered much, yet who shall not venture to hope that with a conscience free from offence, he may not yet recover something of his former self.

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