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ILLUSTRIOUS SONS OF IRELAND.

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THE ROSE OF THE GERALDINES.

A LEGEND OF KILDARE.

CHAPTER I.—THE VIGIL OF PROFESSION.

Sad and silent are the scenes of thy bygone glory, fair city of the Saint. Kildare, thou sanctuary of holiness and learning, where now are the splendors of thy stately minister, with its jeweled shrines; where the pilgrims, who thronged from east and west to offer orisons in the fane which blessed Bridget founded? where the solemn processions, the sacred chant, the glittering, consecrated banners, the fragrant incense, the gleaming tapers, the veiled vestals, daughters of St. Bride, the ministering priests, the white-robed acolytes? Holiness and learning are alike fled! The fretted arches, burst and sunk, are crumbling over the spoliated shrines; for banners, the purple thistle waves its head, and the long wreaths of ivy flutter in the gale; for the odors of frankincense and myrrh, is wafted athwart the chancel the faint scent of the pale wallflower, nodding on some dismantled column; for consecrated tapers, the white radiance of the sickly moon; for the majestic strains that once floated through the lofty aisles, is heard only the fitful voice of the gust which, with a sound as of lamentation, murmurs round the mouldering fane!

Oh, memory, faithful melancholy spirit, wave thy magic wand, and summon from the ocean mist of ages the Kildare of old!

Lo, in solemn grandeur rises the noble structure; the echoes of the Vesper chant still linger through the long ribbed aisles; the vapory wreaths of the incense are still floating about the altar, and as the nuns pass in customary procession from the choir, the black veil of the mistress of the novices catches upon the carved oak of the arched doorway, and stopping to extricate it, her eyes, as she finally retires, chance to fall on a figure in knightly array, kneeling near to the Lady Chapel.

Sister Perpetua sighed; a very tender and pitiful heart beat beneath her serge robe.

"Poor youth!" she murmured; "in sooth he had better have spared unto himself and our dear child that parting which promised to him when she entered our holy retreat; he who so proved in Aileen Fitzgerald the virtues that shine in our novice Eulalia, may well mourn the loss of such a partner in the hard, bad world. May the prayers of our Blessed Lady, and sweet St. Bride, distil the dew of heavenly comfort on his soul!"

Truly that kneeling knight, Redmond de Burgh, had great need of spiritual consolation. His faith and courage waxed faint under a hard trial.

From infancy had almost existed his betrothal to Aileen Fitzgerald, the orphan heiress of a near kinsman of the great Earl of Kildare, chief of the Geraldines, as he himself was related to the equally noble De Burghs, Earls of Ulster.

The youth of Redmond de Burgh had passed among the continental courts of Europe; and at the court of Milan he contracted a friendship with a young English knight, by name Eustace Grey. The friendship was sealed by a brotherly affection from the time that, at the risk of his own life, Sir Eustace saved De Burgh from assassination in the streets of Milan, where he was set upon by bravos, hired by a Milanese noble, who was jealous of the favor with which the young

Irishman was regarded by the Duke. Hemmed in by six of these hired murderers, the young De Burgh would certainly have fallen their victim, but for the opportune appearance of Sir Eustace on the scenes who held the assailants of his friend in play, till two of the Duke's officers came up. In this encounter the young English knight was severely wounded, while De Burgh, the object of the onset, escaped with a mere scratch.

Night and day did De Burgh watch beside the Englishman till he was restored to health, and from that day their intimacy ripened into the warmest friendship. They became sworn brothers-in-arms; seldom, alas, that brothers in blood have for each other so true and tender an affection as subsisted between these two youths, who were henceforth alike distinguished at the Italian courts for their gallantry, their personal beauty and accomplishments, and their devoted friendship.

Alas, the trail of the serpent is on all the best and fairest of mortal affections and turns light into darkness, and virtue into vice. So good, so true, so noble in their affection for each other; and no less good, and true in the love they both bore to a fair and virtuous damsel; yet that love put rancor into the vessel of their peace, and turned all their friendship into bitter hate.

On leaving Italy Sir Redmond De Burgh and Sir Eustace Grey visited the English court. The licentious and murderous tyrant, Henry the Eighth, had already launched on his atrocious career; the virtuous Catherine had been divorced and whether guilty or innocent of the monstrous charges brought against her, Anne Boleyn had paid with her head the forfeit of her brief elevation. The storm of their dissolution was gathering darkly over the religious houses, but the horrid law afterwards known as the "Bloody Statute" was not yet promulgated, the headsman's axe had not yet fallen on the necks of such men as Bishop Fisher and Sir Thomas More; and the two young knights, though faithful sons of the Church, received considerable notice from Henry, who, capricious as he was wicked, perhaps favored the two friends because their graceful and gallant demeanor reminded him of his own youth, of that happier time when he too was an amiable and accomplished knight.

Beyond this, Eustace Grey was near akin to that pernicious parasite of the king who was afterwards so notorious for his spoliation of the Church, when made Deputy in Ireland. The man was proud of and attached to his young relation, and took especial care to keep the matter of the young knight's religious faith out of Henry's consideration; he also took care to abridge the visit of the two friends to the court, knowing how dangerous an abiding place it was.

From London the two youths proceeded to Dublin, where Redmond introduced his betrothed bride, Aileen Fitzgerald, called for her beauty, "The Rose of the Geraldines," to his English friend.

Often had Redmond declared his Aileen to possess all the perfections of womanhood, chaste and noble, young and fair, a model of all the graces and virtues too; and neither in person or mind did the English knight find the damsel fail to justify the noble and generous nature of Sir Eustace himself, his appreciation of the excellence of Aileen's virtues, of which he became a daily witness, was converted by the ingenuity of Satan into a lure for his destruction; a rash confidence in himself betrayed his soul to sin, from its very love of virtue.

Be perceived not that he was treading the brink of a precipice bordered with flowers, when day after day, in company with Redmond, he sought the society of Aileen; when he wore not at Redmond's continual converse in her praise, but joined, and if possible exceeded him in that praise.

Imperceptible were the first evil promptings; from admiring the good fortune of his friend in obtaining the promise of so fair and good a spouse, he grew to envy, then to consider that his own claim to the hand of the damsel were as good as Redmond's; then he hated Redmond, for hatred is the true offspring of envy. Vanity and self-conceit were the next sins on the accumulating roll, and incited by these, he assumed that the kind and gracious manner in which Aileen always received him, and which, in truth, was the mere effect of her esteem for Redmond's friend, was the result of her inclination for himself.

On the strength of this conceit, Sir Eustace Grey so far forgot the principles of Christian faith and manly honor that he actually offered himself as a suitor to Aileen, proposing with the utmost effrontery, that she should break her troth-plight with his friend.

It would be hard to say whether Aileen was most surprised and grieved at this declaration, from the knight whom she had esteemed no less for what she had thought the excellence

of his own character, than as the preserver of Redmond's life.

Aileen's absolute rejection of the English knight's extraordinary proffer was not the less bitter to him because the language she used was so gentle as well as firm, because she could not restrain the expression of her grief that the gallant friend, the honorable gentleman, the Catholic Christian should so fall away from his own high character.

Aileen forbade Sir Eustace again to intrude himself in her presence, she counselled his return to his own country, where she trusted he would overcome this vain fancy, which was a folly, no less than a sin.

Abased as much in his own esteem as in that of the lovely Irish damsel whose beauty had procured for her the name of the "Rose of the Geraldines," Sir Eustace Grey retired.

One would have thought that this unhappy knight, originally so virtuous and good, would have been shamed by the reproof of Aileen into a return to his better self. Shamed he certainly was, but not by a salutary, humble shame, such as leads to repentance; his shame was rage and fury, exacerbated hatred of Sir Redmond, almost hatred of Aileen herself. In fine, like the possessed of old, "he took unto him seven devils worse than the first;" and he made oath that whether she would or no, Aileen should be his bride, and not Redmond de Burgh's.

So did this man succumb to a sharp temptation, and the evil one rejoiced in the destruction of a soul.

Now from the time that the traitor Dermot first made a compact with Strongbow, and the English were lords of Irish soil, Ireland had very good reason to complain of English rule, but all former evils were as a molehill to a mountain in compare to those she was called upon to endure when the heresy of Luther and the monstrous vices of Henry Tudor, originated the so-called "Reformation."

Sir Eustace Grey was aware what strides the new doctrines were making in England, that his kinsman was foremost in promulgating them, or rather in sharing their attendant spoliation, and was high in favor with the king.

Now to do justice to this unhappy youth, he did not contemplate becoming a traitor to his faith, any more than he had first contemplated becoming traitor to his friend.

But blinded by passion, he thought with himself that, after all, De Burgh and Aileen were but Irish, despite their descent from the two great Norman families, those families having become, in the course of ages, "mere Irish" (this despicable term was one of common use in those days), and that therefore he might safely venture on an outrage which he would never have dared attempt upon persons of like rank in the sister kingdom.

Bad passions, too, are awfully quick of propagation, and now to envy and hatred, called into existence by a love which every good principle forbade, was added avarice; and his abominable plan was strengthened by his keeping in mind that Aileen was an heiress, was very rich, and he, as the offspring of a younger son, was very poor. In fine, Sir Eustace resolved to outrage his friend by carrying off Aileen, and compelling her to become his wife. He had learned that very week that his relation had obtained the post of Lord Deputy in Ireland; and he reckoned on a prompt pardon for his infringement of the law.

The disturbed times rendered this wicked plot easy of fulfilment; the continental cities and London itself were the scenes of many a midnight brawl and secret assassination. It was in defending Sir Redmond from an attack of this sort at Milan that Sir Eustace Grey first became known to him. A second time his life was to be periled through the young Irishman, but on this occasion it was in the attempt to perpetrate against him a base injury, and it was De Burgh's own sword that meted out the punishment. And this was the manner in which the event happened.

Aileen Fitzgerald was residing at the house of her guardians in Dublin; the preparations for her marriage with De Burgh were in a forward state, but the ceremony was to take place at Kildare, near which city Aileen had a noble residence; and in a few days the damsel was to proceed thither.

Sir Eustace knew that Aileen was in the habit of proceeding, both morning and evening, to the cathedral in Dublin very slenderly attended, sometimes only in company with her nurse and a single serving man.

In her abode at Kildare she was surrounded by a band of warlike and faithful vassals; his plan must be executed before the damsel left Dublin.

This crafty knight took advantage of the unsuspecting friendship of Sir Redmond, to learn that on a certain day he would be absent from the city.

Darkness fell early, for the month was November, but Sir Eustace knew that neither darkness nor severe weather hindered the pious

maiden from her devotions; so he engaged two rough fellows of the household of his cousin, the new-made deputy, and who were Englishmen like himself, and disguising himself with a mask and a large mantle, with his ruffians at his heels, he stationed himself near the cathedral till Aileen and her attendants issued from it on their return home. These attendants consisted, as usual, only of her nurse and two serving-men bearing torches. Accompanied by his ruffians, the unworthy knight tracked the party till they entered a somewhat retired and silent street, then dashing suddenly forwards, while his followers struck the torches from the hands of her attendants, he himself seized the damsel, and stifling her cries with his cloak, bore her towards the place where he had a swift horse, held by another of the men in his employ.

The poor Aileen in vain struggled for freedom, or even to throw off the folds of the cloak that half suffocated her, and shriek for help.

She gave herself up for lost, and was near fainting, when the shrill voice of her nurse pierced the thick folds of the mantle. Her abductor quickened his steps, but he was embarrassed by her struggles, and was no match for his unexpected pursuers. The next moment Aileen was torn from his grasp, while her deliverer, in the well-known accents of Redmond de Burgh, sternly bade the robber defend himself.

By a mercy of Providence, Redmond had come back to Dublin, and, in company with some young cavaliers, had gone to meet Aileen returning from Vespers, and had encountered the group of the shrieking and distressed nurse, the followers of Eustace Grey, and the serving-men of Aileen, who were exchanging blows and vituperations. The friends of Redmond speedily turned the fortunes of the battle, while the youth himself, guided by the nurse, pursued and overtook the man who was bearing off Aileen.

Foiled in his villainy, Sir Eustace would fain have fled, but the indignant De Burgh, committing Aileen to the embrace of Nora and the care of his friends, who now came up, pressed Sir Eustace so hardily, that he would fain to turn and defend himself, and ere half a dozen passes were exchanged he fell severely wounded by the sword of Sir Redmond.

This brief conflict had taken place by the light of the torches borne by the attendants of De Burgh's party. Placing his foot on the breast of his fallen foe, De Burgh bade him ask for his life, but an inarticulate moan was the only reply he received.

Thinking that the man was unable to speak, Redmond proceeded to sever with his dagger the strings of the mask which he wore, while two of his companions raised him up, the blood meanwhile pouring from his wound.

The miserable English knight, who dreading the discovery of his defeated treachery, feebly attempted resistance, but as the mask fell off, and the torch-light gleamed upon his livid features, all collapsed and wrung with shame and anguish, he responded bitterly to the cry of dismay uttered by Redmond.

"Yes! yes!" he gasped faintly, "it is indeed I, thy friend, who have sought to steal thy bride. A malison on the hour that mine eyes first looked upon her fatal beauty, for it was a snare that hath led me to destruction. I die a crafty wretch, dishonored before God and man. I die, too, by thy hand, for whose life I once so freely periled mine own! May these two memories poison all the days to come for you and for Aileen, that thou hast slain the friend who loved thee, and her beauty beguiled to my soul's undoing!"

The miserable knight fainted as he uttered these dreadful words.

He was taken up and conveyed with all possible care and tenderness to the dwelling of Aileen, whom he had wronged, and a chirurgeon was sent for to examine his wounds.—Fever and delirium ensued, and for many days his life was despaired of.

While the unhappy English knight was in this peril, while Redmond hung despairing over what it was thought would be the death-bed of Sir Eustace, overwhelmed with the thought that his hand should have meted death to the friend for whose crime he felt forbearance and compassion; and while in the ravings of his delirium the English knight passionately upbraided Aileen as the authoress of all his misery and sin, the appalled and pity-stricken damsel made a solemn vow. Should Sir Eustace be spared for penitence, and Redmond spared the dreadful thought that he had slain his friend, then did Aileen register a vow to God, our Lady, and Blessed St. Bridget, that since she, Aileen Fitzgerald, although unwittingly, had been the cause of so much misery, she would never become the bride of man, but dedicate all her future life thankfully to Heaven, in the nunnery of Kildare.

The pious prayers of Aileen were answered. Sir Redmond was spared the horror of having killed him, and Aileen, despite of all entreaties

from De Burgh, from her friends, and from the apparently penitent Sir Eustace himself, kept the solemn vow which she had made.

It was on the vigil of Aileen's profession that the novice-mistress of the great nunnery at Kildare observed De Burgh kneeling at Vespers in the church. On the day when Aileen entered the nunnery she had promised De Burgh that she would see him once again on the eve of her final abandonment of the world.

Sir Redmond was a most noble and worthy and accomplished knight; his heart was filled with gratitude to Heaven in that the blood of the misguided Sir Eustace did not stain his soul, but he loved Aileen with a most tender and faithful affection, and to assist her even for the fulfillment of her vow had been very bitter to him.

But De Burgh had come victor as out of this conflict, and his interview with Aileen at the grate, on the eve of her profession, was less painful than the kind novice-mistress, Sister Perpetua, had feared that it would be.

Great comfort did Aileen derive from Sir Redmond telling her that he had so ordered his worldly affairs as to admit of his loving his sword to the service of God in the excellent Order of the Knights of St. John of Malta, and that he had made arrangements to leave Ireland immediately after her profession.

Of the unhappy man whose frenzy had been productive of the separation between himself and Aileen he had no cheering news to tell. Soon after Aileen had entered the convent, a rude and gloomy mood had displaced Sir Eustace's professions of penitence. This mood was varied by occasional bursts of wild gaiety, in which he would mingle with the most dissolute knights and cavaliers in Dublin. Finally, said Sir Redmond, the English knight had withdrawn altogether from his society. Aileen looked sorrowful at these tidings, she had ventured to hope that the fulfillment of her vow would help to win back an erring soul.

"Redmond, my friend!" she then said, "it may be that this our erring brother is reserved for the redemption of some great chastisement. Should it be thy lot ever to meet with him plunged, alas, in greater sin, and groaning under the burden of some great judgment, promise me, then, that for Aileen's sake, thou wilt abide by him, wilt do thy best to win him back to the way of salvation."

With pious fervor Redmond gave this promise, but in truth he deemed it little probable that in this world he and the English knight would meet again, thinking that Sir Eustace had returned to his native land. Greatly, then, was he surprised at encountering him again that very night, when, after parting from Aileen, he walked out beyond the boundaries of the city.

CHAPTER II.—THE MEETING.

It was a fine summer night, a night of early June, and the moon rode unclouded over the star-sprinkled sky. Sir Redmond was little disposed to rest; his submissive and well-ordered spirit recognized all the excellence of Aileen's vocation, but more of human frailty clung about his soul than that of the angelic maiden, and he could not forbear on that night from a sorrowful contrast of the life that was before him, with that which he had hoped for ere his luckless meeting with Sir Eustace Grey.

De Burgh felt feverish as well as depressed; and instead of retiring to his lodging when he left the convent, he walked out among the fields and bosky woods which at that time encircled the city.

The night was so oppressively warm that the long tendrils of the wild rose fluttered not a leaf, and the rich warbling of the nightingale rung high and clear in the still air.

The country road, or rather lane, down which Sir Redmond had sauntered terminated on a wide common, the eastern boundary of which was skirted by an oak coppice. Absorbed in melancholy musings, De Burgh pursued his way on the borders of the wood till, feeling somewhat wearied, he sat down to rest on the moss-covered roots of an aged oak that threw its gnarled limbs wide over the common.

The coolness and stillness of the young knight, whose harassed mind had told more than he was himself aware upon his frame; and the slumber which he would in vain have courted on his pillow insensibly stole over him.

He was roused from a dream of those bygone days, when Aileen was his promised bride and Eustace Grey the chosen friend of his heart, by sounds which the practised ear of a soldier could not mistake—the clink of metal, the ringing steel spurs, of swords in their scabbards, and the measured tramp of a body of cavalry.

De Burgh shook off the slumber that oppressed him, and athwart the moor he saw a troop of soldiers pass, arrayed in the garb and glittering accoutrements of King Henry's guards, with the red cross banner of St. George in the van.

Some anxiety crossed the mind of De Burgh as to the purpose with which these troops