



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XIII.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, JULY 10, 1863.

No. 48.

THE HERMIT OF THE ROCK.

A TALE OF CASHEL.

BY MRS. J. SADBIE.

CHAPTER XVII.—INNER LIFE IN EFFINGHAM CASTLE.

In the drawing-room at Effingham Castle the conversation that evening turned on the wild and gloomy tale heard on the Rock—a tale so illustrative of the darkest phases of Tipperary life.

Harriet smiled, and bent her head over a volume of engravings that lay open on the table before her.

'Do you not think, Mr. Goodchild, that the landlords themselves may be in some measure to blame?'

'Not to any great extent, my lord—oh certainly not; witness the murder of Mr. Esmond who was considered one of the very best landlords in Tipperary.'

'Yes, but that was an exceptional case—the rule is, as I understand, that those landlords who have been murdered were all more or less obnoxious to the people for their oppressive exactions and their harsh treatment of their tenants.'

'But surely, my lord, that does not justify murder—even admitting it were just as your lordship seems to have been informed?'

'Nothing justifies murder,' said Lord Effingham with stern emphasis, 'but it strikes me, Mr. Goodchild, that the very league which you say exists to an alarming extent amongst the peasantry goes to prove that, there must be some radical fault on the part of those who have immediate authority over them, and I think it is well worth considering what chain of circumstances it is that has so hardened the hearts of these people, and perverted a nature not in itself wicked or ferocious—how it happens, in short, that the peasantry of Tipperary, so warm-hearted, so susceptible of kindness, so keenly alive to justice or injustice, have become so bloodthirsty as it would seem they are—so ready to take life themselves, so prone to sympathise with others whose hands are red with the blood of their fellow-men?'

The chaplain took out his box and refreshed his nasal organ with a pinch of snuff—snook his reverend head—and declared that 'he had never viewed the matter in that light—had never given much attention to the history of Ireland—but he thought the cause of all these evils was undoubtedly to be found in the pernicious and soul-debasing doctrines of Rome to which those unhappy people were so incurably addicted.'

'For shame! Mr. Goodchild!' said Harriet Markham, her eyes flashing with the contempt and indignation she could not help feeling; 'how often have I explained to you that it is not because of their Romish belief, but in despite of it, that the Catholic peasantry of this and other countries do at times take the law into their own hands. Were they not addicted to the doctrines of which you speak, you may take my word for it that such bloody acts of revenge would be ten to one—ay! twenty to one what they now are?'

'My dear Miss Markham,' said the chaplain with his most insinuating smile, 'I have an insuperable aversion to contradicting a lady—but really—ah!—really—'

'My dear Mr. Goodchild,' put in Harriet by way of filling up his hesitating pause. 'I know there are in my persons who are afflicted with a dreadful obliquity of vision in matters Irish or Catholic. If such be your case, I regret it exceedingly, and will charitably suppose that you never even heard of the mighty and incessant struggle everywhere going on between—the Catholic Church and all manner of secret organisations, from Freemasonry to Rubiconism, and all between.'

'What a dreadful country to live in!' said Lady Pemberton to her brother; 'I wonder how Lady Jane will like it?'

'Like it, indeed!' cried Mrs. Pakenham, with a toss of her stately head, 'I wonder did Lady Jane ever like anything beyond herself?'

'I should hope she did,' quietly and somewhat sarcastically said Lady Pemberton, with a glance at the Earl, who, however, appeared to take no notice. The next moment he turned his keen,

piercing eyes on Miss Markham, and said rather abruptly—

'What a singular old woman that was who broke in so unseasonably on Mr. Moran's narrative. Do you know anything of her?'

'I am not sure that I do, my lord, but I rather suspect. For the present, however, I may not say more.'

'An old woman?' exclaimed the chaplain, 'what old woman?'

'Not your old woman, Mr. Goodchild,' said Harriet with a meaning smile—at least I think so?'

The ladies looked surprised, but the chaplain looked astounded, and blushed like a very school-girl under Harriet's mischievous glance.

'Mr. Goodchild's old woman?' said Mrs. Pakenham laughing, 'and pray who may she be?'

'Not one of the weird 'sisters three,' madam.

'Who met Macbeth Upon the heath?'

but probably an Irish kinswoman of theirs on whom our worthy chaplain has been experimenting of late—shooting her with a 'silver bullet,' I believe—or how was it, Mr. Goodchild?'

'I protest, Miss Markham,' stammered the chaplain, his professional gravity entirely at fault—'I protest—I do not understand the allusion.'

'Oh fie, Mr. Goodchild, fie, fie!' and Harriet raised her finger admonishingly, and smiled archly—'you do not mean to deny that you met somebody 'on the heath'—well, not exactly 'on the heath'—but—somewhere between this and the glebe-house?'

The chaplain looked more and more confused, the ladies more and more delighted at what they saw was a good joke, and more and more urgent with Miss Markham to let them into the secret. Just at that moment Lord Effingham rose, and saying he had letters to write, withdrew. Harriet glanced timidly up as he passed her, and was not surprised to see a deeper cloud than usual on his brow, and a sterner look in his dark proud eyes.

Half an hour after, Harriet having gone to her own apartment for a book, chanced to pass the library, the door of which was ajar, and by the dim, subdued light from a study lamp at the farther end of the spacious room, she saw Lord Effingham sitting at a table, his thoughtful brow resting on his hand, and a look of care and weariness impressed on every feature. Harriet stopped involuntarily, with the thought uppermost in her mind—'Neither rank nor riches give immunity from care; it so happened that Lord Effingham raised his eyes at the moment, and looked towards the door, just as Harriet was gliding away. Rising hastily he came to the door, and said, 'Miss Markham! will you have the goodness to favor me with a few moments' conversation?'

'Certainly, my lord!' said Harriet with an effort to assume a composure which she did not feel, her mind being full of the idea that the Earl was not pleased with the freedoms she took in rallying his chaplain, with a still more painful fear natural to a delicate mind that her having passed at that particular moment might be construed into prying curiosity—in short, she felt troubled and unhappy, and her face—ever the index of her thoughts—told all too plainly what was passing within. She saw that her composure was not unnoticed, and that very consciousness increased it considerably. The Earl regarded her a moment with a smile so sad that she could have wept under its strange and softening influence, but she mastered her emotion, and looked up with as calm a mien as she could command.

'My lord,' she began, with some hesitation, 'you will pardon me if I say that I thought you seemed somewhat displeased by my thoughtless badinage in relation to worthy Mr. Goodchild.' An involuntary smile, flitted over her face as she spoke the name, but casting her eyes down with a demure expression, she stood awaiting the answer. It was longer delayed than she expected, and looking up in some surprise, she found Lord Effingham regarding her with the same mournful smile.

'Witchcraft,' he muttered in a tone that was not meant for her ear, yet she heard the words distinctly—'witchcraft! ay, there is witchcraft that even silver bullets cannot reach. Miss Markham!' he said in his usual voice and manner of cold impassiveness, 'Miss Markham! you were much mistaken in supposing that I resented your—your playful attack on my reverend friend—which I considered perfectly fair. Were I disposed for badinage I might, perhaps, say that he was more to be envied than commiserated under such an attack!—Miss Markham smiled, and acknowledged the courtly compliment by a slight inclination—but,' continued his lordship, 'that was far from being the subject on which I wished to speak with you—you are probably aware of the object of my approaching visit to England?'

'I cannot say I am, my lord,' said Harriet after a pause, during which she ran over in her mind certain words that had fallen from Lady Pemberton and Mrs. Pakenham, together with certain preparations going on around the Castle.

'I wonder at that,' said the Earl, 'knowing how difficult it is for ladies to keep secrets. You must know, then, Miss Markham, what, perhaps, you should have known before, as a valued friend rather than the more preceptress of my children?—Miss Markham bowed somewhat haughtily—'in a word, I am about to fulfil a matrimonial engagement, entered into some months since with the daughter of an English marquis.'

'The Lady Jane, I presume, whose name I heard this evening for the first time?'

'The same,' said Lord Effingham with a scarcely perceptible tremor in his voice.

'Your lordship does me honor,' said Miss Markham looking up with a gracious smile, 'an honor for which I feel deeply grateful—believe me I do.'

She was about leaving the room, when the Earl's voice arrested her steps, and she returned to where he stood.

'I have yet another word to say'—he paused—then hastily added—'I wished to know, Miss Markham, whether you will still remain with us—that is, with my little girls?'

'I see no reason why I should not, my lord,' said Harriet proudly, 'my position in the Earl of Effingham's family will be in no degree changed, I should think, by the advent of a Countess of Effingham,' and she smiled with an archness that well became her. 'Unless, indeed,' she added quickly, 'her ladyship may object to having the young daughters of the house of Cartwright educated by a Catholic. In that case, my lord,' she said with much earnestness, 'I will reply on the friendship you do me the honor to profess for me to give me timely notice.'

'Rely,' said Lord Effingham with more warmth than was usual to him, 'on all that I can do at any time to shield you from aught that would in any degree compromise your dignity—your self-respect. I know the innate nobleness of your mind, and rest assured, Miss Markham, it shall never be subjected to any trial under my roof.'

'I thank you, my lord,' said Harriet, her voice slightly tremulous, 'you give the best proof of your good opinion in entrusting me with the education of your dear children, and it shall be my ceaseless endeavor to form their minds to the best of my poor ability—and make them such as I know you would wish to have them. In that way, at least, I can repay your lordship's kindness to—a penniless orphan whom fate has thrown almost on your bounty.' The last words were spoken with that peculiar archness which gave such a charm at times to Harriet's speaking features, and, bowing with the grace which marked her every action, she was leaving the room, when on the threshold she encountered Mrs. Pakenham and Lady Pemberton.

'Dear me,' said the former lady, with a sudden change of countenance, 'we were not aware that your lordship was engaged—that is, we thought you were writing letters, and came to ask if you would spare time to join us at supper—I see Miss Markham has been beforehand with us.'

'You are mistaken, madam,' said Harriet coldly, 'I can lay claim to no such amiable intention—I was merely passing the library on my way up stairs for a book I wanted, when Lord Effingham, seeing me pass, requested to speak with me on a matter of business, and I stepped in.'

'And I,' said the Earl, 'owe you an apology, Miss Markham, for I just now recollect that I had not the politeness to offer you a seat. The business on which I wished to speak with Miss Markham affects us all, I should hope. I was desirous of ascertaining, before any further changes take place here, whether we might count on the continuance of her invaluable services in regard to Ann and Emma.'

Lady Pemberton, who much resembled her brother in character and disposition, and also in appearance, turned at once to Harriet and said with a courteous smile, 'Surely, Miss Markham would not think of leaving her young charge at a time when, perhaps, they may most need her kind and judicious care?'

'That was precisely what induced me to ask her, Caroline!' said Lord Effingham.

'Well, it is very true,' said Mrs. Pakenham, a little maliciously Harriet thought, 'with all her beauty and sprightly grace, I fear dear Lady Jane is not exactly the type of a good stepmother.'

'Excuse me, Thomasine,' said Lord Effingham in his coldest and sternest accents, 'I cannot permit such an inference to be drawn from what I have said. Your remark is altogether superfluous, and entirely irrelevant to our purpose. I asked Miss Markham a simple question, and she gave me a simple and direct answer—I am glad to say, in the affirmative.'

'Well, well,' said Mrs. Pakenham, a little testily, 'now that the matter is arranged to general satisfaction, I presume your lordship will honor us with your presence during the remainder of the evening—and in the first place, to supper?'

Harriet heard no more, for she quietly made her escape, and took refuge in her own apartment, there to muse in silence and alone on what she had heard and seen during the last quarter of an hour, for no longer time had passed since she left the drawing-room. Short as the time was, and unimportant what had occurred, she somehow felt as though a page had been written in her life's record, and a strange feeling was knocking at her heart, but of what kind she cared not to examine. Was she humbled or exalted in her own estimation? Was her peace more or less than it was an hour before? These were questions that she did not trouble herself to answer, but smoothing as she best might the fair surface of her sweet face, she descended to the drawing-room, just in time to bring up the rear of the party on their way to supper. She had ascertained on her own way down that the little girls were already in bed and locked in the blissful unconsciousness of childish slumbers.

The conversation during supper was lively and animated, and Harriet Markham was the gayest of all. Still it could not have escaped an observant eye, if any such were on her, that her cheek was paler even than usual, and her eyes burning with an inward fire. No one seemed to notice anything unusual in her tone or manner, though all felt the ineffable charm that hung around her. Lord Effingham, indeed, took little notice of anything; silent and abstracted, tho' condescendingly polite as usual, he seemed occupied with serious thought and took little part in the conversation. He complained of a headache, and retired early. As Harriet caught his parting glance, she said to herself—'there is a load of care on that proud cold heart—there is sorrow in the troubled depths of those deep eyes. Does he feel—even he?'

The remainder of the evening passed away without anything particular, but Harriet learned for the first time that Lady Pemberton was to remain at the Castle during the Earl's absence to preside over the general preparations, and also to receive the young Countess on her arrival. The little party broke up early, and Harriet Markham, with an exquisite sense of relief, unlocked the door of her spacious and elegant apartment, and threw herself in an arm-chair near the one large window of a balcony connected with her chamber which commanded a prospect of that mingled wildness and beauty that most impress a lofty, imaginative mind. The curtains were as yet undrawn, and the lady-moon shed her heart-soothing light into the small apartment, so graceful in its furniture and decoration, so sweet for the inner home—the retreat, as it were, of a being so solitary in her heart's life as Harriet Markham. So she lay in that delicious sense of rest and the no less delicious sense of solitude—of loneliness—which casts its spell over the world-weary heart and the tired brain when the deep hush of the solemn night is around, and the noisy, frothy, hollow, heartless world shuts its bleating mouths for a while, leaving the deep heart to commune with its own thoughts, to indulge for a space its earnest longings, to drink in the beauty of earth and heaven, and commune with the dead of other years, or the loved and far removed.

Such are the moments happily described by the sweetest of modern poets:

'When lost in the future the soul wanders on,
And all of this life but its sweetness is gone.'

And Harriet Markham felt the charm of the hour and the scene, and her soul was upraised to that heaven which the eye of faith can see afar off through the blue ether of the midnight sky—for it was verging on midnight. All at once a footstep sounded on the verandah beneath her window—a light but measured step, and Harriet's heart beat—not with fear—as she bent her head to listen, and furthermore raised the window just enough to admit a sound from without. The measured footfall continued—to and fro—now broken and irregular, now firm and distinct, like that of a sentinel on duty. Occasionally there came to the ear of the lonely watcher another sound like that she might have heard in dreams—it was a voice, deep, full, yet subdued, humming as if for no listening ear, but the singer's own heart. Oh, how eagerly did Harriet listen to catch the low but musical tones, and an inexplicable feeling of delight enveloped her senses as she recognised the air and the words, too,—

'Oh! bring to me my Nora Fay,
Hours are days when she's away.'

The voice ceased, but oh! the passionate yearning that was in the rich, soft tones. Never had Harriet heard the charm of 'Shute Aroon' brought out with such effect, and she listened with all the intensity of heart to hear the sweet

sounds again. Softly she murmured to herself—

'Oh, not more welcome the fairy numbers
Of music falls on the sleeper's ear,
When half-awaking from fearful slumbers,
He thinks the full choir of heaven is near.'

'Who can it be?' was the next thought.—'That was no rustic—oh no, no. Then who can be within the Castles walls at this lone hour?'

Then came from below the sound of a deep thrilling voice speaking in audible whisper—and to Harriet's excited fancy it sounded almost close to her ear.

'Oh night! what anguish do you shroud full often—oh moon! what sights you witness in your unclouded path through your glorious heavens!—oh heart! throbbing, bursting heart, why not break and be at rest?'

Why was it that, unknowing who the speaker was, Harriet Markham bowed her head on the window-ledge and wept tears that seemed to flow from her inmost heart? A strange, weird thing is human nature, and a stranger thing is the human heart. As an Eolian harp to the voices of the wind, so does the heart respond to the more variable tones of human feeling—human sympathy—human suffering. Long did the slow and measured tread break the stillness of the night, and by some strange fascination Harriet remained with her head resting against the window till the sound ceased, and the earth below was silent as the glittering stars above. Then alone with the night, her mind and heart gradually resumed their usual tone, and gazing upwards on the 'spangled heavens,' that 'shining frame' which, in the language of the poet,

'The Great Creator's praise proclaim,'

her thoughts assumed the form of meditation, and in the contemplation of things divine, she speedily lost sight of the thorns and briars that strew the path to those eternal mansions where joy is ineffable forever reigns. Calmly and hopefully she knelt to perform the last sweet exercise of the Christian's day, and having offered heart to the God who made it, and to Mary the Mother of faithful souls, she resigned herself to sleep—the tranquil sleep of an untroubled conscience.

During the days that intervened between that and Lord Effingham's departure, his lordship spent the greater part of his time in his study, a small and very pleasant room adjacent to the library, and open on the verandah already mentioned. A solitary ride in the afternoons alone broke the monotony of his seclusion, yet when the family assembled at the table there was no perceptible difference in his manner, always calm and cold and self-possessed, at times a little abstracted, but never discourteous to those around him.

On the day before that fixed on for his departure he approached the bow-window in the sitting-room where Harriet occupied her favorite seat, her fingers engaged on some one of those pretty trifles, the use whereof would puzzle any of those 'lords of creation' whom 'men we call,' while her eyes wandered ever and anon to the graceful scene of woodland beauty spread out in their airy before the window, and nearer where her young pupils were amusing themselves with hoop and skipping-ropes on the smooth sward outside.

'Miss Markham,' said the Earl, so suddenly that she started, and blushing, looked up in surprise; 'Miss Markham, there was one trifling incident of our last visit to the Rock which I forgot to mention since, though I have thought of it many times. But why that look of surprise?' he added with a smile of peculiar expression. 'Does my voice grate so harshly on your ear?'

'Not at all, my lord,' said Harriet recovering her composure, and smiling pleasantly, 'but—ah!—I did not think your lordship was so near, and I was just completing the erection of a superb chateau en Espagne.'

'Indeed? It were worth something to know what manner of edifice that was which so gracefully a fancy piled in airy space?'

'Architectural details are seldom interesting, my lord—but may I venture to ask what was the incident to which your lordship referred just now?'

Lord Effingham mentioned the face which he and Mr. Moran had both seen at a window of the old Cathedral, adding that he could not help associating it in his mind with the singular apparition of the old woman in the cloak. 'What is your opinion, Miss Markham?'

Harriet mused a moment before she replied in a thoughtful, hesitating tone—'That there is some mystery about these appearances, my lord, I have not the smallest doubt, but what they indicate—especially the face which showed itself so suddenly and so suddenly vanished, in such a place, is more than I can imagine—perhaps it were even unwise to say it if I could.'

'It is a strange country,' was the Earl's remark, as he turned to Lady Pemberton who was reading at another window in the room, and asked if she would ride out with him, before