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ELLEN AHERN;

OR,

THE POOR COUSIN.

CHAPTER X.—Continued.

My Lord, I know of nothing in our intercourse or our relations towards each other, to warrant anything like this, or invite confidence. You will, therefore, release me instantly," said Ellen Ahern, vainly endeavoring to extricate her hand.

"That is no reason why there never should be. Keep quiet, I am not accustomed to be thwarted," he said, tightening his grasp on her hand. "Fahey will be here in a half hour, and I don't know when another opportunity will present itself like the present."

"This compulsion is in no wise necessary, my Lord. I am not one who is apt to go into heroics, but a matter of fact individual, who likes best to look whatever is inevitable into the face. Release my hand, therefore, and if what you have to say is what I ought to listen to, I will bear you out," said Ellen Ahern, with a brave show of manner, while her heart throbbed quickly, and she recommended herself to the protection of the Blessed Virgin.

"I prefer a more tangible guarantee than your words, my bright eyed falcon, therefore I detain your hand, lest you fit away sooner than will suit me. Do you know, Ellen, that proud, defiant and scornful as you are, you have piqued me into loving you madly, and that I am willing to break all bonds, and defy everything to win you. Answer me, Ellen."

"Leaving the thought of all other ties to the consideration of your honor, I will only tell you how utterly useless, and how worse than unwelcome such a declaration is, nor can I understand how—bound as you are by a solemn engagement—you can so far forget yourself, and what is due to me, to make it. Believe me, even whilst I unconditionally reject it, I feel anything but complimented by such an equivocal compliment."

"Ellen, you have a deal of courage, but know that I am a dangerous man when I am baffled in the attainment of an object in which I have set my heart, therefore, do not exasperate or trifle with me. As to my engagement in England, it is purely a mercenary one. I hate the woman as much as I hate the idea of marriage with her."

"And yet—" "I anticipate you. And yet—you would say—feeling thus, you would marry here? I answer yes, if I had not met you here, beautiful Ellen; you whom I am determined to win cost what it may!" he replied, while the light that burned in his eyes, and the determined, resolute lines of his countenance gave emphasis to his threat.

"My Lord," she said, in a quiet, firm voice, even while Don Enrique's warning suddenly flashed across her mind, and made her heart sick and faint; "it may be well for you to understand at the outset, that you have a character to deal with quite as determined as your own; and that there is not the slightest probability that your sentiments can ever be reciprocated. I appeal, therefore, to your chivalry and generosity, to respect my defencelessness, and no more urge the subject on me."

"I can make no such promise, Ellen. It would be folly to throw away the advantage ground I possess."

"Then, as the world is wide, I shall seek shelter and protection elsewhere. I am no coward, Lord Hugh Maguire, but strengthened by high resolve, I have the courage to go and earn my bread. Satisfied with the approval of God and a good conscience, I ask no favor from the world."

"Wherever you go I shall pursue you; therefore think of no such wild scheme as that to avoid me. Be rational, Ellen. Consider what you would gain for yourself and others by a favorable consideration of my sentiments."

"No earthly motive could induce me to be false to myself, or be guilty of a wrong that good might come to it. I should despise myself, if for greed or gain I could traffic with what I consider the holiest emotions of our nature. I should feel guilty of a debasing crime, if by consenting to a marriage of mere interest, I made an unworthy use of what I believe to be a divinely instituted sacrament."

"Mr. Fahey is here, my Lord," said William, looking in.

"Tell him to wait. But stay—did he bring any news of MacDugin, the factor?"

"Yes, my Lord; the man is dead he says."

"Dead! The Devil!" exclaimed Lord Hugh Maguire, springing from the sofa in a rage. "I believe that the old dotard killed him to spite me. Everything conspires against me, but I'll triumph yet—remember Ellen Ahern—I'll have my own will yet. I'll not be thwarted and baffled at every turn—least of all by you."

"Threats to a woman well become you, my

Lord," said Ellen Ahern, getting up to leave the room. A feeling of irrepressible scorn, and the chafing of a free, proud spirit, impatient of littleness and unjust control urged her to say it, and ere he had time to intercept her egress, she had flitted past him, and ran up to her own apartment, where she found Thela waiting for her, coiled up on the door mat. He got up, shook his snaggy coat, and licking her hand, followed her in, and after she turned the lock of the door, came and stood before her as she sat down pale and exhausted on the bedside.

"I think we will go to-morrow, Thela," she said after a long silence, during which time her heart was full of bewildering thoughts. The dog whined and rubbed his great head against her hand, as if he comprehended her; while she, touched by this mark of mute affection in her desolate loneliness, burst into tears. She was not altogether friendless; something loved her, and clung to her with rare faith—Thela, at least, would never forsake her. And gradually the troubled, stern shadows of earthly woe gave forth tears, which softened her heart to higher and holier influences, which were hovering like Angels about her. For the moment, the stern exigency of her position was absorbed in the strong sentiment of faith, and she threw herself on her knees before her Oratory, and exclaimed in broken accents: "Thou seest all, my Father!—Thou knowest all! Thou art strong to deliver and hast promised to be a Father to the fatherless—pity me—succor me—and suffer me not to be taken in the snare that encompasses me!—Mother of Sorrows! powerful Friend of the afflicted! protect me, guide me, and intercede for me." And as she prayed, pouring out her soul to Him, who having created it, was ever ready to attend to its cries for His protection, she felt tranquilized, and her reliance on Heaven strengthened. She spent two or three hours before retiring, in picking up a few valuables—papers and some necessary articles of wearing apparel in a portmanteau, to be ready at any moment to go away, after she had taken counsel of Father McMahon and Sir Eadna Ahern.

The next morning she arose early to go to Mass, but to her surprise and consternation, when she came to the narrow pass of rocks leading down into the hamlet, she found it guarded, and was told that no one was to be allowed to pass in or out without an order from Lord Hugh.

"But these orders do not surely apply to me. I am Miss Ahern, his Lordship's cousin."

"It's little matter, Miss, who you be. If it was her ladyship, it would be mar than my life is worth to let you by," said the Scotchman firmly.

"What is the matter? What has happened? I do not understand this," asked Ellen Ahern.

"It's nae saicret, leddy, that his lordship's life has been attempt-d, and to the best o' my knowin', he suspects some uncanny body that's in the habit of going to an' fro', and wants to make sure o' it."

"Let me pass, my good man. His lordship don't suspect me, surely—do you think he does?" said Ellen, with something of her old misanthropic flashing over her countenance.

"I danna pretend to ken, leddy—anywise we daren't let you by more than any ither," replied the man, "his lordship bein' awa' we must wait further orders."

But Ellen did not hear him; she had turned reluctantly back, pondering as she went, on the meaning of so strange an arrangement, and startled by terrible fears, which came unbidden to her mind.

"Merciful God!" she thought, "this man is evil enough to attempt anything. I appeal to Thee in my helplessness, oh divine Saviour, who art the defence of Virgins, to protect me from the wiles of this dreadful man! Here am I, abandoned by all earthly aid and friendless, even the consolation of talking with Thy two old servants denied me! what can I—what shall I do? Where is Judith?" she asked of a strange gossoon who crossed her path at the moment.

"Nan! is it my mammy?" said the fellow sturdily.

"No, not your mammy. Judith Flynn."

"She's sint away wid the rest o' em."

"The rest of who? Do you mean, my lad, that the old servants are all turned away?" asked Ellen.

"That's just it, bedad!" he replied, with a grin.

"I am left completely at his mercy!" was the terrible idea that now fell like lead on Ellen Ahern's heart. "His threat was no idle one. I will see him—I will demand my liberty—but, alas! as well might I pray to yonder block to drop me honey, as to expect good from his callous nature. What am I to do? I have no means of getting a message to any one!"

"His lordship desired me to say, Miss, that business called him from home rather suddint

this morning, and you will please not wait breakfast for him," said William meeting her at the door.

"I will be down in a moment or two, William," she said, inexpressibly relieved to hear that Lord Hugh Maguire was away; "for now," thought she, "I shall have time to see Lady Fermanagh, and throw myself on her womanly compassion. But her ladyship could not be seen that day, her nerves were in the ascendant, and she begged that Miss Ahern would excuse her. And with no friend near her but Thela, who would not leave her, she spent the day in painful and solitary musings; and as evening came on, with wind, cloud and tempestuous rains, the most anxious and harassing doubts and fears assailed her, as she sat listening with strained ears to every footfall, and starting at every new sound. When Felice came up to tell her that tea was ready, she inquired with as much calm indifference as she could assume, "if Lord Hugh was come?"

"Il n'arrive pas," said Felice, looking like a heroine in distress. "Voyez la sa refroidie moitise!" (He does not come. Your tea is getting cold, Miss.)

"I shall be there presently, Felice," she replied sadly. "How is your lady to-night?"

"Elle a mal a la tete. Helas! Je suis a moitie morte," (she has got a headache. Alas! I am half dead) sighed Felice, going away.

Ellen learned from William that Lord Hugh would not be at home for two or three days.—This gave her a respite, but she found on trial, that it was impossible to persuade or bribe a servant to be the bearer of a note or message to Father McMahon. The next morning she was admitted to Lady Fermanagh, who, pale, and haggard, looked really ill. With half-averted face, she gave her a hurried, nervous greeting, through which her aversion to the interview was plainly perceptible. After a few commonplace inquiries relative to her ladyship's health, she said, in a low voice—"Something strange has happened, Lady Fermanagh, which makes it necessary for me to throw myself on your protection. May I—do you feel equal to hear what I have to say?"

"I feel quite ill, Miss Ahern, but of course, if it will serve you, I will listen to whatever you have to impart," replied her ladyship, smelling her *sal volatile*.

And Ellen told her how, and of what she had been warned by Don Enrique, and how—the thing being too strange to credit it explicitly—she had thought it all, at the very least, a mistake, until Lord Hugh's subsequent conduct combined with much that had occurred before, and his own words, plain and unmistakable, left her in no doubt, that she had a great deal to fear and being convinced, from the fact that the only outlet from Fermanagh was guarded, and the servants sent away, that she was a prisoner, completely in the power of Lord Hugh Maguire—humanly speaking—she had nothing left but to throw herself on the womanly compassion of Lady Fermanagh.

"I cannot help it, Miss Ahern. I have remonstrated. I saw it all. I have nothing to do in it. Do not think for an instant, that I countenance it. That boy is thwarting my wishes and aims, and rushing on his own destruction," said her ladyship, in an agitated manner.

"But may I not hope something from your Ladyship's protection?" asked Ellen, growing very white.

"I am powerless. I have told him there is a sword hanging over his head, that his last act may cause to fall, but nothing avails. He has a will like *Juggernaut*, he worships it, and is willing to be crushed by it—the fool! the fool!—Can you not fly, Miss Ahern?"

"I am a prisoner, it seems; the only outlet from Fermanagh is guarded by his people, whom he has commanded to allow no one to pass or re-pass."

"Is there no other way?"

"None. Steep precipices surround us on every side except that, which it makes one dizzy to think of. I have no hope but in God and near me no friend but Thela," said Ellen bowing her head on her knees.

"I would help you, Miss Ahern, if I could.—I am an erring and unloving woman—proud to my own undoing—but I would not willingly stand by and see you harmed. I would rather see my son—although I love him not, Miss Ahern—I would rather see him (or whom I have suffered much and long, die than live to do you a wrong, for just as sure as he does it his doom is sealed," said Lady Fermanagh, with a wild *distrain* air, which impressed Ellen painfully, and sent a flood of strange, bewildering thoughts into her heart, while she felt convinced how little she had to hope from her influence and protection.

"Could you not tell him so?" she asked.

"He knows it;—Miss Ahern; as well as I do, but pretends incredulity," she replied, wringing her pale hands together. "But leave me. I

must keep quiet. Put your hand here," she said, taking Ellen Ahern's hand, and laying it on her heart, which fluttered and bounded about in her side like an untamed vulture.

"Can I assist you in any way, Lady Fermanagh?" said Ellen, touched with pity at her sufferings, and for the moment forgetful of her own.

"By going away—yes. It is terrible to think that death must come amidst such perturbations!" she said in a low and almost out of breath, as she dropped some pale fluid from a vial into some water, and swallowed it.

"There is One—even God our Father, who alone can strip death of its fiercest terrors.—Trust Him, and seek refuge in his tender mercy!" said Ellen Ahern earnestly, while her beautiful eyes were suffused with tears.

"Do you? Is not your faith shaken in Him by these straits into which you have fallen?" asked her ladyship, fixing her great, stern eyes on hers.

"My trust is in Him, and I believe that He will deliver me," said Ellen, in a calm, earnest tone; "deliver me now, and at the hour of my sorest need in life and death, all honor and glory to Him forever."

"There—there. Go away now, Miss Ahern, and keep your dog with you; mind me, keep him close by you, he's a ferocious beast, and able to protect you. The *ingrate—the madman!*" she muttered, as Ellen Ahern, shocked by her wild and singular manner, retreated from her room. Two more days passed away, unmarked by any event. Again and again, she attempted to get a note carried to Father McMahon, and to pass the men who guarded the narrow path leading down to the hamlet, but in vain; and there was nothing left for her to do but to remain quiet, and ponder on the strange difficulties by which she was surrounded. On the evening of the third day, William brought her a letter, which, hoping that it was from Sir Eadna or Father McMahon, she tore open eagerly, and read the following:—

"Beautiful Ellen—I hope you are convinced by this time, that I am one who will permit nothing to interfere with the attainment of my ends; and see the wisdom of yielding with a good grace to what is inevitable. I have made every arrangement for our private marriage to-morrow morning, at six o'clock, and shall expect a willing bride. Understand that all resistance is, and will be useless, as you are entirely in my power."

HUGH MAGUIRE.

Ellen Ahern sat like one stupefied after reading this precious communication. Was her trust in God's divine Providence shaken now! Listen. She lifts her head from her hands, her face is deathly white, and her lips are quivering, but as she looks out beyond the night and its blue shadows—beyond the mysterious light and glory of the starry realms, up, up by faith, to the very footstool of Divinity, her soul grows strong, and she exclaims, "Thou wilt not forsake, because I have hoped in Thee, my God." Then a faintness and dizziness came over her, followed by a sweet dreamy sensation, and she hoped that if it was God's holy will, she was dying; then she put out her hand and groped around to feel if Thela was anywhere near her, and a single pang shot through her heart when she recollected that the creature had been missing since the morning, and had perhaps abandoned her; after which her head fell forward on her breast, and she dropped from the low cushion on which she was sitting to the floor insensible. How long she remained insensible she could not tell; the candle was burning low in the socket, and her fire flickered dimly on the hearth. Before she opened her eyes, she felt that something huge and dark was standing over her; she felt its breathing, and was conscious of eyes looking into her face, and suddenly a cold clammy touch chilled her face, and, uttering a cry of terror, she sprang up only to find Thela watching beside her. Throwing her arms wildly round the faithful creature's neck, she rested her head on his shaggy coat, and wept tears of unguiled bitterness and joy. But the dog was restive and fidgetted, twisting his head around and putting his nose down between his fore feet, growling and whining incessantly, until Ellen lifted her head and was removing her hand, when she heard and felt the rustling of paper under it—a sudden *thel* flashed through her heart—she examined Thela's collar, and found a letter fastened to it. Now she knew that the animal's instincts had led him to go in search of her friends, his sagacity had discovered her grief, and his affection and gratitude led him to endeavor to find relief for her. Hastily breaking the seal, she read by the flickering light of the expiring candle:—

"I heard all. Friends are watching over you. Be in the old picture gallery at midnight, and fear nothing."

ENRIQUE.

Lighting a taper, and throwing a shawl around

her and a veil over head, she lost no time in going as noiselessly as possible to the old Portrait gallery, followed by Thela. Her step was light and elastic, not a doubt or fear assailed her.—Heaven had heard and answered her prayer, and she was saved, or soon would be, beyond the reach and power of Lord Hugh Maguire. Don Enrique had said it, and she believed it. Dim and shadowy looked the place when she reached it, and the echo of her own footsteps on the decaying, loose boards, sounded as if some one was following her, while the grim portraits along the walls seemed to bow their heads towards her as the light flickered over them. Placing her taper in a corner, she took a very old picture and formed a sort of screen before it, then, with her hand on Thela's head, she went to the Oriel window and seated herself in her accustomed place within the deep embrasure; and while she looked up at the calm, glittering sky, she said the rosary with sentiments of ardent devotion and gratitude. But an hour passed, and no one came: then the thought suddenly occurred to her that, in case this should be a stratagem of Lord Hugh Maguire's, she was even more unprotected here than in her own apartment; this was followed by another, which suggested to her the impossibility of Don Enrique's admission to the castle, and the folly of hoping that he could get in except by the usual way, which was strongly guarded day and night, and her heart sunk within her: while vague fears of unearthly things made her cower farther back into the depths of the window, where, with trembling lips, she continued the devout mysteries of the Rosary. Suddenly, Thela lifted up his ears and sprang to his feet, and at the same moment Ellen Ahern saw one of the ancient portraits of some old princely Maguire swing out from the wall towards her. To her excited imagination, it looked like a phantom approaching, and she would have shrieked, but that fear held her spell-bound; then she saw, with her eyes riveted on the spot, a human form, dark and stealthy, emerge from behind it, and heard a low, softly whispered "Hiss!" But she remained silent and motionless, while Thela, springing forward, crouched quietly at the feet of the man.

"Are you here, Miss Ahern?" whispered a voice which she thought she recognized; "we have not a moment to lose—come." Advanced now more within the range of the faint light, as he followed Thela towards the window, Ellen saw, with mingled joy and thankfulness, that it was Don Enrique Giron. Hastening to meet him, she placed her hand silently in his, and in another moment he had, with his strong arm about her, whirled her down the gallery and through an aperture in the wall, stopping only to draw the picture, which was in reality only a secret door, back into its place and fasten it securely within; on down, through a steep, narrow stone passage, where the air was heavy and damp and where not a single ray of light penetrated; down steep, rugged steps, and over sharp, uneven ways, until, almost fainting with weariness, she was compelled to pause.

"For God's sake, Miss Ahern, do not flag; it is not far from dawn; we shall soon be at the end of this dismal but safe way. Lean on me," said Don Enrique.

"Give me strength, my God, I pray Thee," was the prayer of Ellen Ahern's heart, as, panting, and almost exhausted, she renewed her flight without uttering a word.

"Trust me, Ellen, you is a faithful and true friend—how much nearer you are to me, I dare not now say—I see a distant spark of light, Sir Eadna Ahern is waiting there with a lantern; you will soon embrace him," said Don Enrique, as he sped along the narrow, steep way.

CHAPTER XI.—MAN PROPOSES AND GOD DISPOSES.

"Our Blessed Lady strengthen her," murmured Don Enrique, as he felt Ellen Ahern drooping more heavily on his arm, and perceived that her steps became more feeble. "Courage, dear lady, we are near the outlet; a few more windings and we are there. Even a short delay would be perilous, for the night is wearing away, and, as Lord Hugh Maguire and his minions are expected at Fermanagh before sunrise, it is not improbable that we might meet them on our way up to St. Finbar's."

"I fear that I can go no farther. I believe that I am dying," gasped Ellen, on whose nerves the terrible excitement of the last few days was telling fearfully; and who, exhausted by anxiety and apprehension, as well as from having eaten scarcely anything during that time, felt in the close suffocating atmosphere, that the last remnant of her strength was forsaking her, and would have sunk helpless to the earth, but that Don Enrique lifted her like an infant in his arms; and bore her swiftly on until, by the cool 'fresh' air, which swept in a strong current over her cheeks, she knew that they must be near the outlet of the subterranean way. In a few moments she was folded to the bosom of Sir Eadna Ahern, whose expressions of joy at her deliverance were fragrant