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THE CATHOLIC COUSINS: A TALE.

CHAPTER I.

It was a lovely evening in the month of July. The sun was just setting behind the gilded clouds of the west, and the dew-bespangled flowers were just closing their petals. The air was calm and serene; Cynthia's timid rays waxed stronger as the shades of night gathered around her, and countless stars peeped from beneath the fantastically shaped clouds, as they lightly winged their course through the wide expanse of heaven. Never did the village of — look more picturesque—the dark frowning forest of Cambre—the smooth sheet of water, whose crystal surface seemed to slumber beneath the thick foliage of venerable trees—the straw-thatched cottages scattered round about, some in the depth of the valley, others on the summit of the hill—the simple and unadorned steeple of the parish church—the hawthorn lanes and gently sloping corn fields, all formed one vast picture of indescribable beauty; and as the moon careered through the azure vault of heaven, she varied the enchanting scene, by throwing a broader, deeper shade over one part of the smiling landscape, while she lighted up with her silvery beams some dark cavern, whose moss-clad roof glistened with dew.

In the depths of the valley, surrounded by the most bewitching charms of nature, stood Captain Melville's summer residence. The gallant officer, however, preferred town to country, and had had it not been for his daughter's entreaties to spend at least a few months at Dryad Lodge, he in all probability would have passed the summer as well as winter, in Brussels.

Isabella, to whom we have already alluded as Captain Melville's daughter, was an extremely beautiful girl, and like most girls of her age, exceedingly romantic; she would sit for hours at the open window, gazing forth into the moonlit scene, while at intervals she would strike the cords of her guitar, and sing some wild ditty, and then pause, as if to listen to the lingering echoes of her own sweet voice. It was thus that she was amusing herself when a young cavalier rode slowly by beneath the ivy-mantled casement. He stopped, dismounted, and attaching the bridle of his steed to the bough of a tree, he seated himself on the grass, apparently to listen to her melodious strain, for no sooner had she ceased that he hastily remounted, and urging his charger on with bit and spur, galloped off at full speed in the direction of town. Next evening as Isabella was seated, according to her usual custom, at the open window, she was somewhat startled by hearing a rich counter-tenor voice singing; she bent forward to try if she could recognise the air, but both the air and the words seemed foreign to her; she hurriedly rose, and looking out, beheld a handsome young man reclining at the foot of an old tree. The full moon shone on his fine features, which were partly shrouded by a large slouched hat; and over his shoulders hung a loose Spanish cloak. Could anything be more fortunate for a child of romance? Isabella had read in novels of young cavaliers breaking lances for their lady-loves, and singing beneath their windows on moonlight nights, and in the enthusiasm of the moment often would she picture to herself a young cavalier breaking a lance for her sake, and singing a love ditty, mainly intended to meet her ear; now all her sanguine hopes and dreams of romance seemed accomplished. There was no other residence near, and therefore she at once naturally came to the conclusion that the handsome young stranger who had seated himself beneath her window had sung solely with a view to attract her attention, and her bosom throbbled with a secret joy as she leaned forward to catch another glimpse of him whose melodious voice seemed to fan into existence ideal visions of blissful happiness. At that moment the stranger's dark flashing eyes met hers, and the crimson tide of maiden bashfulness rushed to her cheeks, and she hastily closed the lattice window. The young stranger, who seemed attentively to watch her movements, instantly rose, and wrapping his mantle closely round him, hurried away, and was soon lost from sight beneath the thick foliage of the overshadowing trees. Isabella, on seeing him depart, had stealthily re-opened the window, and looked after him; but he never once turned his head, and she was somewhat mortified to think he cared so little about her. Still she was of too romantic a turn of mind to banish him altogether from her thoughts. She had read in works of fiction of similar things occurring, and she fancied it not at all improbable that she would be destined to play as conspicuous a part as the heroines of many tales. Next evening she anxiously looked forth from her latticed window, vainly hoping the handsome young stranger would make his appearance; but, poor girl, she was doomed to be disappointed for once at least, for no one save an old woman even passed the Cambre-road that night. Not so, however, on the following evening; for as she was leaning

back in her chair, romantically watching the clouds as they danced around the queen of night, she was suddenly aroused from her reverie by hearing a rich voice singing to the music of a guitar.

Isabella, instantly starting up, looked tenderly out into the clear moonlight night, and at once recognised the slouched hat and loose Spanish cloak of the handsome young stranger, whose name since the eve of his first appearance she would have given her richest jewels to know.—At that instant her father entered, and carelessly remarked—

'Isabella, whence proceeds that music?' and he mechanically advanced towards her.

'I scarcely know, pa,' she replied, placing herself before the window in order to prevent him from looking out. 'I imagine it is some peasant returning from his work.'

'Ha! perhaps so,' he rejoined; 'but peasants, now-a-days, seldom, methinks, accompany themselves on stringed instruments.' And then, as if his thoughts were suddenly wrenched by force of circumstances from one subject to another, he added, as he handed Isabella an old torn parchment, 'I wish you to mount this on some of your drawing paper, your fingers are more accustomed to that sort of work than mine.' And with a father's tenderness, mingled with parental pride, he glanced round the room, whose satin-papered walls were hung with massy-framed pictures—the cherished productions of his uncle's beloved child.

The moment her father had left, she once more eagerly turned her gaze in the direction where the stranger had seated himself. Great, however, was her disappointment to find that in that short interval he had disappeared.

'I scarce know what to make of him,' she musingly said to herself, when suddenly her eye rested on a blue silk ribbon which was tied to one of the ivy-leaves. She gently undid the knot, when, to her surprise, she found a note addressed to herself attached to it.

'This is more than strange,' she exclaimed, as she examined it by the moonlight. 'I wonder if it would be right for me to open it. I really cannot imagine there could be any harm, especially as it is addressed to myself.' And then she conjured up every similar occurrence bearing directly or indirectly towards solving this difficult question, replete, indeed, with the most extravagant ideas, which her favorite romance writers had instilled, from almost the dawn of reason, into her soul; for Isabella, ere she had learned how to appreciate a tender mother's solicitous care and judicious instruction, had been deprived of her by the cruel, nerving hand of death. After turning the note over and over again in her hand, she at length came to the conclusion that it certainly could not be wrong, at least, to open it, as she was not bound to take any further notice if it would be imprudent to do so. In a minute her slender fingers broke the seal, and she read as follows:—

'Madam—Hitherto I have wandered through the world as one without a home, and destitute of friends, for whom no cheering words and welcome salutations are poured forth from loving, tender heart, but now mine eyes have gazed upon thine, and searched deep into the very depths of thy soul, and I love thee because of thy beauty and the mildness of thy disposition, which I have seen mirrored upon thy countenance, and the world begins to brighten before me, for, sleeping and waking, thine image is ever presented to my view. Dare I, then, venture to hope that you will at some future period grant me a conference, and that you will deign to smile upon me with at least the affection of a loving sister.'

'SILVESTER ALPHONSE, Medical Student.'

Isabella blushed and sighed alternately, as she perused these few lines; and throwing the note on the table, she began to pace up and down the room.

'O, how stupid! I quite forgot to look at the name,' she musingly exclaimed, as she again glanced over the note.

'Silvester Alphonse, Medical Student.'

'The name, &c., sound well,' she added, mechanically going to the mantelpiece mirror, and arranging the silky locks of her auburn hair.—'I wonder whether I ought to tell pa? Oh! no; because he might make fun of it, and he'd be sure to say I was a silly girl, always ready to fall in love with every handsome young fellow; besides, he might be angry.' And then, as if a bright idea suddenly flashed across her mind, she added, 'I know what I'll do; I will write a line to Emma, and ask her to spend a day with me, and then I can make her my confidante.' In a few minutes the letter was written, sealed, and handed over to the tender mercies of the servant for delivery.

CHAPTER II.

On the following evening Isabella was agreeably surprised by her cousin Emma, unannounced, entering her apartment.

'Oh! how do you do, dear,' said Isabella, starting up. 'I am so delighted to see you; did you get my note?'

'To be sure I did, and that's what brings me here,' replied her cousin, gaily.

'But why did you not come and spend the day; I've been expecting you all the morning, and then when I began to think no more about you, lo, and behold, you suddenly make your appearance. It's always so, isn't it?' said Isabella laughing.

'I believe it has on one or two occasions happened so before,' replied her cousin. 'But really Isabella, you must excuse me this time; indeed, I'm sure you will when I tell you that I'm going out of town to-morrow with my brother, to spend a few weeks in a small village near Antwerp.'

'And you had so much to do in the line of packing that you had no time to lose; isn't that it?' said Isabella, with a smiling inquisitive look.

'You have guessed right; but you see, Isabella, that notwithstanding I have managed to find time to come and see you,' replied her cousin.

'You are a good creature,' said Isabella, with evident satisfaction. 'You cannot think how pleased I am to see you,' and she tenderly embraced her cousin.

'Our delight is mutual, I can assure you,' returned her cousin.

'Have you seen that work, Emma?' asked Isabella, as she pointed to a book which lay on the table.

'No,' replied her cousin, having taken up the book and glanced at the title-page; 'indeed, I never recollect having seen the work before.'

'You surprise me,' said Isabella, 'for it is the last new novel that's come out, and everybody is talking about it.'

'That may be,' returned her cousin, 'but I very seldom read any novel; indeed, I have not time.'

'Ah! now Emma, how can you talk in that manner? one would really think you were a lawyer's clerk.'

'Well, I don't exactly mean to say that I can never find time to read a romance; but what I mean to say is—one can be so much better employed,' replied her cousin.

'I don't at all agree with you,' said Isabella, laughing. 'I think one learns so much from a novel.'

'How do you mean,' asked her cousin.

'Oh! you silly girl,' replied Isabella, laughing still more, 'I declare one would really think you had just come out of a convent, to hear you talk thus. I mean, one learns so much of the world.'

'Well, perhaps so,' said her cousin, sighing, 'and sometimes perhaps too much.'

'What made you say that in such a melancholy tone,' exclaimed Isabella, bursting into a merry laugh. 'It is just what one might expect from a person crossed in love, but not from you.' And she looked into her cousin's face. 'Oh! blushing?' she continued, 'Well, I declare, that tells a tale.'

'You were never so mistaken in your life,' replied her cousin, blushing still more, 'for I assure you I scarcely know what it is to be in love—at least in the sense you mean.'

'Whoever said you did?' merrily exclaimed Isabella; and *scarcely* too, she added, clapping her hands. 'So you are a little in love—very little, perhaps—but never mind, you will be head and ears in love some of these fine days; and she again peeped into the beautiful face of her cousin in the most provoking manner.

'Well, upon my word, Isabella, this is really too bad of you,' replied her cousin; 'you always tease me so. Supposing I were to torment you about Charles?'

'Oh, Charles! I don't care two straws about him,' said Isabella, tossing up her head.

'What makes him pay you such compliments, then?' replied her cousin, evidently disappointed to find that she had hit on a person whom Isabella seemed to care very little about.

'In the first place,' rejoined Isabella, 'gentlemen may always pay compliments to ladies without entangling themselves in the meshes of a lady's love; and in the second place, supposing even a gentleman did care about a lady, it does not follow that she should care about him.'

'Certainly not,' said her cousin, gravely; and then suddenly raising her finger to her mouth, she exclaimed, 'Whist! Who's that singing?' And she was just in the act of looking out of the window, when Isabella caught hold of her by the skirt of her dress, and drew her back, saying, 'Let us hear what the song is about.' And they both standing opposite to one another, listened silently for some time, until her cousin bursting into a merry laugh, peeped her head out of the window.

'Don't Emma; he'll see you,' exclaimed Isabella, as she gently laid her hand on her cousin's arm.

'What do I care,' returned her cousin; and

she instantly stretched out her hand and made a snatch at something.

'What's that?' said Isabella, in a whisper.

'Oh! don't you talk of not being in love!' exclaimed her cousin in high glee, as she gracefully waltzed round the room; and extending her right hand she waved gently above her head a triangular note.

'Hush, dear, he may hear you,' interposed Isabella.

'Oh! for that matter,' replied her cousin, 'he is gone; but what do you say to this?' she added pointing to the note.

'What?' exclaimed her cousin, turning pale, and then blushing, and then turning pale again.

'Where, dear, did you get that?'

'Where did I get it? Why, I stole it from beneath one of the wicked little ivy-leaves that mischievously tried to conceal it. There's where I got it, and it's addressed to you, too. What do you say to that?'

'I scarcely know what to think or what to say,' replied Isabella; 'but I suppose, if it's addressed to me, I'm privileged to open it.'

'Certainly,' said her cousin, 'but you must remember that possession is nine-tenths of the law, and that—'

'And that, consequently, I must quietly await your ladyship's pleasure,' interrupted Isabella, with an air of mock dignity.

'Just so,' replied her cousin, laughing; and then she added, in more serious tone, 'but really Isabella, dear, joking apart, I would not advise you to read that note (and she laid the little love messenger on the table), unless, indeed, you have some previous knowledge of the strolling minstrel whose fine voice and sweet toned guitar seem to have captivated your wayward little heart, for I have no hesitation in saying that he it was who dexterously fixed it to the ivy-leaf from which I took it.'

Isabella hastily snatched up the note, while a burning blush of mortification and confusion swept over her beautiful countenance, as she coldly replied—

'Emma, your advice, I have no doubt, is very good, and might, perhaps, be followed with advantage; but I must thank you not to volunteer to counsel me for the future; your happening to be about a fortnight older than I, cannot surely make you my superior in everything; and she laid marked emphasis on the last word.'

Emma was grieved that she unintentionally should have offended her cousin, and therefore throwing her arms round her neck, she said— 'Isabella, dear, do not misunderstand me; I am sure I had not the slightest idea of dictating to you, but I only meant to remind you of the deceitfulness of the world.'

'Oh, of course, you are so wise,' said Isabella with a toss of the head; 'perhaps you'll tell me I should show this note to papa?'

'Were I similarly circumstanced I would,' carelessly remarked Emma.

'It is well we can each have separate opinions,' replied Isabella; 'for my part, I cannot see any wrong in having a little bit of harmless fun; for, after all, it's nothing else.'

'At present it is nothing else, no doubt,' observed her cousin, 'but you do not know what it might lead to?'

'Why, Emma,' replied Isabella, with a forced laugh, 'upon my word you are getting old-fashioned in your notions, I'm sure they would do credit to an elderly maiden aunt; but come, let us change the subject; I'll not read the note at present, at all events, and perhaps not at all, if I become to-morrow as wise as you; and with a good-humored smile, and an arch look, she placed the billet in her writing desk.

Her cousin returned the smile, but made no reply.

'It is a glorious evening,' said Isabella, advancing to the side of Emma, and placing her arm round her waist.

'It is, indeed,' rejoined her cousin, with an impressive manner. 'There is something so calm and balmy; it seems to elevate the very soul. I never can contemplate the beauties of nature,' she added, 'without meditating on the immeasurable greatness and goodness of God.'

'It is no doubt a vast subject for thought,' said Isabella, 'but you know I hate everything that is serious; so pray, Emma, let us have some music; and, ringing for candles, she was about to seat herself at the piano, when her father entered.

While Captain Melville and his niece were agreeably engaged in saluting one another, I will avail myself of the opportunity to withdraw my reader's attention to another scene in another chapter.

CHAPTER III.

The grey dusk of morning was just emerging from the deeper shades of night, and gradually brightening into a rich yellow tint of purple, lightened by a flood of golden light radiating from the eastern heavens, as two gentlemen rode slowly along the Kensington Road. One was an elderly man, apparently about fifty, the other,

judging from his juvenile appearance, could not have numbered more than twenty summers. As there is no mystery, however, respecting these two individuals, I will introduce them without further ceremony to my readers by their proper names.

The first horseman, to whom I have alluded, was Sir Thomas Cranston, a worthy merchant of considerable wealth and influence; not a baronet, however, but a knight, a title which he enjoyed as a marked pledge of friendship from one of Ireland's lord lieutenants, who had conferred on him that honor some ten or twelve years before the period of which I now write.—The second horseman was his son, a youth gifted with no small share of ability as a scholar; his features were not such as might be termed handsome, but at the same time there was a peculiar, I might almost say an indescribable sweetness, in their expression, which lightened as he conversed, and which even critics on personal endowments could not resist admiring.

'James,' said Sir Thomas, addressing his son, 'have you thought over what we were talking about the other evening?'

'Yes, sir,' replied the young man, thoughtfully, 'and I am really at a loss to know what to say. As far as my own wishes go, I am desirous of entering the church, at the same time I have no wish to act otherwise than in accordance with your views. You have already mentioned to me the circumstances which induced you to send me to Oxford, and consequently I feel satisfied that were I to act on the impulse of inclination alone, I would be deviating from the path which you, from my infancy, had marked out in your own mind for me to pursue, and this is what makes me so reluctant even to suggest anything which might influence you to further my wishes contrary to your own in a matter so important to my future career.'

'James,' said Sir Thomas, with a countenance beaming with parental affection, 'such sentiments are worthy of yourself. They are noble, they are generous, and I appreciate them as they ought to be appreciated. My views, however, with regard to your education, shall always tend towards one main object, namely, your happiness in future life. If, therefore, you seriously desire to enter the church, I will rather anticipate your wishes on this head, than put any obstacle in the way. I have every reason to be satisfied with the progress you have made in your studies, and, therefore, after you have taken your degrees as a bachelor of arts, you shall read for holy orders, and I think I will be able to obtain you a curacy almost immediately after your ordination, just to start with, and after that I'll see what can be done. I have many influential friends, you know.'

Their conversation was interrupted by a travelling carriage dashing by them at a furious pace.

'That's a mad-cap way to economize time,' observed Sir Thomas. Scarcely, however, had half a second elapsed, ere they heard a terrible crash, followed by several piercing shrieks.

Both put spurs to their steeds, and soon came up to the travelling carriage which had passed them so rapidly, and to their surprise, all lay a heap in the centre of the road, coach, horses and rider. James observing two ladies were in the carriage, vainly endeavoring to extricate themselves from their perilous position, immediately dismounted, and desiring some of the bystanders to hold the horses' heads down, opened the carriage door, and with some little difficulty managed to lift the ladies out of the capsized vehicle who were more frightened than really hurt. One was very tall, thin, and severe looking, somewhat advanced in years, and anything but prepossessing. The other was quite the reverse, as far as height in stature went, but in every other respect she resembled so much her companion, that to arrive at the conclusion that they were sisters could scarcely be considered as a hazardous guess.

Sir Thomas Cranston, who had also dismounted, expressed a hope that neither of the ladies had sustained any personal injury, and particularly addressed himself to the taller—perhaps the elder—but as a lady's age should never be supposed to be known, I will forbear to comment upon this subject; besides, 'comparisons are odious,' said, 'Madam, if I, or my son, and he slightly turned towards James, 'can be of any further assistance to you, you have only to say so, and we shall be quite at your service.'

'You are really very good, sir,' replied the tall lady, endeavoring to compose the agitated expression of her features into a pleasant smile; 'if, then, it would not be too much trouble, sir, and she slowly articulated each word, 'perhaps you will kindly accompany us to our hotel, for I really feel so nervous, and—'

'But, Mary,' interrupted the short lady, 'they say the posthorn is all but killed, and Jenkins has fractured his leg, and our carriage, you see, is a perfect wreck, so how, pray, can we possibly reach Ford's hotel in the plight we are in?'