

A LIMERICK LEGEND.

BY JAMES NOBLE.

FROM THE "HIBERNIAN MONTHLY."

A NOBLE ASH TREE grows in the center of the ruin of Castle Connell beneath which we took our seats, upon a moss-grown relic of the olden time, and listened eagerly to the stories of our most pleasant guide. Now, however, he had changed his theme—although still loath to "discourse" of the daring men who, it is notorious, years ago, made the vaults and caves of Carrig-o-Gunnell their places of secret meeting, he was led to allude to them, indirectly, by the reference to the faith of a young girl who, about twenty years ago, gave a name to the spot. From the information we gleaned from him, added to subsequent inquiries, we are enabled to tell our readers her sad history.

There is little more in the story than a development of the strength and durability of female affection—proof of reckless daring on the one hand, and of pure devotedness on the other. Old Jacob Bobenezer had commenced with that rigid discipline towards his daughter Rachel which he imagined would fortify her against all the Irish Whiteboys that ever galloped beneath the moonlight; and, moreover, every Sabbath day he invited to his table a young man, in whose manners, discreet conduct, and great worldly-mindedness, he exceedingly rejoiced. Adam Switzer, the only son of his most esteemed friend, had upon being told by his father that Rachel would be a fitting bride for him, in every respect, resolved to marry her; and her father had already contemplated the fast-growing crops, the plentiful increase, as if they had already been added to his stock.

Rachel neither smiled nor frowned upon the youth; if she had done either, there might have been some cause for his suit would prosper; but of all things indifference is the most fatal to love. Young Adam did not know this—or, if he did, he did not heed it. How Rachel became acquainted with James Henessey is not upon record; they never frequented the same places of worship or amusement. James was known to be a fierce and restless fellow, full of those wild notions of liberty which eventually render a man either a hero or a slave; he was of a good but sinking family, handsome, and better educated than most young men of his time and station. Of all the youths in the neighborhood, he was the most frequently spoken of in terms of strong disapprobation by the Bobenezers and the Switzers.

"Any news to-day, good Adam?" the wife would inquire; "for truly Jacob grows so deaf that he hears but little, and Rachel and I never visit but amongst our own people."

"Nothing," Adam would answer, "but that James Henessey grows worse than ever; he told a magistrate of his own people he lied!"

"Oh! to a burgomaster!" exclaimed the old lady.

"Perhaps it was true," suggested the maiden.

"And even if it was!—but such a thing could not be true. I wonder you do not see how impossible it must be, Rachel," continued the dame.

"It would be a great blessing if he were out of the country," said Adam; "he turns the heads of the men and the hearts of the women."

"I do not see what this is to thee," answered the wife, "as long as thy own head is steady, and this maiden's heart sure."

Rachel looked one way, and Adam another, but neither seemed pleased.

That very night, beneath the waning beams of a harvest moon, the Palatine girl was weeping upon the shoulder of James Henessey—weeping as if her heart would break—weeping, not loudly, for her grief was heavy hearted, so that its demonstration could hardly make way. She had met him that night, and so often before, in her own bower, over the trellis of which the aged hands of her father had trained woodbine and roses, that she might sew, and spin and knit, and read her bible in the free and fragrant air—there she had frequently met her lover, and listened to the deep and passionate declarations of an affection which, to do him justice, he really felt.

"I daren't come again into the valley, darling of my heart, my own cushia machree! it would be as much as my life is worth. I daren't do it, by night or day," he continued; "the storm may blow over, as storms have done before, or as people say they do, forgetting what they give and wreck in their passing, and if it does, why, Rachel, I'll ask you boldly from your father, and if he refuse we must take the leave he will not give; if the storm does not pass, why then, ma-voineen, I must leave the country, that's all."

"And I with you—I with you," said Rachel, suddenly changing from a calm, cold, patient girl to the wildly enthusiastic and devoted woman. "I will never leave you, James; the greater the blame, the harder the fate, but the more truly will I cleave to you."

James Henessey was indeed, as the country people express it, "on his keeping" his connection with Whiteboyism had become notorious and he could no longer walk abroad with impunity; he was a marked man among the marked, for he was well known to possess the hardy daring and the rude but powerful eloquence that enters at once into and masters the Irish hearts.

Rachel clung to the hope that brighter times would come. She could not comprehend why her father would oppose her union with James, when he was made aware (according to her belief) she had often implored him to tell the truth to the Palatine; but James knew better than the unsophisticated girl, the feel at the idea of his child being the wife of a proscribed outlaw—for so in reality he was. He therefore trusted to

his own influence over the affectionate creature who had so confidently launched her heart upon a stormy and perilous sea; and well he might have trusted one so pure and so devoted. After many vows and little consideration, Rachel agreed to meet her lover under the ash-tree amid the ruins of Carrig-o-Gunnell the next Sunday at midnight; he could know, he said, by that time whether it was likely he should be obliged to leave the country altogether; or, if his former errors were overlooked or forgotten, he swore to the weeping girl that he would enter upon a new life, and become anything, everything, she desired. With men like James Henessey such resolutions are broken almost before they are fully expressed.

"I wish, Jacob," said Rachel's mother to her husband, on the following morning, "I wish you would come into our child's room; it is near ten of the clock and she is still sleeping. I did not like to awake her, but she is so disturbed that I cannot bear to look on her. She is little more than half undressed, her arms tossed over the coverlet, and her beautiful hair clings in heavy wreaths to her damp brow." The Palatine moved with a lighter step than was his wont to the door, through which his worthy wife had passed; she pointed to their child while the old man lingered on the threshold, gazing with a troubled countenance upon his fair daughter. "Leave her alone," said the confiding father, "leave her alone; even now her head has fallen from the pillow upon the bible that was half-placed beneath it—the child tarried too long at her prayers." If Rachel could but have heard the words, how bitter would have been the reproaches of her conscience!

The next Sabbath brought her commonplace lover, and even he observed that "the maid Rachel seemed disturbed." She had received in the morning from the hand of a mountain-boy a feather from a wild bird's wing—"Such birds," said the urchin, "fly far, but remember where they build their nests." Rachel had not forgotten. She did not, however, meditate a far flight for she took nothing with her save the national cloak of their Irish serving girl; and enfolded herself in its ample screen, she threaded her way across the meadows which lay between her dwelling and the Rock of the Candle. She was a fearless girl, and yet many things contributed that night to make her shudder despite her confiding love. She knew she was doing wrong, and as she flew past the gloomy spots that tradition had invested with a peculiar or fearful interest, she paused and trembled, every now and then; the ruins of the magnificent rock loomed in the distance, and frowned in mysterious grandeur over the moonlit meadows. At last, panting and breathless, she achieved the trying-tree and stood with her hands clasped over her panting bosom beneath its shadow; the breeze sighing through the leaves, the rabbit as it croaked the clover, the beating of the bat's wing upon the air, the heavy whir of the broad-faced owl, even the half-murmured bleat of a kid, as it nestled more closely to its mother's side, increased her fears; nor was it until she was clasped in her lover's arms and felt his warm breath on her cheek that she again forgot all the world in him. Whatever were his plans he had no time to develop them, for the rolling first of one stone, then of another, down the ravine, told James Henessey that footsteps unaccustomed to the rocky passes were approaching.

In an instant, before she had time to remonstrate, or even ask why or how, James had lifted her in his arms and passed with her into the depths of one of the caves known only to the disaffected. It was the action of an instant; and the girl brought up with so much care and in so much piety was clinging to the most daring of the Whiteboys in the midst of twelve or fourteen fellows as daring and more desperate than he. She heard the sharp, quick click of their pistols and was nearly suffocated by the smell of the ardent spirits that stimulated them to so much evil; the light of one bogwood torch, shaded as it was, was sufficient to show her the glitter of pikes and the more horrid expression of fiend like faces that glared upon her; suddenly, even this light was extinguished, and James murmured she "was safe," for she was with him. Rude and harsh words were exchanged in whispers which the firm authority of Henessey suppressed. Rachel heard the heavy tramp of a strong man near her; it was the tread but of one man—yet what child does not recognize a parent's footstep? A horrid conviction that her father had tracked her flight came upon her; for a moment she could not speak, but at last terror lest any harm might come to him forced a word or two from her clammy lips.

"Stand here!" muttered Henessey, "if you cling to me I cannot save him, if it be he. Rachel, his life will answer for this rashness, for he cannot live and we be discovered." Still, though fainting, she clung feebly to her lover; the footsteps passed away, but the girl was roused from her insensibility by a voice calling her sternly and heavily by name, far above where she lay.

"Rachel!—my child!—Rachel!" She felt that James had quitted her and she struggled in the darkness with those who would have held her back; it was a faint struggle—a feeble girl against strong-armed men.

"Father, I am here," she cried, but her tones were weak—a pause—and then came a distant rush, and blows, desperate and determined. "They won't fire if they can help it," said one fellow to another, in the same suppressed tone. She heard no more; utterly exhausted, she lost all consciousness, nor did she revive until aroused by the rapid motion of a horse, and again a well-known voice whispered: "Darling avouneen, you are safe with me."

Several months had elapsed after this occurrence; the old Palatine's garden bore a neglected aspect; the trees were untrimmed, the path overgrown with weeds; a light gleamed without its walls, for the night was dark; and

through one or two apertures in the window the glimmer of a candle flickered over the ill-remembered that had been Rachel's. Within sat the Palatine and his wife; his hair was now white, his figure lean and dwindled; his eyes were weak and dim as he bent over his bible, but the eyes of his wife were fixed on him. "We have heard God's word again and again," he said, "and we must be comforted. It was a memorable mercy that on that night no blood was shed, though mine was thirsted for; do not look so sad, wife—God is a wise God."

"I do not look sad," she answered, "for you are with me, Jacob; but when I think that you will not be so long—"

There was a slight knocking at the door.

"Who's there?" inquired the Palatine. The sound was repeated.

"Friends know it is not safe to open doors to a tongueless man," he answered; and then came a reply in tones that sent him staggering against the wall, while his wife, with a aspect that marred her intention, endeavored to undo the fastening. At last, Rachel crawled, rather than walked, to her father's feet; but he would not look upon her; she then took refuge on her mother's bosom, who parted the hair upon her brow, while large, heavy tears dropped like hail upon the wasted features of her child.

"I have you here forever now," said the poor woman; "here you will remain—no one will rive a crushed and faded flower—forever now."

"For one hour," answered Rachel, "for one hour, and then I quit you, my mother, for a long, long time. Mother, in Heaven's sight I declare I had no thought of leaving you that night; and he saved my father's life, and will carry to his grave the mark he received in defending it."

Her mother declared she should not leave her.

"Let her go to her keeper," said the old man sternly.

But Rachel arose and answered: "Father, before the day was done he was my husband; he has worked me no wrong, for the choice was my own; and I am thankful to bear shame with him if it can lighten his heavy load. Mother, you would have done as much for my father."

"There is a curse, strong as well as deep, that sooner or later will overwhelm the children of disobedience," said her father bitterly.

"I know it—I believe it—I feel it—but even so, I submit."

"The time will come," continued the old man, "sooner or later—the time will come when he in whom you trusted will fail you in your uttermost need; when he will pour into your breaking heart the poison you gave your parents. Oh, what fools are those who put faith in their own children! He will spurn you and desert you."

"He may do so," she replied, weeping, "he may do so, but I will never desert him."

"Jacob," interposed his aged wife, "Jacob, our child—she—given to our prayers after long years of expectation—she says she has but one hour to stay with us; do not let it pass thus. She is still our child, Jacob; but one hour to stay," repeated the mother, wringing her hands—"but one hour."

"Not an hour now," said Rachel, "not much more than half; you, mother, will listen to me; people spoke falsehoods of him; deceived away he was; but he is not what they say; they will not hear him, will not pardon him; if he remained in Ireland he must be as he is, outlawed and wretched. He has yielded to my prayers; and in a foreign land where we are going, he may still be what the Almighty intended he should be—great and good; he gave me one hour to bid you farewell, to pray for your forgiveness; only one hour, and the minutes are flying while I speak."

"Will he come for you?" inquired her father.

"Oh, no, he cannot, he dare not venture here, nor would others let him," she replied.

The old man rose steadily from his seat and before either mother or daughter was aware of his intention he had seized Rachel in his iron grasp.

"As the Lord liveth," he exclaimed, "you go not hence; I will bind you to the horns of the altar; I will not suffer even a tainted sheep of the true fold to become the prey of the ravening wolf; here you remain; vain will be your cries for aid; all vain. Here will I stand and whoever enters shall have the recompense he comes for, who would rob an old man of his child." Rachel implored, conjured, entreated, wept; even her mother's tears were added to hers, but all in vain. The Palatine shouldered one of the heavy muskets of his own country, and paced backwards and forwards opposite to where he had bound his child with cords which her mother dared not loosen. His eyes scowled upon the unhappy girl, while ever and anon he muttered between his clenched teeth such texts of Scripture as seemed to him to bear hardest upon her case—threats against disobedient children and denunciations against the associates of the ungodly. When the first gleam of morning broke through the crevice of the window Rachel spoke again:

"If harm come to my husband his blood be upon your head." It seemed after that as if a portion of her father's sternness had entered into her gentle nature. She would neither taste food nor drink,

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but sat with clasped hands and eyes turned towards the mountains, the sunlit tops of which were seen through the latticed window.

"She will die, she will die," said her mother.

"Pray God she may," was the father's harsh reply, "that I may lay her in the grave, and then be gathered to my fathers."

She did not die; but a desperate and very dangerous fever came to her relief, for it took away her mind from present thoughts; weeks and months elapsed ere she was able to sit at the cottage door. But the lapse of time had wrought changes in many ways: the country was more tranquil; and people said that since James Henessey had disappeared matters were become altogether different. The Palatine relaxed but little of his severity, except that, thinking himself secure in Rachel's weakness, he suffered her mother to move her from place to place in her arms. She took no interest in anything. Nothing amused, nothing drew from her a word or even a look of intelligence. All blessed her as they passed along the road, and the little children used to heap her lap with wild flowers. Her mother reconciled herself to the violence which her husband had practiced when she found that no letter, no token, arrived from James; that he had gone into exile was certain—but had he forgotten Rachel? Months rolled into years; two years had passed; and Rachel was still the same. Usually the Palatine preserved the most rigid silence towards his daughter, but sometimes he would give vent to bitter feelings, and reproach her in strong language; it was all the same, her features remained unmoved, and she seldom shed tears. Once, indeed, when they were alone, and her mother wept over her, she desired her to be comforted, as she should be happy yet.

People wondered how she lived, how anything so heart-broken could remain so long in a torturing world.

One morning she told her mother she would lie down; and her father at the noon-day dinner, going into the room (where he had once been deceived), laid his hand upon her shoulder, as if to assure himself that she was there, "in the flesh." Suddenly she opened her eyes, and raising her head, kissed his cheek; he was so unprepared for the act, that he had no time for consideration, and, as if by instinct, a blessing fell from his lips. When her mother came to her with some food, she said, "Father has blessed me at last; you do so too, then, let me sleep."

When the evening meal was prepared, and her mother again sought her, she was gone; if the neighbors had seen her, they stoutly denied it, and declared that she was spirited away by the "good people." The old Palatine traversed the country like one demented, bending his way at last to the ruins of Carrig-o-Gunnell, not with any distinct hope of finding her there, but from the natural desire of seeking in every possible and imaginable place for a thing cherished and lost.

There, under the ash-tree, he saw his child, her head reclining against its trunk; he called to her, in a voice tremulous from an emotion he would vainly have suppressed; it was vain; he fell on his knees by her side; he turned her face towards him; the cheek upon which he had impressed the kiss of returning affection was cold, her heart had ceased to beat, her eyes to weep for ever! Then, indeed, the strong pent up current of parental love, that had been so long congealed within his bosom, burst forth. He wept as only strong men weep; he lifted up his voice, exclaiming like the Royal Poet-Prophet of old—"Oh! Rachel, my child! my child! would that I had died for thee!"

People say that the spirit of the Palatine girl wanders amid the ruins of the Rock of the Candle to this day; and there are few bold enough to approach the elm tree after night fall.

"But, sure, your honors," said our guide, when he had closed the story, the leading points of which we have thus preserved, "a spirit so good as hers could harm no living mortal."

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