

SILENCE IS GOLDEN.

Young men were at a premium in Glencurragh. Notwithstanding that this regrettable scarcity made the few eligible bachelors fully conscious of their importance in the matrimonial market, it seemed inconsistent that two of the most prominent among them should fix their regards on the one young lady, and enter into a keen rivalry on her account.

Uncharitable people had been heard to remark that the certainty of a substantial fortune prompted these attractions, while the less calculating were given to assert that Miss Curtin's personal attractions were the chief inducement. The situation was somewhat awkward for the interesting subject of this controversy. She admired each suitor in his respective way, but they were extremely different in style and temperament, and she was not conscious of a decided preference for one above the other. John Kirby was an excellent type of the well-to-do farmer, but had no remarkable talent, ambition, or pretensions above the local standard. He did not seem destined to figure in his country's history as a leading personality either in the world of thought or action, but he had vigorous health, good sense, and a kindly nature, birthday gifts, which may be more productive of homely comforts than the rarer attributes of a genius. True to the traditions of his race, he had romantic tendencies, which love of reading and a quiet life had helped to foster. His farm, which was extensive, adjoined the seaport town in which Miss Curtin's father was hotel proprietor, consequently business matters carried him rather frequently into the dangerous precincts of the hotel.

His rival, Cecil Hammond, was son of the leading merchant whose pretentious establishment overlooked the Subare, and was dignified by the name of "The Emporium." Young Hammond had never presumed to be a systematic business man, but he was decidedly up-to-date and progressive in his ways. He had been given a short college course in the metropolis, cut a good figure when he rode to the hounds, and was president of the Glencurragh Literary Society. He was musical, had unquestionable pretensions as a singer, and talked well, in what was considered a genuine Dublin accent. The latter accomplishment he hoped to display to the best advantage at the forthcoming lecture and concert, to be held in the Town Hall, in aid of a local charity, during the week on which our story opens. As president of the Literary Society, under whose auspices the entertainment was being held, the pleasing duty of introducing the distinguished lecturer had been deputed to Mr. Hammond, and many were the fluent rehearsals to which he treated the unresponsive walls of his private room during the wakeful nights preceding the event.

He trusted to turn the occasion to the best account. Miss Curtin was to be among the crowd, and having determined on making a formal proposal to that young lady as soon as convenient, he thought it convenient to approach the critical question after creating a good impression. There was one thing which slightly jarred on his anticipations. His declared rival had been assigned a part in the night's proceedings, having been persuaded to propose a vote of thanks to the guest of the evening. It was his first appearance on a public platform, and Cecil Hammond wickedly trusted to Fate that his debut would be a failure.

After a good deal of elaborate preparations the festive night arrived. The hall, which had been decorated by skilful hands, was transformed into a thing of beauty, the rude, discolored beams overhead being garlanded so profusely as to appear almost artistic, while the stage was a confusion of pottery and flowers.

There was a drop-scene, executed in haste by a local artist, which added considerably to the effect; for, though there was a generous disregard for anything like perspective, the coloring in the landscape was bright and cheerful.

Before the appointed hour arrived, the body of the hall was crowded, and the reserved seats towards the front were filling up rapidly by those whom the local papers afterwards described as "the elite of the locality." The green-room, a little apartment convenient to the stage, had been made sacred to the ladies for the completion of details in connection with the concert. But the

lecture had precedence, and the members of the committee had already distributed themselves in seats upon the platform, or stage, as was designated by those with histrionic tendencies. The advent of the lecturer, Mr. Augustus Brownlow, was marked by the turning on of the gaslight to its fullest brilliancy, and a murmur of expectation ran through the audience as he made his way towards the stage, escorted by a few of the leading citizens. He took his appointed seat quietly, while Mr. Cecil Hammond came forward to effect his introduction. The latter gentleman appeared in tip-top form. He was cool, faultlessly dressed, and full of confidence. His hopeful anticipations were more than realized, for he excelled himself in fluency, grace of gesture, and deportment.

After he had retired people whispered among themselves that he was an extremely nice fellow, and there were many who cast enquiring glances to note the effect upon Miss Curtin.

The lecture itself was loud, learned, and instructive, and while it appealed strongly to the intellectual, it gave less profound thinkers an excellent opportunity to look around and scrutinize their neighbors' toilettes.

When it was all over the time had come for John Kirby to make his mark in history. For a man of strong character he was extremely sensitive, and had wrought himself into a state of painful nervousness since the proceedings opened. Throughout the lecture he was a distracted listener, mentally rehearsing his forthcoming speech, and the effort to remember added still more to the mental strain he was enduring. When he rose to his feet and came closer to the footlights he was conscious of a surging sensation in his head, and the faces of the expectant people melted into one brilliant blot before his eyes. He cleared his throat violently, and the exertion gradually restored his sense of sight, but his mind remained obscured, and he failed to recall one word of what he had prepared. He shuffled uneasily on his feet, made a few inarticulate remarks, bowed slightly to the audience, and retired to his place at the back of the stage. He carried with him, along with his deep humiliation, a sense of Miss Curtin's apparent pity, for, even in his dilemma, his eyes had sought her out instinctively, and there was some paltry consolation in the fact that, while suppressed amusement overspread most of the faces, hers was only startled and sympathetic.

The humor of the situation was considerably heightened when Mr. Peter Glynn, an impulsive little man, who did not give himself time to think, came forward to second the vote of thanks "so ably expressed" by his friend, Mr. Kirby. After a few further formalities the proceedings in connection with the lecture wound up, and the audience settled themselves down to a critical chat in anticipation of the concert.

In this the local singers went through the programme with more or less success, but it was conceded on all hands that Cecil Hammond scored a second triumph when he took up his part.

Discriminating people asserted that all the sentimental fervor of his love song was directed to Miss Curtin, but she was seemingly a very unresponsive inspiration, as her face was strangely thoughtful and abstracted. When the entertainment was over, she lost no time in taking her leave, and slipped quietly down the wide staircase leading from the room, under the escort of a younger brother.

Reaching the entrance door, she was dismayed to find that a heavy rain had set in during the evening, for which she had come out totally unprepared, after an unusually elaborate toilet. Before she had time to decide what course to adopt, somebody stepped from the shelter of the doorway and kindly extended her a large umbrella. Meanwhile a companion of her brother's had joined him rather boisterously, and Miss Curtin was led to accept, not only the sheltering umbrella, but the friendly escort of Mr. John Kirby on her homeward walk.

After the first few common places were exchanged, an awkward silence fell between them. Happily nerved by the charitable darkness of the night, it was the young man who spoke, and in a tone strangely

cynical for one of his quiet temperament.

"Why don't you congratulate me, Miss Curtin? I am surprised at your forgetfulness."

He would have been strangely puzzled if he had known that her lips trembled and her eyes filled with sympathetic tears as she replied, rather harshly:

"There is nothing to congratulate you about. You were a hopeless failure."

John Kirby appreciated the blunt honesty of her criticism—it was more wholesome for him than volumes of hypocritical flattery. It was ungrateful of him, however, to blurt out angrily:

"You could at least commend me for improving Mr. Hammond's position—the contrast with my stupidity added to his lustre."

Miss Curtin was determined to punish him this time.

"He acquitted himself remarkably well," she said, coldly.

John Kirby seemed to be afflicted with a sudden reaction from his stage fright, and his taunting remarks followed each other in quick succession.

"He will have presumption enough for anything now," he said, meaningly, "his eloquence has carried all before it."

"Then you are not an advocate of the principle that 'silence is golden,'" Miss Curtin answered. It was, one of those random remarks which crop up in conversation, and, until it was uttered, she had not troubled about its interpretation, but she flushed hotly, even in the darkness, as she felt her escort's inquiring glance turned full upon her. He was silent for what seemed to be a considerable time, and when he spoke there was no trace of bitterness in his voice—it was full of quiet tenderness.

For one brief space his heart had beaten quickly with the hope that her words had held a deeper meaning, but, on consideration, he had taken the remark as a light jest at his expense.

"It is a very good motto, but, unfortunately, has not a general application. However, I may outlive your contempt some time because you are naturally kind and charitable; if you had not been there I would have done better."

"Mr. Kirby," Miss Curtin said, impulsively, "cannot you understand that I felt extremely for you? There was no contempt only, only—"

She stopped abruptly, for there was a perceptible tremor in her voice. Regardless of the pattering raindrops, John Kirby shifted the sheltering umbrella to his right hand and laid his left lightly on her arm. "You pitted me, I know," he said. "I wish to heaven that pity could be 'akin to love' in your case. If it were I could endure a full measure of contempt from all the others."

"Then if you value so much my moral support," she hesitated, for, notwithstanding her bravest effort, she could not control her voice.

"Miss Curtin," he said, almost sternly, "you are too honest to trifle with my feelings. Could you bring yourself to care for a blunderer like me?"

"I never knew until to-night," she answered, truthfully. "It was only when you blundered that I knew how much I cared."

John Kirby was too moved to speak, but he took the small ungloved hand in his and raised it to his lips. There was no further expression of endearment except that he retained the little trembling hand until they reached her father's door. He did not relinquish it even then until she had given him an assurance that he would have a right to claim it as his own in the immediate future. Standing in the clear light from the hall within, she saw the happiness upon his face as he turned reluctantly away, and her own heart grew glad within her because that she had given a silver lining to the little cloud which had cast a passing shadow on that non-existent life.

Some time later the lecturer, accompanied by Cecil Hammond and others of the Society, reached the hotel, and the pleasant hum of conversation and music of mellow laughter echoed through the premises. After a few minutes, Mr. Hammond, on some slight pretext, made his escape from the company and requisitioned one of the maids to convey to Miss Curtin his particular desire to see her.

Lingering around in pleasant anticipation of an interview, he was extremely annoyed when the messenger returned to say that Miss Curtin had retired to her room, and regretted very much being unable to see Mr. Hammond. Although he received the apology politely, he could scarcely contain his irritation. He had missed her at the hall after the proceedings closed, and was at a loss to understand her prospective leave-taking, and in a tone strangely

she got away. It hurt his vanity at the time that she had lost a possible chance of offering her congratulations, but he had consoled himself with the idea that a private meeting would be better chosen. He was doubly disappointed because of this second check on his intentions, for with a strange perversity of human nature, he coveted that most which was denied him. The incident did not serve to damp his hopes, however, and after a while he came to the conclusion that the morning would serve his purpose just as well, and when the young lady would be brighter and in better form. It was her invariable custom to take a brisk walk during the forenoon along the rugged sea coast beyond the town, and Cecil Hammond, familiar with her habits, determined to seek her out there on the following morning. With this mental resolve, he joined the company again, and, by the time they prepared to disperse, had become one of the most social spirits of the party. There were a few hilarious jokes at the expense of poor John Kirby, for, though the greater number were his personal friends, the occasion was too good to let pass without some harmless badinage. Needless to say, Mr. Cecil Hammond was not the least partial to a few witticisms over his rival's discomfiture.

The morning following seemed propitious to his plans. What with the balmy purity of the air, the deep unclouded blue of the sky, and the vivid freshness of the surrounding country, it would be strange if a young man, bent on such a pleasing errand, should lack the buoyancy of spirits and elasticity of step which the occasion warranted.

He had given Miss Curtin a 20 minutes' start for her morning walk. The pathway she had taken entered into private grounds immediately outside the town, but, through the courtesy of the owner, was always open to the public. Over the soft carpet of the sloping meadow land, it wound its way around the dents and curves of the irregular coast line. Twenty feet below, the blue Atlantic washed over the rough shingle, and stole in and out between the rocks, through dark, mysterious little coves of its own formation. Far out, where the harbor widened into the open sea, the bold outline of Carbery Island rose dark and rugged from the water, and here and there, where the sunlight glinted on the house-tops, the scattered homes of the islanders could be discerned. Crossing towards the mainland in a small boat, a few of those hardy sons of toil were making their way slowly. The rhythmic stroke of the oars, coupled with the soft music of the Irish tongue in which they spoke, seemed soothing as a lullaby breaking over the sleepy stillness of the place. Whatever the time or season, the scene before him would have appealed to Cecil Hammond, but though he was conscious as ever of its attractions on that particular morning, his mind was too preoccupied to loiter much on their account.

Rounding a sharp angle where some thick shrubs obscured his view, he suddenly discovered the object of his search. Miss Curtin had descended by a rugged by-path almost to the water's edge, and taken up a well-fortified seat at the foot of a steep cliff, against which she leaned, in happy unconsciousness of an intruder on her dreamland. She was not aware of his approach until the crush of his footsteps on the shingle roused her from her reverie. The young man was gratified to remark the deepening color on her face as he drew near, though his self-confidence would have sufficed if he could interpret the real cause of her confusion. She had divined his motive in seeking her out, and, coupled with the incident of the previous night, the prospect of a private interview was extremely trying. She could not deny from herself that she had given him a fair share of encouragement on which to found his hopes, and she was painfully sensitive of being compelled to let him know that she was already promised to another.

Cecil Hammond was pleased to attribute her embarrassment to other feelings, and gave her his hand with a well-turned compliment. "I feel reluctant to mar the beauty of the picture by bringing my unworldly presence into the foreground. However, I had to sacrifice effect through selfish motives."

Miss Curtin laughed a little as she replied.

"The masculine element was always well in evidence, Mr. Hammond," nodding her head towards the approaching fishermen.

"Well, there is something picturesque about those jerseys and Tam-o-Shanters of theirs which would warrant their intrusion. I have nothing to recommend me."

Marie Curtin, glancing shyly at the straight, well-dressed figure, Freeman.

could not help doubting the humility of the assertion. She was not in a mood for passing compliments, however, and simply smiled her answer.

"You were fatigued last night," he said, abruptly changing the subject.

"Just a little," she answered truthfully. "The lecture was a trifle wearying. I thought he might have condensed at somewhat."

"After the fashion of Mr. Kirby who condensed his remarks to vanishing point," he said, cynically.

The girl flushed crimson, but turned her attention off adroitly by remarking:

"You should be more generous, considering that you acquitted yourself so well. Your song brought down the house completely."

"Well, considering that my inspiration was not far away. I think I do not deserve more than half the credit."

Miss Curtin was conveniently dense, and evinced an eager interest in the landing of the islanders, but her companion did not choose to be so easily thwarted this time, and continued, in a softer tone, "You cannot fail to understand me, Marie, for you must be aware of my feelings towards you long before now. I meant to speak to you last night, but was denied the chance. I have a dread of a formal speech on an occasion like this—you will spare me the need of any by giving me an assurance that my regard is not unwelcome."

He was standing close beside her, but her face was steadily averted.

"I am extremely grateful for your kind sentiments," she answered, after a long pause. "I wish sincerely they were proffered to some one far more worthy."

He was at a loss to understand her hesitancy, and attributed it to a possible belief on her part that a little uncertainty was commendable. "Let too light winning make the prize light."

"You cannot damp my hopes by this humility," he said, half jestingly. "Let me see your face and read my fate for myself." He was surprised when, obedient to his request, she rose to her feet and turned directly towards him. Her face was pale, and the grey eyes met his a little wistfully, but her words were firm and decisive.

"Mr. Hammond, I am sorry that you have misplaced your regards; I have already promised my future to another."

She saw the unexpected shock her words occasioned him, and was prepared for the abrupt query:

"To whom, may I ask?"

"To John Kirby."

His dark brows met in a harsh frown as he put the next question.

"Since when has Mr. Kirby dated his proprietorship?"

She felt she deserved the satire, and answered, briefly:

"Since last night."

"Before the lecture?"

"No, after the entertainment."

"Would I be guilty of too much curiosity if I inquired whether Mr. Kirby saw you home?"

"Yes, he saw me home. I was placed under his escort quite unexpectedly at the outer door."

"And all the eloquence which he denied the public was reserved for private use—it is evident that he succeeded better in the friendly shadows of the night."

Miss Curtin was discreetly silent as he continued, bitterly:

"I should not have dreamt of pitting myself against such a capable pleader as Mr. Kirby if I had known that he had entered the lists against me—you will pardon my presumption. I am sure. It was evidently a wise proceeding on his part to make himself ridiculous as long as it appealed to your very sympathetic instincts."

He paused a little but her gaze was resting dreamily on the blue mists of Carbery Island, and she made no reply. Only when he held out his hand she gave him hers directly, and thanked him in her quiet fashion when he wished her every future happiness. When he was gone she resumed her seat and gave herself up to thought for fully half an hour. It was evidently a reverie which brought her conscience considerable balm, judging by her reflections as she turned homeward.

"It is vanity which is wounded worst," she told herself. "If I had reversed my choice and given poor John his dismissal thus, I honestly think his deeper feelings would be touched."

Even in that solitude she blushed warmly at such a consoling surmise, and would have fallen into another prolonged day-dream did not her thoughts again revert to Cecil Hammond.

"It is no harm to teach him," she said, with a protesting gesture. "How, once in a way, we have proof that 'Silence is Golden.'—Weekly Freeman.

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