



ELLEN AHERN;
OR,

THE POOR COUSIN.

CHAPTER IX.—Continued.

My dearly beloved Father, do you know that I never comprehended—that is, felt—that I was dependent in all my life until lately: and that it is anything but an agreeable reflection; for, poor cousin though I be, I have all the pride of all the Maguires to contend with. But seriously it may come to it, and, like a celebrated French Lady, I intend to familiarize myself with all sorts of straits, by way of making them easy when they actually come.

There's sound philosophy in that, but make no hasty resolves, my dear child. Things may work around right for us yet if we are patient. But what have you there? said Father MacMahon, as Ellen Ahern flourished a five dollar bill in her fingers.

That is a flag of truce, sent by Lady Fermanagh to the poor, who no doubt have clamored at the door of her conscience until she was driven in self defence to do something to quiet them. I believe I have partially succeeded in thawing her; and all jesting aside, I really think she begins to feel an interest in the sufferings around her. She actually sent for me and told me so.

God be praised for all things—but—Well go my child, and distribute your alms, and if you meet Don Enrique by the way, ask him to come hither.

I do not expect to meet Don Enrique, she replied, while a deep flush and something very like an expression of pain flitted over her countenance; but should I do so, I will deliver your message. Good bye, dear Father, until we meet again. And she knelt a moment at his feet to get his blessing ere she went away.

Don Enrique had, ever since the moment she had seen him at the close of his interview with Lady Fermanagh, been a myth to her; and the more incomprehensible he seemed, the plainer did she discover how much, and how deeply she was interested in him, a discovery which did not cause her to regard herself with much complacency; for his looks and tone towards her kinswoman that day, and the sudden change in his manner from cold severity to bland courtesy—from the authoritative respect of a judge to the suave kindness of a friend, urged her to think that he was the conniver in some dark, base secret, or else a hypocrite, utterly unworthy of her esteem. And yet how to reconcile the difference, puzzled her severely. His noble sentiments—his benevolence—his piety that seemed so genuine and elevated—his quiet, unobtrusive, but withal, commanding manner—and last, tho' not least, his gentle, nay, almost tender attentions towards her, made her reproach herself for her uncharitableness in allowing—but there it was again, nothing could effectually put it down, and again she saw him standing full of conscious power, while that proud and unbecoming woman bowed her head in very abjectness to his mandate. What interests could they ever have had in common? It was surely no ordinary thing that had given him such power over her. Where had they met before? He had, he said, spent his life in Spain. What did it mean? She could not tell. Then like a weak woman, as she was unreasonable and ungenerous, through want of faith, she thought how very frightful the hump on his back was, and how it deformed him, until she forgot the truthful, soul-lit face, she had so much admired; the fine, classic head; and the charm of his conversation, which a highly cultivated intellect, and noble, expansive views, rendered the most interesting and instructive that she had ever listened to.

Good morning, Miss Ahern! said a kindly voice, with a slight patois, which she recognized ere she saw the person who had addressed her.

Good morning, Don Enrique! she responded, with a stately bow, as she paced swiftly on. The next moment she thought of her promise to Father MacMahon, but it was too late, she could not turn back or call after him—it would be forward and undignified after so hurried and cold a greeting, which, now that he was gone, she felt to be indecorous, inasmuch as she possessed no right to resent a want of confidence on his part, or an imagined wrong; and she would have given the world—i.e., if she could—if she had not acted so foolishly. She experienced what all people do, at some time or other of their lives; that it is an easier matter to mount the stilts, than either graceful or pleasant to get down. In no very enviable frame of mind, she went into the only shop Fermanagh could boast of to make purchases of potatoes and meal, which she ordered to be put into separate hampers and kept until she sent for them, then having received her change, she pursued her way out beyond the outskirts of the hamlet in search of Alice Reardon, who, she had heard, was living under a rude sort of a tent, just where the limits

of the Barony of Fermanagh were bounded by another estate. Just beyond the boundary line, where three or four ancient trees—the land marks of the two estates—grew together, scarcely affording shade or shelter, so sparse was their foliage. Alice had pitched her tent, and set up her primitive abode, which was nothing less picturesque from its poverty. Several ragged quilts, gorgeous with patches of scarlet and yellow, were stretched, at some height from the ground, between and around the trunks of the trees to which they were nailed, forming a temporary shelter. At a little distance off, three forked sticks were set upright in the ground forming a triangle, and brought together at the top, from which hung suspended a small pot, over a peat fire, the smoke from which curled upwards in the sunshine in long, graceful undulations, and as Ellen Ahern came nearer, she was glad to perceive from the smell that something savory was in preparation for their dinner. With her back towards her, Alice Reardon stooped over a wash-tub rinsing and wringing out linen, her busy hands keeping time to the song of the 'Black-bird,' which she was singing as blithely as if she had been the inmate of a palace. Ellen Ahern lifted a corner of the tent, and saw Kathleen Reardon seated on a bundle of clean straw, busily engaged carding wool, while at her feet dozen and purred a great white cat. There was nothing there in the way of furniture, except a broken chair, and an old meal-chest—empty of course—and a shake-down—with a few boards under it for a bedstead—where they slept.

Is that yourself, Miss Ahern dear? said the girl, looking up, with a bright smile on her handsome face.

Did you think I had forgotten you entirely, Kathleen? said Ellen Ahern, holding out her hand, which the other grasped. I'm glad to find you sheltered anyway.

Such a shelter as it is, she said merrily. If it wasn't agin the Church I'd set up for a gipsy, and tell fortunes, for we look enough like the pagan cratars to do it. Och, but it takes rain as well as sunshine to make a harvest, and we're content if it's God's will.

Our Father in Heaven loves a cheerful heart. This can't last always, said Ellen Ahern deeply touched by the cheerful submission of the young girl, who all ignorant of the world's love, had so much of heavenly wisdom in her heart.

Faith, then, Miss, I never doubts it, an' says I to mother, the arth is wide enough for us yet, and while we keep our health, we have no right to complain—because if they drive us from Don we can go to Bersheba, and work our way through, unless they hunt us into the sea, and even then I'll try my best to swim. And Kathleen's blue eyes, full of mirth, flashed forth a strong will to overcome, and a determination not to be put down.

That's right, that's the spirit I like, said Ellen Ahern, with a happy little laugh at Kathleen's odd, but good reasoning.

Because, Miss Aileen, ashore, it's no use to be moping along like haythens, instead of Christians wearing the blessed badge of St. Francis, an' under the protection of our Blessed Lady—so I'm going to make the best of it, and then the two young girls laughed together.

But how do you manage to live?

Why you see, Miss, the Don gives mother his linen to do up, and that, with what I earn, keeps us from starving—but let me go and tell mother you're here, said Kathleen, coming out but no sooner had she done so than she sprang back, pulling Ellen Ahern with her, saying, God save and keep us forerer—but there comes Fahey. But I must not stay here—I must run out and tell mother to put the cover on the pot before he comes up and finds the hare cooking in it. And in another moment she stood beside her mother, and had given her the warning just in time, when Fahey, who had seen the manœuvre, hurried up and joined himself to the group.

The top o' the morning to you, Feru Fahey, said Alice, wiping the sud's from her brawny arms, which she placed akimbo.

The same to you, Mistress Reardon, and to you pretty Kate, he said pinching Kathleen's flushed cheek.

Keep your hands to yourself, Mr. Fahey, she said, drawing closer to her mother's side, whose eyes literally flashed fire.

I thought you knewed by this time Alice Reardon, that I'm not one to be trifled with for nothing, said Fahey, swaggering up closer to them. If you'd a been a sensible lass, you'd be living in comfort now, and all belonging to you.

The devil fly away with such comfort, exclaimed Alice, wrathfully, you've done your worst and I'll thank you to leave us in pace.

If you don't hould in your tongue a little Mrs. Reardon, I'll—I'll—

What? Turn us out agin? Faith then, that'll be hard to do seeing we're not on his

lordships land, and if we wor, you'd find it a tough job, seeing that we've nothin' left but our skins to be burnt out of, said Alice, tauntingly. Go way, Tim Fahey, an' let us alone, or it won't be good for you.

You tureaten do you? That, indictable—take care that you an' your pretty daughter don't get lodged in prison. But you seem to live high here—what's that cooking?

Water!

What else? he asked, sniffing up the savory steam.

Something that you'll have to rub your eyes with when you want to cry for your sins, honey. Inyons.

And what else? he asked, lifting the lid of the pot, where, as ill luck would have it, the head and thigh of the hare bobbed upon the surface.

One of Pusheen's (the cat's) kits, if you must know—will you be after stayin' to dine with us? said Alice, snatching the lid of the pot out of his hand, and replacing it.

Not-to-day, Miss Reardon, honey. I'll come to-morrow with two constables at my back, to put you a little further away from his lordship's game, said Fahey, who at the same instant threw his arm about Kate Reardon, and kissed her, intending to trust to his heels afterwards, but as quick as thought Alice snatched up a bucket of slush, and with true aim, sluiced him with it from head to foot. Half suffocated with rage, and what used to be the pig's dinner, he retreated muttering vengeance, when Alice, with a light laugh, would have returned to her tub, had not Kathleen told her that Miss Ahern was within.

I'm ashamed Miss Ellen, honey, to behave so, and you to the fore, said Alice, going in, but that black-mouth villain can't be managed any other way.

You gave him his deserts, only I'm afraid Ally, he'll bring more sorrow on you. You know there might be great mischief made about that hare.

An' this, honey, there's the poacher, said Alice, laughing, as she pointed to the cat, an' when Pusheen fetches 'em in by the neck, as dead as a dure nail, its no use—an' we half starved—to throw 'em away.

Pusheen! said Ellen Ahern.

Yes, surely. I don't know what made the craythur take to sich disonest practices, except it was ben' half starved, for it's nothing now for her since we lived here for to come in with a hare or a birdeen, stone dead in her two jaws, 'till she lays down sensible like, an' waits till it's cooked for her share. We call 'em her kits, and ate 'em with thankful hearts; and if Tim Fahey's a mind to make mischief out of that, he may. But hows your health a sivilish?

I am very well, Ally. But I hope Pusheen won't be transported for poaching, said Ellen Ahern, laughing, or bring you into trouble.—You have a brave heart of your own, and I'm glad to see you so able to meet difficulties. Do you need anything?

No, thanks be to God. What the Don gives me for washing his linen, and cleaning his room every day, feeds us, and you know ashore, there's no rint to pay. If the weather continues a week or so longer, we're the promise of a poor bit of a place with a sorry house on it, a few miles away; but if it comes on to rain shortly, the Lord help us. But why was you ather asking, honey?

Because Lady Fermanagh has given me money to divide amongst the most needy of the turned out tenants.

Och! Miss Aileen a sivilish, there's poverty an' sickness enough amongst them poor souls, an' they need help more'n we do; give it all to 'em a sivilish machree. As for me, all I crave is a sup of good milk, but I can't get it, an' I'm just as well off without it.

You shall have it, Alice. Send Kathleen or Biddy up this evening, and I will tell Judith to fill whatever you send with fresh milk from my own cow. If you get into trouble let me know. Good bye, keep up a good heart, avoid Fahey—don't exasperate him.

Let him keep clear of Kathleen then; the dirty driver that used to come many a time begging to my own mother's dure, when he was a hare-footed gossoon, and was never turned empty-handed away. If he ever dares to lay his nasty paw on her again, I'll break every bone in his ugly skin, said the virago, who looked fully able to put her threats into execution.

Ellen Ahern had a sorrowful pilgrimage that day. From one stricken family to another she went, ministering to their needs, and trying to cheer their drooping hearts, and relieve their squalid misery as far as her means went, and when they were exhausted, her kindly, hopeful words let in the sunshine to more than one desolate heart. Lady Fermanagh's message

* A fact.

seemed to solace them no little, and they laid hold on it, as drowning persons are said to grasp at straws. They thought, naturally enough that a mother should have influence with her son, and be able to exercise it for good; and if her ladyship truly pitied them, they saw no reason why Lord Hugh should continue his hard and cruel course towards them. It was in this way they reasoned with each other, sanguine because their view of the case was morally right, and because they could see no barrier to the fulfilment of its expected results.

On her return, she stopped at the Fermanagh Arms to see Sir Eadha Ahern, but was informed that the Factor was supposed to be dying, and that he was in close attendance on him, watching every breath and administering the necessary remedies with as much assiduity as if he had been a dear friend, a benefactor, instead of a stranger, who to say the least, entertained a feeling of scorn and indifference towards the country that the true-hearted old man loved so well. Then she went to pray for a little while before the altar of St. Finbar's, where moved by true charity, she asked Heaven's mercy on the dying stranger, and having concluded her devotions she turned homewards, and was walking rapidly, for it was growing late, when Don Enrique, who was sitting on one of the lower fragments of rock by the way-side, with his head leaning on his hand, heard her light footsteps, and looking up, advanced to her side. She saw by the fading light, that he looked harassed and pale, and when he spoke she observed that his voice was low and husky, as if from intense emotion.

Miss Ahern will pardon me for obtruding myself on her notice just now, he said, as he walked along by her side; but circumstances leave me no alternative. I fear that I have—though unintentionally believe me—offended or wounded you in some way, or by some means suffer under the effect of false impressions in your opinion. But, of myself, I cannot speak now. There is a mystery which I dare not yet explain; all that I can do, is to disclaim everything that may seem unworthy, and implore the patient confidence of—of—those whose opinion I most value.

There are none who do not wish Don Enrique Giron well, replied Ellen Ahern, scarcely knowing what to say.

My object now is, he went on to say, to tell Miss Ahern that facts have come to my knowledge by which I am convinced that she is threatened with peril; and if she will not think me too presuming, to say that if the most unwearying vigilance can do it, I will save her.

From what quarter am I to look for this danger? asked Ellen, with quivering lip.

Be wary of those around you, Miss Ahern; and place no faith—well—there may be protestations made, and even vows which will bear the semblance of a true and genuine heart devotion, but which in fact are snares. I am at a loss for words; I do not know how to tell you what I fear, but there have been such things in real life as forced and mock marriages, he answered, as if he wished to warn her fully, but dared not trust himself to do so.

I thank you, Don Enrique, for your well-meant warning; and also for your offers of protection, and can only hope that your fears are groundless. However, I shall be on the alert, and trust to Almighty God and the Blessed Virgin for deliverance. I do not think, she added with a light laugh, I could by any probability be forced into a marriage with any one, and can scarcely suppose that there is any one who would have the temerity to try such a thing.

Such things are not common, neither is the wickedness that would prompt so much evil; but I have gone, perhaps, too far, and yet I cannot recall aught that I have said, or wish it unsaid. I only ask the privilege of watching over your safety, and averting the evil that threatens you, if possible, he said, as he bowed low on the hand which, under a sudden impulse, she handed to him, and walked away.

Bewildered and amazed by what she had heard—its very vagueness making it more terrible to her imagination—Ellen Ahern knew not what to think. A thousand things rushed on her mind, a thousand conflicting thoughts distracted her, as she went blindly up the rugged pass of Fermanagh, heedless of her footsteps, and seeing no object around her. What could it mean?—Should she trust him? Why was he not more explicit? Who could be so deadly a foe to her as to wish to harm her? Is it possible that Lord Hugh Maguire could stoop to so base a thing? Might not Don Enrique have some object of his own to accomplish—some design to serve? How could she tell? To whom should she confide her difficulties? What hope had she of earthly succor if evil designs really environed her? What friends had she but two old men whose age rendered their aid unavailing—and the poor, whose miserable poverty made them

helpless? And yet she could not really in her heart distrust Don Enrique; she felt that, notwithstanding the mystery that hung about him, he was truly noble and good—a conclusion which was not the result of any natural logic, but one of those impressions which are sometimes stamped on the mind by some quick, indelible and mysterious process. As she was crossing the Terrace, she suddenly bethought herself of her promise to Alice Reardon, and she turned to go towards the kitchen in search of Judith, who had the care of her cow, to leave an order to send milk not only to her, but to the family of Patrick Maginness: after which, accompanied by Thela, whom she determined to keep always near her in case of emergency, she went up to her room, and sat down to endeavor to compose and collect her thoughts, and come to something definite in regard to her future course of action.

CHAPTER X.—THE MIDNIGHT FLIGHT.

There were some few individuals amongst the tenants, as we before hinted, who having forsaken little by little their religious practices, and being unrestrained by holier motives, were not disposed to submit quietly to the harsh measures of their landlord and his agent from a sense of duty. These unfortunate persons had in some instances set at naught the laws of man, and by their evil lives continually outraged the laws of God. It is not strange, therefore, that now, when smarting under a fiercer application of the scourge than they had yet felt—when one of them had seen an aged mother expire by the ditch side from exposure and fright, and another had closed the eyes of his only child, who was ill of a fever when they were evicted, under a bleak midnight sky—their darkest passions should be roused to such fury, as to render them unwilling to wait God's time, and determine to take vengeance into their own hands. Weak and tempted, having voluntarily abandoned the source of true strength and consolation, they listened only to the dictates of nature, and taking counsel together, they swore with a fearful oath that Lord Hugh Maguire should die. No one knew their dread purpose—it was only suspected—and they kept desigedly out of the way of their friends and connections, to avoid being questioned or warned. Lord Hugh Maguire, unconscious of the fate that was impending over him, continued his cold, implacable course, feeling responsible to no power, either human or divine, for his acts, as long as law and custom legalized them; and continued inexorable to the misery he had created, until it turned its wan face, divested of every earthly hope, appealingly towards heaven. But he had his own annoyances and heart-burnings. The Scotch operatives were becoming dissatisfied, and threatened to go away; and his factor, on whom so much depended, was sizzling daily—no human skill could save him. Although Don Enrique had gone away, no one knew whether the mysterious secret that he held like a drawn sword over his mother and himself, levered and irritated him whenever he thought of it, until he sometimes became almost frantic, his impotence making the endurance still more bitter, and he fervently hoped he had left the country. Added to this, Lady Fermanagh incessantly thwarted him, and by her counsels, and urgent wishes to return to London, gave him no rest. Amidst all, the image of Ellen Ahern, in her pure, spirited beauty, haunted, and inspired him with a determination to carry out his plans if they led him to the very verge of peril. Further than that he did not wish to go. His stubborn, dogged will gave him strength in the pursuit of his designs which, simply because they were his, he made up his mind that no circumstances or opposition should baffle them, he therefore declined holding out any hopes to her ladyship of a speedy return to England.

One evening he was returning home late from Cathagura, when a shot, which seemed to come from a coppice on the roadside behind, was fired, and had not his horse stumbled at the moment, and caused him to pitch forward a little in his saddle, the ball would have penetrated his brain instead of his hat, which was perforated through and through. Putting spurs to the frightened animal, he galloped homeward at full speed, and clattered up the rocky pass of Fermanagh with such fury, that the dogs and stable boys started together in full cry, to see who and what was coming. But he dashed through them, and threw the bridge to a boy as he dismounted, without a word, and strode into the house. Ellen Ahern was in the drawing room with Lady Fermanagh, who, after making sundry efforts to be cordial and civil without success, had desired her to read aloud, which she was doing when Lord Hugh came in. She glanced up from the page before her, and when she saw how white and grim he looked, she involuntarily exclaimed:—'You are ill, my Lord.'

'Not ill, my fair cousin,' he replied in a voice that was remulous with the rage that was boiling and seething within him. 'I have only been shot at, and narrowly escaped with my life.'