

NO SIGN.

BY MRS. CASHEL HOEVY.

JUST PUBL

Mr. EDWARD

CHAPTER I.

"TH"

CANDIDATE NUMBER FIVE.

MY story belongs to a period a little later than that terrible time which young people of the present know nothing about, and we who lived in it have almost forgotten—the "Irish famine years," 1847-8.

The events of my story took place in Ireland, near a town which I shall not call by its real name, though I shall try to give a faint idea of the beauty of the scene which witnessed them.

If the persons and the incidents of my story shall arouse any interest, it will be because those persons lived and those incidents happened.

The town of Narraghmore is built of stone of the bluish grey, that looks dingy and dismal when one walks along the dull streets and regards them in detail, but which harmonizes with its setting of green field and upland, with sweeping mountain curves at the back, and of broad river, with a thickly-wooded bank at one side, and a stern majestic stretch of mountain and moorland trending to the sea at the other. It is a grave, substantial town, and the beauty of its site and surroundings is much commented upon by travellers on the great line of railroad which runs from the Irish capital, through the province of Ulster, up to the Northern coast—the coast of famous caves and cliffs, of thundering seas, and the legend-haunted stairs of the Giants. This beauty comes unexpectedly, after a long stretch of barren country, where poor patches of wretched tillage strive with the stony hill-side slope, and the turf bog; where the heron flies low over the narrow but bright streamlets; so that there lingers with the traveller on his northward way a delightful vision of a verdure-clad valley, with a broad river, and stately woods beyond, a mountain range whose outline is a succession of delicious curves, without one harsh line or abrupt projection throughout all its length, and in the far distance, the sail-flecked bosom of a wide bay. The grey town lies in that valley, and some of its out-buildings dot the rising ground beyond. It has somewhat of the stir and importance of a seaport, for though the river is not navigable all the way up to Narraghmore, it has been supplemented by a canal, and the two channels unite, down towards the river-mouth, at a spot where the contrast between the wooded loveliness of the one bank, and the stern majestic grandeur of the other is strongest and most impressive. Narraghmore is not a county town, but it is a thriving place, where there are large timber-yards, and where other kinds of commerce also flourish. It has a bank and a prison, a courthouse, military barracks, and a number of churches belonging to a number of sects. On the rising ground beyond it, is more than one venerable ivy-grown ruin, which had a history in the troublous times, and an ancient burial-ground stands out conspicuous for its grey and moss-grown stones, its gnarled old trees, and the peace and solitude which dwell upon it, and cast their spell over the long narrow sloping gardens, rich in fruit, and flower, and greenery, which share the hillside with it. Also outside the town in the sense of continuity and sociability, but beautifully situated too, as it might be the chosen abode of pleasantness and of happy household life, stands the "Poorhouse," as the institution known in England as "the Workhouse," or "the Union," according to its local conditions, is called in Ireland.

The Narraghmore Poorhouse was a long, narrow building, with bluish grey walls, black slated roof, and tall, narrow, greenish paned windows set in black frames, with a bare courtyard on three sides of it, and high rough walls dashed with lime, which required the ceaseless vigilance of the authorities to keep them free from opprobrious and mocking inscriptions and caricatures, among which the august chairman of the Board of Guardians himself had not unfrequently figured. In 1850 the Irish Poor Law was still known as the "New" poor law—just as at a later date the new police were popularly known as "Peelers"—and the frightful strain which the years of insurrection, famine, fever, and exodus, had put upon it, as upon every other institution, was hardly yet relaxed. The amenities of modern architecture, which have done so much to modify the formerly uncompromising grimness of all institutions intended for the relief of suffering humanity—whether they put forward their claim under the compulsory form of pauperism, which must be housed and fed for reasons inherent in the existence of the State and of Society, or under the persuasive guise of Mercy, which is "twice blessed"—had not extended to Irish Poorhouses then, and have, indeed, fallen short of them up to the present time. The Narraghmore Poorhouse was as unlovely as the destinies of its inmates, as little adorned as were the hard facts of their lives.

In the vicinity of the workhouse, boasting as little adornment as that great institution itself, and probably as profoundly detested by the majority of its frequenters, stood the Poor School. This building was also low, long, and enclosed within a high wall, and, as its roof sprang from a height of only two or three feet above that boundary, it may be supposed that it was not enlivened with any extensive prospect, and did not err on the side of cheerfulness. The distraction of the juvenile learners in this humble temple of knowledge, would certainly not come from without, or be stimulated by the vanity of the eye. The school for boys and that for girls were under the same roof, but divided by a wall which intersected the bare yard, euphoniously designated the Play-ground, and bounded by the external wall. The school-rooms stood back to back, and each had its narrow, black door, up those grey stone steps, with a triangular wooden frame above it, with "Boys' School" on the end which faced the hill-side, and "Girls' School" on the end which faced the river.

The place was not enlivening to look upon, but the teaching to be had within its walls was by no means despicable. Poor schools of Ireland held then, as they hold now, high rank among the rarely successful expedients of popular instruction, and turned out pupils, both male and female, who had at least so much of a fair start in life as sound, if elementary, teaching could give them.

The post of Schoolmistress to the girls' school at Narraghmore was vacant at the time when my story takes up the threads of the human destinies involved in it, and a well-attended meeting of the Board of Guardians had just been convened to consider the applications for the office which had reached them, and to select the candidate whom their united judgment should approve. The number was not great, and the tests to which each young woman was subjected were not difficult, but they were carefully applied, for the Board was chiefly composed of men who were zealous for the success and respectability of the schools; and Mr. Bellew, the chairman, a portly, middle-aged gentleman, with grey hair and very discerning spectacles, who had made a good deal of money in the flax-growing department of the linen trade, was considered to be almost dangerously advanced in his notions of what was really good for little boys and girls, especially little girls, in the way of education. The discussion of the question was taking place in the Board-room—a lengthy and substantially-furnished apartment on the ground floor of the men's side of the workhouse—and the parties to it were seated on either side of a ponderous table, provided with writing materials, and covered with a green baize cloth, much the worse for ink. Mr. Bellew, the chairman, occupied his official seat at the top of the table, with his back to the high grey stone chimney-piece, over which was displayed a fly-spotted map of the province of Ulster, his co-Guardians of the Poor had pulled their chairs up close on either side, and were inspecting some loose sheets of paper scattered upon the table, at whose foot sat an official, with a formal array of documents in front of him, and the expression, attentive, yet unconcerned, of one who records, but does not participate in the business of the hour. This official was the "Clerk to the Union," and in that capacity secretary to the Board of Guardians; and his duty on the present occasion, had simply consisted of presenting to the Board the letters of recommendation and certificates brought by the applicants for the post of schoolmistress, and recording the names and qualifications of the latter, who had been placed in a waiting-room, until the turn of each for inspection should arrive.

"Now, then, let's have in No. 5," says the chairman, "and see whether she has a better notion of what is wanted here, than this Mary Conway."

Mr. Bellew spoke with some acerbity. Candidate No. 4, who was well recommended, and had her certificates all right, had failed signally in a test which he regarded as of very great importance. It was that of handwriting. Mr. Bellew wrote a fine hand himself, of the "commercial" order, and he esteemed a fine hand as the highest achievement of practical education, besides imputing to it some not very clearly defined moral significance. "I never

trust a man, woman, or child, who does not look me straight in the face," is a frequently-uttered prejudice fondly cherished by its professors, especially if nature has preserved them from shyness, and endowed them with a gift of steady and unabashed staring. "I never trust people who do not write plain," was Mr. Bellew's profession of unfaith. "Depend upon it, there's something astray when people can't put down plain words in plain letters. Your slurs and your curly queues, and your loops and your dashes, your big letters where there ought to be little ones, and your little letters where ought to be big, your words cut in two, and your lines running uphill, your confounded gentlemanly and ladylike hands, sir, all mean something wrong! Something wrong, sir, I don't care whether it's the head or the heart, or both; there's something radically wrong with the man or the woman who doesn't write a good, plain hand, according to the copybook rule, sir,—the good old rule that we're all slipping further and further away from every day of our lives, and more's the pity, as time will show when I'm gone, and you're gone, and everybody's gone—a hand that their neighbours can read, sir, without puzzling eyes and brains over their confounded indolence and impudence; for you won't deny people can learn to write plain hands if they choose. Very well, if they don't do it, that's indolence, and as their infernal scrawl plagues other people, whom they haven't any right to plague, that's impudence. No, no; the man or woman who writes a plain hand and minds the rules is the man or woman for my money."

As, in the present instance, Mr. Bellew's money meant the money of the community—in other words, the salary of the schoolmistress—and his fellow-guardians were prepared to agree with him that a good handwriting was much to be desired on the part of the candidate to be approved, some especial interest attached itself to the manner in which one young woman after another, when the preliminary examination of certificates and recommendations, and the brief customary interrogation, had been gone through, acquitted herself of the task subsequently imposed upon her. It was only this. She was required to take a seat at a side table (like the central one, covered with a green baize cloth the worse for ink, and supplied with writing materials), and to write upon a sheet of foolscap paper a sentence of her own selection, to be read by the gentlemen at the central table. It had been curious to observe the difficulty which this seemingly simple direction had occasioned to the four candidates, and the blundering manner in which they had respectively fulfilled it, although their previous training, as indicated by their certificates, ought to have rendered it perfectly easy. Mr. Bellew waxed impatient when the candidate under inspection would fidget on her chair, take up the pen timidly, fumble with the paper before her, turn red in the face, cough, look round as if she longed desperately to run away; and finally, on being reminded that she was wasting time, write something in desperation, and finishing it, and her own chance with it, by a blot and a smear.

Of the four handwritings which had already been submitted to the Board, that of No. 4 was the nearest approach to anything which would have a chance with Mr. Bellew. But No. 4 had taken an unconscionable time to consider what she should write, and turned redder, coughed in a more tangled fashion, fidgeted longer with the sheet of foolscap paper before her, looked around her with more evident stupidity and embarrassment than her three predecessors, and finally written very slowly, and with extraordinary pains—

"GENTLEMEN,

"I hope you are very well.

"I remain, Gentlemen,

"Your obedient servant,

"MARY CONWAY."

When the Clerk to the Union opened the door, that candidate No. 4 might pass out, which he did as politely as if she had been a lady and he a gentleman, he knew, and she knew, that it was all over with her.

After a momentary delay the fifth candidate presented herself, and if the Clerk to the Union had been one of those persons who conceive distrust of every individual who does not look an interlocutor straight in the face, he would have had his suspicions of No. 5 from the first, as she curtsied deeply at the door, advanced to the great table, laid her papers before the chairman, and replied to Mr. Bellew's first question,

My name is Katharine Farrell, sir."

The Clerk had extended his hand to take the small packet of papers which she held, as a matter of course; but she passed his outstretched hand unnoticed. His back was turned to the table until she had spoken her first words. Then he closed the door and resumed his place.

Katharine Farrell was directed, as her predecessors had been, to take a seat while the gentlemen present should be engaged looking over her papers. She complied, but differed from the preceding candidates by her self-possession. The gentlemen were all looking at her, though some of them were pretending to read the certificates of her fitness for the post of a teacher, and the letters of recommendation from the parish where she had recently resided—and she knew it. The clerk was not looking at her—and she knew it too.

The woman on whom the four pairs of eyes were fixed, from whom the fifth pair were turned and held away, was perhaps four-and-twenty years old, tall, and finely formed, after that best and rarest fashion which has the freedom of the peasant from artificial restraints, from cramping modes of dress and carriage, and the impress of a wholesome life in fresh air upon it, without any injurious touch of coarseness or suggestion of the weariness of toil. Symmetrical of figure, firm of step, with shoulders and bust whose fine outline showed well under the thin black shawl so neatly adjusted, and with white throat lightly touched at the nape of the neck by silken rings of rich red hair. The lavish surplus of the massive coils upon the back of the long flat head, were just discernible under the ribbon "curtain" of the plain, neat straw bonnet, of wide circumference, and tied with large, carefully-adjusted bows under the firm, square, powerful chin. Bonnets were veritable coverings for the head in 1850, and hid those characteristic features, the ears. Katharine Farrell's bonnets hid ears, which, whether characteristic or not, were out of harmony with her singular beauty, for they were large, thick at the lobes, and less delicately colored than her face, which might have been one of those which the winds of heaven are never suffered to visit too roughly—one of those that appertain to the "hot-house plant" order of loveliness, and, except to expert eyes keen to discern the indications of exceptional character, have all the delicate and indolent charm of the aristocratic type. This woman, who came to try if haply she might win the privilege of setting pauper children their monotonous tasks in a bare and stuffy school-room day after day, had the cut of feature, and the tinge and texture of complexion, which persons of limited power of observation and fixed prejudices describe as "fit for a duchess,"—as though Nature conducted her operations on the haberdashery scale and system—and the hands which she hid in coarse brown cotton gloves, the feet which were imprisoned in strong country-made boots, would have equally answered to that description. From her broad, low forehead, white as milk like her throat, her rippling red hair rolled back, with golden dots at the roots of it, and warm gleams in the waves of it which might have defied any painter since the giants set the beauty of Venetian women upon their canvas in the good days of old; and under the arched brow her deep-set eyes long, and, though well nigh as colourless, to the full as bright as water, and shaded by thick up-turned lashes of a browner red than her hair, looked up, or held themselves resolutely downward, as she chose, with power, will, and dauntlessness rarely to be seen in the eyes of any woman. The expression of those glittering light eyes was so noticeable, that it would have marked the face, if that face had not been beautiful, and the complexion of that almost dazzling whiteness and purity sometimes seen in combination with hair of tint which no sophistry or softening effects can claim as anything but red—uncompromising red—the complexion with which a very few freckles go well, and which resists with equal impunity every kind of wind and weather.

A similar interrogation to that which had already taken place in the case of each of the four preceding candidates, was conducted by Mr. Bellew in that of Katharine Farrell. It seemed as if the other members of the Board were content to listen and look on, especially to look on. She acquitted herself well, and though the chairman put questions to her which savoured as much of personal curiosity respecting this uncommon applicant for a post of humble import and small emolument, as of zeal and discretion in the choice which he and his colleagues had met to make, no flicker of a smile or slightest look of consciousness betrayed that she was aware of the exceptional nature of the interrogatory. The facts elicited by it were of an ordinary kind. Her story was very simple.

Katharine Farrell was a native of Dublin, where she had been brought up by a man and