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ELLEN AHERN;

OR,

THE POOR COUSIN.

CHAPTER XV.—A CLOSE TO THE MYSTERY.

In a little while Cato came in to light the lamps, and exhibited as much surprise at finding his master there as his strict ideas of good-breeding, and what he called 'manners,' would permit.

'Send my daughter here, Cato,' said Mr. Wardell, when the negro, having lit the lamps and arranged the chairs, was about leaving the room; 'and tell her to fetch back that book.'

'Yes, sir,' responded Cato, closing the door noiselessly after him, and wondering what such signs portended.

Therese, obedient to her father's summons, came immediately; and drawing a *labouret* to his feet, sat on it, leaning one elbow on his knee.—She thought it was something that he did not repulse her, and lifting her soft eyes to his face, she said, half shyly:

'I have brought them both, sir.' 'Hilloa! both what?' 'The Arabian Nights, sir, and the prayer-book.'

'The deuce you have. Here, give me the Arabian Nights.' Therese gave him the book, as directed, and saw it the next instant flying through the air, then fell, crumpled and torn, a glittering wreck of crimson and gold, behind one of the chairs on the opposite side of the room.

'I want to try my fortune again. I didn't like the first. Lay your book here in my hand, so that it will fall open of itself—or let me cut, myself, and then do you read out to me whatever your eye falls on.'

There was a portion of the book well thumbed, and the leaves loose from continual use, for the child, had studied daily all the instructions it contained on that point, and now it naturally opened just there. Holding it towards her, as it lay open on his broad palm, he bade her read. And clearly and distinctly, she read:—

'I desire not the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God, return ye and live.'—Ezekiel 18, 32.

'Thou wilt pardon my sin for it is great.'—Psalm 24.

'For Thou, oh Lord art sweet and mild, and plenteous in mercy to all that call upon Thee.'—Psalm 85.

'Do you believe that?' said Mr. Wardell, closing the book suddenly.

'On, yes; it is certainly true.' 'How do you know it is?' 'Because the Lord God hath said it,' replied the child, with countenance all aglow.

Then he spoke no more, but with his hand resting on her shoulder, where it had fallen, he seemed lost in thought. And not tranquil were those thoughts, if one had judged from his face, which gradually settled in to deep, harsh, sorrowful lines, which made him look as if extreme old age had suddenly fallen upon him. His hair looked whiter, his features sharper, and there was a pallor over his countenance which was ghastly and death-like; while his eyes, although they were wide open, seemed to be looking inwards at some buried horror, instead of outward objects before him. And the only sounds that broke the silence were the quiet, sharp throbs of his heart. Therese, with her soft black eyes resting tenderly on him, observed this change; her heart grew full, and her breath came short and thick with pent up emotion; she was inspired with the profoundest pity, and an innocent and natural desire to console one who, for the first time in her life, she now saw grieved, and whom she had always regarded as being superior to, and unassailable by, ordinary emotions; and, leaning forward, said with an energy strange in one usually so shy and retiring:

more miserably than the vilest beggar who has no care but for what he shall eat and drink—I've got the dyspepsia, and I don't think there's anything in that book will cure it.'

'Why don't you see a doctor, papa?—perhaps one might cure you.' 'Enshaw, child! I have no faith in doctors.—They have never discovered a remedy to suit my case,' said Mr. Wardell, moodily. 'But stop, now—don't say another word to me about myself. Nobody ever talks to me about myself.—I want to know what you are studying out of that book?'

'I am preparing for my first communion, sir, said Therese.

'When?' 'The sixth of next month, on the Feast of the Epiphany, sir.'

'That's right. All females ought to be pious. I am glad to hear this. Now go away—or stay, if you'd rather. Where is your governess?'

'In her room, sir, writing letters home.'

'So. I am going to sit with your grandmother awhile; good-night—kiss me, for I may not see you again for a week or so,' said Mr. Wardell as he rose from his chair with a deep sigh.

'Good night, dear papa; I hope your ship will come safe into port,' said Therese, helping him.

'Do so, child—do so,' he said impressively, as he turned away from her.

Mrs. Wardell was sitting in her usual place when her son came in, with her golden-headed staff beside her, and the Chinese screen, covered with paintings of lizards, green serpents, and other monstrous and misshapen things, making a fit background for her grotesque figure. A pleased expression brightened her face, and chased away the gloomy, lowering, suspicious look which had become habitual to it.

'How are you, now, mother?' said Mr. Wardell, drawing his chair up beside her.

'Just the same, Bernard. What makes you look so? Are you sick?'

'It's the old thought, mother, the same old, bitter, dreadful thought,' he answered, folding his arms tightly over his breast.

'What's the use tormenten' yourself with it?—What's done's past and gone,' said the old woman, beginning to shake.

'Yes, mother, for me, I'm afraid it is. But it's no use for you to be dragged down to hell with me. That thought troubles me sorely, sorely. When I look back, and think that it was for my sake, and to give me the education of a gentleman and a fair start in life, that you were led to consent to that great wrong in which I—curses on my ambition and pride—was finally persuaded to participate, the anguish of my conscience became too intolerable to be borne.—Mother, we used to be very happy in the olden time—we were happy because we were innocent! How well I remember the pious training you gave me, the prayers you taught me! And how, above all, the belief that I first learned at your knee, that beyond this life there is another, in which we shall be held accountable for the acts committed in this, and be rewarded with eternal good or evil, according to our deeds, has haunted me! Nothing could still the whispers of its voice—noting hush its appeals. Oh, it is dreadful! dreadful!' said Mr. Wardell, as if talking to himself.

'But after a while poverty came under our thatch, and left the walls of our cabin bare, its chests empty, and its baggart stripped. We were too proud to beg, and there was no work to be had. We were perishing! Do you remember it all, mother?'

'Yes, surely I do. But that's enough of it honey!' said Mrs. Wardell, weeping.

'And how, just then, that cold beautiful, devilish woman, came and tempted us beyond our strength? How smoothly and glybly she talked, until she almost persuaded us that she was an angel of light; and then how, when she got us both into her power, she urged us to commit the crime for which we have both been bitterly suffering ever since?'

'Aye, aye! a *bow'ral dhas*, I remember it all,' cried the old woman, whose head was shaking violently; 'but why do you come here, stirring up the ashes of my wild heart?'

'Because I pity you, mother. There's no need for you to die without such consolation as your faith can give. I am so miserable myself, that I begin to feel reckless of the consequences. I would give up every dollar of my wealth, and be willing to retire to some penitential cell to live on bread and water the rest of my life, if by so doing I could retrieve the past, and restore the dead to life. Exposure and ignominy, I confess, I fear. My courage fails me there. If I could only forget that, I might know a little peace on earth, the woe that awaits me hereafter could be ignored in this existence—but to suffer here and now as well as then! Merciful God! whither can I fly to escape the intolerable, merciless reflection? I sometimes feel tempted to put a ball through my brain.'

'Oh, a *laxner voght*, put such thoughts away

from ye intirely. Didn't ye know, darling, there's a way open for ye! Did ye forget that the secrets of the Confessional liken them of the grave? Go, then, and ease your conscience, for surely a life-time of suffering and good works ought to atone for one sin.'

'One sin?' exclaimed Mr. Wardell, in a tone of anguish. 'Mother, did you ever hear of a *barren sin*? That one sin has made all our subsequent lifetime a continuous, black catalogue of sins, and us responsible for all the evil consequences which have been the result of it. I can bear it no longer. You must bear it no longer. You are old, and trembling on the verge of the grave; you must not go away, mother, in the dark, without a ray of comfort to light your way. I can suffer best alone—but you must see a priest. Sometimes I think of going back to Ireland, to find out if God, in His infinite mercy, has left open for me any way of reparation; for He pursues me mother, He will not let me alone,' said Mr. Wardell, not even attempting to lift his hand to wipe off the hot tears that were flowing over his face.

'Ochone! Bernard, my son! what has come over ye?' cried Mrs. Wardell, vainly attempting to lift her shaking hand to his face. 'It's that governess! that Ellen Ahern, that's stirred up the bitterness in ye! Why did ye bring her here, when ye knew she was one of that brood?'

'Because she was poor and friendless. I received her as a sign of God's relenting, that He, in His inscrutable ways, sent her wandering across the wide ocean to seek shelter under my roof! Hence, I have treated her more as an honored guest, than as one who receives my money for services rendered. I have surrounded her with all the comfort and elegance that gold can buy, and played my child's soul in her hands, as the first step in the way of atonement.'

'Have ye ever questioned her? Maybe she can tell ye something.'

'I dare not, mother. I think, myself, she might tell me much, but I have not the courage to ask her. I could form no excuse for it. She might take the alarm and fly from this desolate tomb of a house, and from Therese, whom I love, although her poor mother—God rest her soul—had no place in my heart. That marriage was another, and one of the few evils, resulting from that sin. But enough now. Promise me *Mhair avaruineen*, that ye will send for a priest.'

'No, Bernard Ward!' said his mother, with strange energy. 'No. Not from my lips, even under the sacred seal of confession, shall I ever escape to criminate ye in the eyes of any man. What! my son! the merchant prince!—the man that all other men, wise, good, knowing ones, look up to, and are ready to fall down and worship him, to be brought low by me? Go away with ye Barney! Ye must think, sure, that I'm doing. I didn't bring ye into the world, suffer and sin for ye, to bring ye to such an end as this,' exclaimed the old woman as she sunk back in her chair, convulsed from head to foot.

Mr. Wardell lifted her tenderly to an upright position; wiped away the beaded sweat from her hollow temples, and handed her a glass of water, then resumed his place beside her, where he sat patiently smoothing her hands and wrists until the paroxysm passed off. Then he spoke soothingly and gently to her of other things, until she became quite tranquilized; and the hour striking for her to go to bed, her nurse came in, and he bade her 'good night,' going away with the burthen on his heart nowise lightened.

Several times after that, Ellen Ahern saw a muffled figure kneeling behind a pillar, before the altar of the Good Shepherd, which she thought resembled Mr. Wardell. But she could not tell; for, with his face bowed on his hands, which was covered with his cloak, it was impossible to see even its outline; and the twilight deepening into darkness, gave her no time to wait until the person finished his devotions, that she might ascertain if her impressions were correct. But, on the morning of Therese's first communion, when the lights on the altar and the tapers of the devout sent an uncertain and glimmering radiance here and there throughout the Church—when the stars yet shone through the arched windows from the gray sky beyond—and the child, full of serene awe and solemn joy, turned away from the sanctuary, holding in her breast the Real Presence of the Lord and Giver of Life—Jesus Christ Himself—Ellen Ahern saw the same bowed figure near them, and as he uncovered his face for an instant to rise, she saw by the light of a taper in the hands of a woman near her, that it was indeed Mr. Wardell. What did it mean? Surely, no human motive could have led that stern, strange man into the Temple of God at such hours, and in so humble a guise, to kneel in places so hidden from the eyes of man! Here was a thought of consolation for Ellen Ahern amidst the conflict of her own inner life; and, from that day, she redoubled her prayers for Mr. Wardell's conversion. The days succeeding this passed on unmarked by any

new or startling event. She saw, as usual, but little of Mr. Wardell, and when she did encounter him, he was the same abrupt, snarling, but in the end, a kind friend, that he had from the first proved himself. Therese somehow seemed to have gained a little on him. He sent for her now much more frequently than formerly to accompany her to his mother's room where, under the pretense of wishing Mrs. Wardell to observe how much she had improved in her studies, he made her very often read aloud articles of his own selection. Sometimes it would be the penitential psalms, then sometimes from the newspapers about Ireland, startling, thrilling events, which carried the old woman's heart back with yearning love to her native land, and notwithstanding all her efforts to the contrary, caused her eyes to brighten with fitful lustre, and her form to grow more erect. One morning he told Therese that 'There was an almost forgotten story that he wished to hear again,' and taking down an old English Testament from a hanging shelf, he turned over the leaves until he found the account given by St. John of the Passion and Death of our Lord, and gave her the book, open at the place to read it. And while she read in clear, thrilling tones, tremulous with the tender emotion that the theme evoked, her father sat with his hand shading his eyes, crushing back the big tears that rose unbidden to them; while her grandmother, quite lost for the moment to all that had passed since she last read that doleful and wondrous narrative, and of the wide gulf that circumstances, more than time, had made between then and now, devoutly crossed herself and muttered a prayer; then, suddenly remembering herself, she told them that she was fatigued and wished to retire, adding sharply—

'Don't set the child on to reading such matters, Bernard—it's no use.' Sometimes Ellen Ahern was invited to these family reunions, and towards her, Mrs. Wardell's mood was extremely variable, being at one time kind and gentle, at another fitful and peevish. Father Weston came sometimes to visit Ellen and her pupil, and by his cheering and instructive converse left them always with a feeling as if he had brought sunshine with him, for he was one of those priests who thought it not unworthy his high and holy functions to cultivate Christian gentleness, and patient, charitable thought for others, by which course he *wooz* more souls than ever a different course could possibly have driven heavenward.

Then came letters from home—Fermanagh letters—telling nothing new, it is true, but full of affection, and loving, friendly messages. Don Enrique was there—Sir Eadhna Ahern wrote her word—but had been unable to gain access either to Lord Hugh Maguire or his brother, both of whom remained at Fermanagh, secluded from every one except their own people, his lordship receiving nobody except his workmen and Fahey, who went up two or three times a week to report the progress they were making in the factory, which was being steadily built. No further clue had been discovered to the whereabouts of the Wards, the persons for whom Don Enrique had been so patiently and perseveringly searching, and at times they felt so disheartened that they were almost inclined to abandon the case as hopeless. Many and long were the speculations with which these letters abounded concerning the probable return of the rightful heir, and the changes that would necessarily ensue. Ellen Ahern plainly saw that these two hopeful, and simple minded old men—the priest and Sir Eadhna—were really buoyed up and kept alive and strong by the mere expectation of the event, and observed not a few pointed but delicately-couched hints thrown out, as if by accident, by the designing, cunning couple, which brought the red blood mounting impetuously to her cheeks, and gave her heart an impetus which left it weary and palpitating for hours afterwards.

Mrs. Gaston and Mrs. Talbot, with their daughters and sons, called often in a friendly way to see Ellen and Therese, and frequently invited them to their houses. It was during this friendly intercourse, which had fast ripened into intimacy, that Arthur Talbot, a young gentleman whose success at the bar was attracting much public attention, became deeply interested in the beautiful and intelligent girl who was so independently supporting herself, by the exercise of those talents with which God had so liberally endowed her. His mother, to whom he confided his preference, having satisfied herself that the object of her son's choice was his equal in birth, and that her antecedents had been without reproach, yielded her assent; Ellen Ahern's want of fortune forming no obstacle in her mind to the happiness of a beloved son when all else that was essential to it were hers in an eminent degree.—Frequent and delicate in his attentions, Arthur Talbot won the kindly regards of Ellen, who, grateful for what she considered merely as the expressions of a noble friendship, received them with less reserve than she would have done had she known the true motives by which he was governed. Great, then, was her surprise when

Mr. Talbot declared his sentiments; and bitter his disappointment, when, in unequivocal and decided terms, she rejected him. She thanked him for the compliment he had paid her, and for all his thoughtful, kind attentions; and, governed as ever by an unselfish spirit, she soothed the pain of her refusal by frankly avowing a previous attachment, and asked for a continuance of his friendship.

'Miss Ahern,' said Mr. Wardell, whom she met the next day in the Hall, 'you've done a very foolish thing. Tell me, now, hadn't some confoundedly proud notions about dower, and so forth, to do with your rejection of Arthur Talbot? He had taken her hand, and she had to stand still and be questioned until it was his good pleasure to liberate it.'

'None at all, sir,' she replied, in a low, firm tone; 'I should have thought such feelings too poor a return for such disinterested and generous devotion, and unworthy of me under the circumstances.'

'I think so, too. I only wanted to tell you in case it was so, that it need be no obstacle, for I have more money than I know what to do with, and had you accepted the fine young fellow, you should not have gone to him downless.'

'Thank you, from my heart, Mr. Wardell,' replied Ellen Ahern, pressing his hand; 'but it was impossible. Your kind intentions, which I have done so little to deserve, I am, however, as gratified for as if you had carried them into effect.'

'Make yourself happy your own way. Have you seen my mother, to-day?'

'Yes, sir. She does not seem so well.'

'So?' he ejaculated, with a great sigh. 'It is terrible to be old and afflicted, Miss Ahern.'

'Yes, sir. But there is the sweet consolation of knowing how, in the nature of things and with God's assistance, these sufferings may be soon merged into eternal rest from all that pains and grieves,' she said, softly.

'Do tell her so?' asked Mr. Wardell eagerly.

'I try to, sir; but she gets impatient and sends me away.'

'Don't mind that. Tell her again. You see, Miss Ahern, although I've grown to be a sort of pagan myself, that it would be a great grief to me to see my old mother go down to the grave in this way, for you must know—well—hold your ear close—she was one of your faith?'

'Oh, sir! what shall we do?' exclaimed Ellen, in amaze.

'Well! In old times people had faith in prayer, I've heard; and I once read somewhere, that as much faith as a grain of mustard seed would remove a mountain. Now, I think that you, Father Weston, and Therese might manage between you to get up that quantity. My mother is not a mountain, therefore, the task will be less difficult. At any rate, you can try.'

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'We will do all that we can, sir, humbly hoping; but although Almighty God is infinitely merciful and able to create worlds and souls by the breath of His power, He cannot save a soul unless that soul consents,' said Ellen Ahern, earnestly; but Mr. Wardell made no reply; he only dropped her hand, and went into his library.

One night, soon after, he came home later than usual, and with a slow, heavy step, went up to Mrs. Wardell's room. There was a look of firm determination, mingled with extreme suffering, in his countenance, and he took his place beside her without speaking, while she regarded him with a wondering, questioning glance. After she had sent her nurse away, he took her shrivelled hand in his, and said: 'Mother, the first step is taken. The struggle was not only getting the better of my body, bowing me and making me older than my time, but it was touching my reason. I have endured a foretaste of the miseries of hell, without their utter hopelessness. There is nothing that I could suffer in this life, through loss of name, fortune and liberty, that can equal what I have already endured.—The only thing that saved me from utter despair and madness was the desire—that God left with me, smouldering like a faint spark under the ashes—to restore and repair the bitter evil of my life. This spark has been fanned into a fire which is consuming the rest; therefore, I dare no, longer fight against it. Body and mind are wearing away—they will perish together unless the burden is lifted, and with them will die worldly honors, riches, and all human ties; but this soul, which gives me no rest in its ceaseless struggle, will live on—on—on, forever and forevermore. I felt that I must do something for this part which cannot, even if it would die, mother, and also for yours. How, or what I could not tell until this evening, I wandered into a Church where I saw a holy old man sitting in the confessional, waiting patiently to receive any penitent soul that might enter. I went in; and, as God is my judge, I felt in that act, simple as it was, more happiness than I have felt for long, bitter, weary years. I told him that I was a sinful man, come to unburden my soul to him, and began my confession. To-morrow I am to see him again, at the same hour.'