

Cripple

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Well

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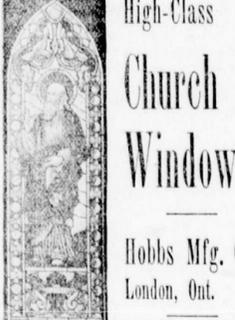
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MARCELLA GRACE.

By ROSA MULHOLLAND.

CHAPTER VII.

SACKCLOTH AND ASHES.

Murphy opened the hall-door with a sleepy and aggrieved countenance.

"There's a woman here with a message for you, ma'am, 's been sittin' in the hall these two hours. I couldn't have put her out, barrin' I called in the policeman; an' I didn't exactly like to do that, as she looks a decent sort of body."

A messenger at 1 o'clock in the morning! Marcella knew by instinct that the message was for her.

Mrs. O'Kelly divined the same, and sent Murphy away, and pushed her debutante into the library while she spoke to the woman, who had risen from the hall-chair and fixed her eyes on Marcella, who quickly reappeared.

"Mrs. O'Kelly, I know this woman. Something is wrong with my father." "Your father is dying," said the woman, "and he's callin' for you. He's been ill these four days, and wouldn't tell us where to look for you. I knowed that grandeur couldn't change ye that much, Marcella, but what you'd want to see him. I ask your pardon, Miss, but I don't know how to speak to you rightly in that beautiful dress."

Marcella was already putting off her necklace and bracelets and throwing them on the hall table.

"Get a cab at once," she said, "and I will change my dress in a moment and go with you. Oh, my poor father, why was I so selfish as to leave you?"

"Marcella, are you quite mad? After all the trouble I have taken to conceal your connection with low people to think of running out like this to them in the middle of the night! You shall not do it. These people always exaggerate. It will be quite time enough in the morning, when you go out naturally as a young lady should, and no one need know where you are going."

But Marcella had not waited to hear the last of these rapidly uttered words, but had flown to the top of the house, and was down again, clothed in a dark dress, before her patroness had time to realize what she was doing.

"Marcella, I am shocked and disappointed in you. If you quit this house at such an hour, remember you never come back to it."

"Oh, why did I leave him? Why did I ever leave him?" moaned the girl, unfastening the door with her trembling hands. "Come, Mrs. Casey. Oh, Mrs. O'Kelly, don't be angry. I am not ungrateful—but my father—"

The humble messenger stood up and courted to the angry lady, and the next moment Mrs. O'Kelly stood alone in the hall in a passion of outraged and injured dignity.

In the meantime Marcella, all her finery vanished, was flying through the streets at a pace with which her companion could hardly keep up. There were no cabs to be seen, and if there had been she had no money. The ill-lit, ill-lighted streets of the Liberties had never looked so dismal as now, their squalor and misery seemed more appalling to Marcella than they had ever seemed before. Arrived at the old house at last, she flung herself on her knees at her father's bedside.

"Whist, Marcella! Sure I wouldn't have sent for you, darlin', only I haven't many hours to live. When I first took sick, I wanted you, but I said, says I, you mustn't be intherin' in 'mid the creature's good fortune, Michael Grace. Sure who will look after her when you're gone if you anger the lady that's good to her? An' when I felt I was goin' to die, I seen everything so different from what it was before. Sure your mother was a lady, Marcella, and the Lord made you to live among ladies, and He sent one of them after you to take you to your natural place. An' what would the quality be doin' wid me in their way—nothin' but a big blunderin' creature that would be disgracin' you? And sure, my darlin', I'm goin' to heaven to get a sight of your mother, though God knows it's the angels she'll be keepin' company with an' not with the likes of me. Well, well, sure I'll find a little place for Michael some-where, for they say heaven's very big and there's a corner there for everybody that the Lord Jesus took thought of when He died. And more betoken, Father O'Reilly told me yesterday that the Lord was thinkin' of me on the cross when He died. Did you ever hear the like of that, Marcella? Of course I ought ha' knowed it, but it never came home to me rightly the way it does now. I seem to see a meanin' in it an' a reason for it; for sure what 'd become of me a stranger, pushed suddenly out into the other world if I hadn't a friend there to be providin' for me?"

The dispensary doctor shook his head when questioned by Marcella. The old man was older than she had thought, and had long been breaking up. He was dying now as fast as he could of rapid disease of the heart.

Days passed over, and Marcella, completely devoted to the task of soothing his last hours, thought of nothing, remembered nothing but the fast-fleeting presence of this affectionate father, the only and tender, if rugged, companion of her childhood and youth, the one creature to whom she really belonged in the world. No message came from Mrs. O'Kelly, and Marcella was obliged to the kindness of her poor neighbors for such little assistance as she could not do without. At last the supreme moment came, and he expired in her arms, blessing her.

And the desolate girl, having fol-

lowed him to the grave, sat in the dreary old house, dismayed and alone.

CHAPTER VIII.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

Sitting forlorn in the old house, alone in the world, Marcella looked back amazed over the events of the last few months of her life and felt as if all living was a dream, and nothing real which humanity can touch or behold. Up to the night when she had sheltered and protected the stranger whom she now knew as Bryan Kilmartin, her existence had in its hard monotony been real enough, but the many strange vicissitudes through which she had passed since then, looked now for her memory like the flying phantasmagoria of clouds over the head. The stern fact remained that her father was gone, and that she should have neither care for nor protection from him more in this world.

She returned at once to her old life of sewing from morning till night to keep body and soul together, and as she stitched in solitude her thoughts often went back to Mrs. O'Kelly, and she wondered with a sore heart why rich people should be so whimsical and strange, so kind one moment, so cruel the next. She had believed that Mrs. O'Kelly had loved her, and yet she had allowed her to face her terrible sorrow alone, to struggle with poverty at such a moment, to nurse her sick and bury her dead without help or sympathy from a friend. What a little part of the generosity that had dressed her so finely, amused her, taken her about the world during those unreal weeks would have sufficed to have eased and soothed the suffering of the last ten days! It would have been better she had never known her, thought Marcella, in tears; better she had stayed by his father during those last weeks of his life, more wholesome for herself if she had never tasted the sweets of refined living and of gentle company. The only good she had gained, thought the girl, as she pined her needle, with tear-dimmed eyes, was that she had been allowed to see her hero again, had heard something of his life, had learned his name, and had been honored by the clasp of his hand. It seemed to her now, looking back on that enchanted season of enjoyment, that this wonderful episode in her life had been permitted to her solely for the sake of that one half-hour conversation with Bryan Kilmartin at the ball.

Why such a strange conviction should cling to her she did not know, only she felt inexplicably that she should yet have some further means of serving him, that she was to have something more to do with him, or for him, before she died. She was too young to know the folly of relying on presentiments: though presentiments do sometimes come true.

She was startled out of her long reverie by the sound of an approaching foot on the stair, followed by a summons on her door. Rising quickly to open it, she almost expected to see Kilmartin again on the threshold, come to tell her what further she could do for him. But it was not Kilmartin who stood before her expectant eyes, only the much older Father Daly from Distrena. Marcella had never beheld him before, but seeing that he was a priest, she, as a matter of course, invited him to enter and sit down.

He laid his hat on the corner of the old loom, looked at her kindly and critically for a moment, and then extending his blunt, honest, feeling old hand (for hands express as much as voices), said:

"There is no one to introduce us: but as you and I are bound to have much to do with each other through life, we will begin to be friends at once, if you have no objection."

Marcella thought for an instant that the strange priest's mind was a little astray, or that he had mistaken her for someone else. But he soon corrected that impression.

"Your name is Marcella Grace," he said, "and you have lately suffered a great loss. Nay, my dear, God wip the tears from all eyes; and sure I am you have already wept more than is good for you. Now, how am I to talk to you if you go on crying this way?"

Marcella, whose flesh was weak from scant food and sleep, but whose spirit was willing, righted herself at once and asked what her visitor wanted of her.

"Sit down, my dear child, and listen to me, for I have a good deal to say. Some time ago you had intercourse with a lady, a cousin of your mother's—Mrs. O'Kelly, my friend, my poor friend—God be merciful to her!"

"Sir, you do not mean—"

"That she also is dead? But I do, my dear. God has strange ways of dealing with us, and sometimes troubles come oddly in bunches. 'It never rains but it pours,' says the old proverb; but after God's rain there is always some harvest for the soul. Now, my dear, I will allow you to cry for five minutes, but you must not be longer, for I have a great deal to say and to do. My poor old friend had a true affection for you. She told me to tell you she was sorry she had been hasty with you. She died with sorrow in her heart for your trouble, but she did what she could to make amends, so she did."

"And I have been thinking her changeable and unkind," said Marcella, trying to control her grief. "But what—how?"

"I will tell you all about it. Some time ago we had a bit of a misunderstanding, my poor friend and I, about rents down in the country, and about making her will, and because I was displeased about one I would give her no advice about the other, God forgive me. And I went away in a huff—"

Here Father Daly paused and remembered the old lady's angry cry, "Don't come back here until I send for you!" but he said nothing of that.

"About a fortnight ago," he went on, "I got a telegram in the country asking me to come in a hurry to comfort my poor old friend. She had had a stroke of paralysis and she had only a few conscious hours before she died. Fortunately, and thanks be to God, she was able to make use of her time."

Marcella listened in silence. All this conveyed to her but one thought. Her good friend had died without receiving the grateful thanks which were her due, and meanwhile the recipient of her bounty had thought of her with a reproachful heart. How can such piteous misunderstandings ever be put straight when death and eternity have interposed between soul and soul?

"She told me about you, my dear, and how strangely you had come across her as if Providence had sent you. She owned she was wrong in being displeased at you for hurrying away to your father, and she would have followed you next day only 'twas then the hand of God was laid on her. Poor soul! she blamed herself right and left, as we all will have to do then, my dear, and may as well begin now. And the end of it was she left you her love; and along with it she has bequeathed you all she was possessed of in the world."

"I prize the message dearly," said Marcella; "it puts me right again. I thought I had lost a friend, and now I have gained one again, though so far away as heaven. Thank you with all my heart, Father, for coming to bring me that word."

Father Daly looked at her inquiringly.

"I don't think I have made you understand me," he said. "You are now Mrs. O'Kelly's heiress, my child, with houses and lands, and an income of two or three thousand a year."

Marcella colored to the roots of her hair, and threw back her head and looked at Father Daly with a puzzled expression.

"Have I heard you rightly?" she said in a low voice. "Do you not make some strange mistake? Oh, sir, don't you see that it is so very, very unlikely."

"Nothing is so likely to happen as the unexpected," quoted Father Daly, buttoning his coat, "and this is not so unlikely after all. You are her near next of kin, in the first place, and she was very fond of you in the second. At all events, I can assure you that there is no kind of mistake. And now about practical business. You can laugh, and cry, and wonder about it all when you have time, but in the meantime you must have somebody to listen to you. It will not suit you to continue longer in this house, my dear, than it is absolutely necessary. I have thought about all that and I have made some arrangements. As the lady of Distrena you must have proper surroundings at once, and there is no use in taking the world into your confidence unnecessarily as to where you have hitherto had your home. In all humility we must always remember it ourselves; but it was Mrs. O'Kelly's wish that nothing should be said to take from under your feet the little platform of worldly respectability on which she had been at pains to set you up. Not that you must ever deny the truth, but the world has no claim on your voluntary confidence."

"This being so," continued Father Daly, brushing his hat with his coat-sleeve, and looking at the crown of it intently, so that he might not intrude upon Marcella's natural emotions at such a moment, "I have taken some steps for your comfort. Here is money which you will want to wind up your affairs—your own money, mind; nobody else's—and if you are ready to leave this to-morrow, I will take you to a place where, I will answer for it, you will soon not be sorry to have gone. Some clothes, and all that, can be sent after you."

"Where?" asked Marcella.

"Well, I am going to take you to a friend of mine in the country, for the present. I thought you would not care to go to Merrion square just now, and Crane's Castle would give you but a cold welcome unless it got longer notice. With Mrs. Kilmartin you will be happy and safe until such other arrangements as you please can be made for you."

"Mrs. Kilmartin," murmured Marcella, again with the feeling that she could not have rightly heard or understood.

"She is a dear friend of mine, and was a friend of Mrs. O'Kelly till—well, the world parted them. She lives in a very retired spot and is an invalid, and a great deal alone, as her only son is necessarily much away from her. I wrote to her in haste, telling her the state of the case, and this morning I received her reply. She will expect us to arrive to-morrow evening."

Having given her a few more detailed instructions, Father Daly went away and left Mrs. O'Kelly's heiress to realize this newest and most extraordinary of all the changes in her life. Her friend as well as her father gone from this world, and in their place fortune, ladyhood, position in life allotted to her.

Her first impulse when alone, was to fall upon her knees and wrestle in prayer with the great wonder, and the strange alternations of pain and joy that now, after her first bewilderment had passed away, seized and shook her. With her hands clasped above her head she remained long in the attitude of supplication without power to put her thoughts into ordered words, hardly knowing what she asked to receive, or to be saved from, only keenly conscious that God was aware of it all, and would overshadow her with the wings of His care. Then rising to her feet and

standing in the middle of the old familiar room, she looked round on the poverty-stricken hearth, the old loom, the rotten timbers, and said to herself that all this evidence of her old life was passing away from her, and after to-morrow would be seen no more. Only this morning she had feared that she should never be able to escape from its sordid, haunted forlornness to cleaner and less dreary, even if almost as poor, surroundings, and now it seemed to her she could not leave it without a pang. The old crazy sticks and stained walls were all that remained to connect her with whatever love she had known in her life, and in leaving them forever she seemed to cut herself adrift from those she had forever lost.

Her experience till now had inclined her to "trust no future however pleasant," and yet her thoughts, after an interval of sorrowful looking back, sprang on to to-morrow, the eagerness of youth leaped up in her, and she smiled radiantly through her tears. It was true, true as that she held what seemed to her a small dowry of golden sovereigns in her hand, that she was henceforth to have money, freedom, nice living, gentle and genial companionship, power to relieve those who suffered still as she herself was now to suffer no more. She was to go forth into a beautiful world, with flowers on her breast and a golden wand in her hand—and then her wide visions of the splendors and delights of a possible happiness gradually narrowed down to one dazzling point, she remembered that to-morrow she was—strange to tell, and hard to realize—was to be a guest in Bryan Kilmartin's mother's house.

With the impulse of youth to believe unflinchingly in what it has already accepted by instinct as noble, she had never paid the slightest heed to Mrs. O'Kelly's denunciations of this man, preferring to think that he was right, and his former friend in the wrong, having from the first adopted his cause, whatever it might be, as the just one. Mrs. O'Kelly had described his mother as crushed and undermined in health by the wrong-headedness of her son. This Marcella had never believed, but now she should see. Happily, she should presently see.

Then she began to make her arrangements for the final break with the past. With characteristic fidelity to what she had undertaken, she finished the piece of sewing on which she had been engaged when interrupted by Father Daly with his wonderful news, and took it to the shop which had employed her. Strange it was to her now, the old familiar counting out of pence into her hand—her hand which was to have henceforth the spending of sovereigns. Coming out of the shop she gave the price of her tear-stained labor to the first poor-looking creature she met, and passed on hugging the blessing she had bought with the aims. Next she made some purchases, a few necessary articles for herself, and various little presents for humble friends who had been kind to her in her trouble. She had paid her small debts, and said her last good-byes, telling all those poor creatures whom she visited, that friends having sent for her, she was leaving Dublin, but giving no clue to her future whereabouts. Nobody was surprised, Marcella had had relations of worldly respectability on which she had been at pains to set up. Not that you must ever deny the truth, but the world has no claim on your voluntary confidence.

"This being so," continued Father Daly, brushing his hat with his coat-sleeve, and looking at the crown of it intently, so that he might not intrude upon Marcella's natural emotions at such a moment, "I have taken some steps for your comfort. Here is money which you will want to wind up your affairs—your own money, mind; nobody else's—and if you are ready to leave this to-morrow, I will take you to a place where, I will answer for it, you will soon not be sorry to have gone. Some clothes, and all that, can be sent after you."

CHAPTER IX.

THE SHALOW OF A CRIME.

Bryan Kilmartin sat in his chambers in Dublin turning over an anonymous letter in his hands, and pondering its contents. It told him that the police were watching him, that he was suspected of complicity in a recent crime, that a strong case was being made out against him, and that he had better fly the country while yet he had time.

"A precious document!" he exclaimed. "I shall not take the slightest notice of it," and then tearing it into shreds he walked to the window and stood looking out, without seeing the things at which he gazed.

His thoughts were busy with the events of that night when he had fled through the streets of the Liberties of Dublin like a criminal from his bed, from lay in dismal colors before the eye of his mind. A fellow-creature whose steps had been dogged from street to street, done to death without a moment's warning, a man whose hand he had often touched, the sound of whose voice he knew, lying on the pavement in his blood while his murderers escaped. He heard the cry of the police and their footsteps following, as, overwhelmed with dismay at his position, he, Bryan Kilmartin, did what he had never done before in his life, ran from pursuit, and sought for a hiding place and sanctuary. His brow burned as he remembered all that had occurred, and then having mastered a sort of silent passion of shame and regret, he turned abruptly from the window, took up his hat, and left the house, as if he would escape from his painful thoughts by movement through the open air.

Passing across Merrion square he looked up at a house from which he had only a few days ago followed the funeral of an old friend, one whom he had always looked on as a friend in spite of the sharp reproaches with which she had of late kept him in mind that she held him in disgrace on account of his politics. And what were

these politics which so dishonored him? he asked himself. He believed that Ireland might be made and ought to be made, by her own exertions, a peaceful and contented country, that education should be encouraged in, and famine should be banished from the land. That was about the whole in a nut-shell. Probably his friend, an emigrant now, probably to that new world where no rents are paid and unbought leases are held in perpetuity, was wiser this moment than she had been a month ago, and would willingly exonerate him from much with which she had not scrupled to charge him. How quickly she had taken her departure, poor, old lady, and what had become of that strangely interesting girl, the young relative who had appeared under her chaperonage just before her death? As this girl's face and voice came back to him, he remembered that it was not only her own peculiar attractions which had so fascinated him, but also her curious resemblance to that other girl who was so associated with his adventure on one fatal night, the events of which had just now been so present to his mind, and to which his thoughts still so easily went back.

The sordid aspect of the rooms, the poor garb of his protectress herself came before him again, and he reproached himself for not having tried to do something to better the condition of those under whose roof he had been sheltered from a real misfortune. True there might be some danger to him in returning to the spot, in at all connecting himself with the people, whoever they might be, who lived in that house. If he were in reality watched by the police, as he had been informed, it might tell against him were he observed to hold any intercourse with those who had harbored him, who might be suspected on that occasion. Yet in a matter of this kind it were cowardice to be over-prudent. He had already discovered that the owner of the house was a weaver of poplin, poor and old. Might he not benefit him a little if only by buying his manufacture?

The man he had never seen; the girl he was assured would keep his secret. He felt a sudden and strong desire to do something at once towards discharging his debt. In these troubled times a man like him could not be sure of the circumstances in which he might find himself to-morrow. Better to do at once whatever seemed urgent to be done. Under the influence of this impulse he directed his steps towards the Liberties, and took his way through some of the most historic parts of Dublin. Here, along these quays where the western sun turns even the mud of the Liffey into liquid gold, makes the dome of the Four Courts redden in the clouds, and fires the spars of such shipping as clusters between the shadowed spans of the bridges, ran the "rebels" of '95 with caps of pitch ablaze on their heads to plunge madly into the waters for an ending of their torment. About this spot were enacted the last pathetic scenes in the short life of the enthusiastic Irish patriot. Along this route he strode, sword in hand, leading on the ragged regiment which was all that appeared in the flesh of the imaginary armies with which he had expected to win Ireland for the Irish, and there his gibbet stood, the scaffold from which his heroic young soul escaped to where there are neither famines, nor oppressions, nor possible mistakes or miscalculations for the ardent and freedom-loving spirit to fall into. In yonder house Lord Edward Fitzgerald was trapped, wounded, and caught, to be dragged to Kilmalham prison to die of his wounds. On this streetway Lord Kilwarden met the untimely fate that broke Emmet's heart.