

THE BLINDNESS OF DR. GRAY

By Rev. F. A. SHEEHAN, D. D., Author of "My New Curate," "Lake Delinquent," "Lullaby," "Gleanings of the Sea."

CHAPTER I

AN AMERICAN WILLIAM

The Very Reverend William Gray, D. D., Parish Priest of the united parishes of Doonarragh, Lackagh, and Athboy, came down to breakfast one dark, gloomy December morning in the year of our Lord 18—He had risen early, like all the old priests of his generation, made his half-hour's meditation according to his rigorous rule and habit, made his quarter-hour's preparation for Mass, celebrated the Holy Sacrifice, and with the burden of years and the cares which the years will bring, came slowly down the softly carpeted stairs, and gazing with an omniscient shrug of the shoulders at the pile of letters which lay on his writing desk, he sat down to table, broke his egg, looked out on the gloomy, wintry landscape, shuddered a little, pushed aside the egg at a crust of toast rather meditatively than with any appetite for such things, drank a cup of tea, and pulled the bell. His aged domestic made her appearance.

still stands guarding the old place where the Grays had lived for generations? Did he think of her sweet looks, her bright, girlish face, half-gypsy, half-saintlike in its perfect contour, and the dark hair that framed it irregularly and tossed riotously across her forehead without restraint of net or bodkin? And her homecomings, when she came back from the boarding school in Dublin, and returned to her parents' holidays from Mayo; and he wondered and was glad when people turned around on Sunday morning and riveted their eyes upon her? Perhaps more. But if the tear fell, and the thin, bony hand trembled—and I do not aver that they did—it might have been from another recollection, when on a certain day he had said, when others' opinions were wavering for and against her: "Yes! She must go. It is the law!"

He rose at length from his stooping posture, and walked up and down the dining-room, a favourite exercise of his whenever he was in a gloomy and anxious condition of mind. His hands folded slightly behind his back, grasping that ill-omened American letter. He was agitated with remorse for the past, and with anxiety for the future. The words of that letter, "your sister," seemed to rise out of the page and smite him, each with its own deadly blow; and the strong man trembled beneath their suggestions, and his hands shook as he held the strokes of an axe swung by a pigmy beneath its branches. Sad reminiscences woke up that had been hidden away and buried beneath the debris of the years, and he became aware of the fact, that should never be forgotten, that the human heart, however seared and shrunk, holds a terrible vitality unto the last.

"Who's there? And what do ye want?" "It is I, the parish priest, Betty," he said, in a loud voice. "I beg your Reverence's pardon; but what do ye want; and where's Nance?" "I'm sure I don't know where Nance," he shouted back. "But I want to tell you that I am coming in the morning to say Mass for you, and give you your Christmas Communion." "God bless you!" she said. "But only on the old condition." "Of course," he replied, "the old condition. And I want your advice, too. Is it all right?" "Av course it is," she said. "I'll tell Nance, and she'll have everything ready."

He entered away; and after a dinner he sat down to his desk and wrote a very emphatic letter to the priest in Chicago, to the effect that, although he regretted deeply the demise of his sister, and was gratified to learn that she had received all the rites of the Church, Canon Law and ancient laws forbade him personally from entertaining even for a moment the idea of opening his house to his orphan niece. It was against all precedent. He would be happy to accept of a visit, and the idea of having a visitor in the house to be watched, and tended and fed and entertained was always intolerable. He had to put up with such things twice, when he had a mission in his parish. But it was a time of uneasiness and trouble, which he terminated as speedily as possible, and then resigned himself to the delightful luxury of being alone again. And now, here comes a cool suggestion from a priest, of whom he had never heard before, to take into his house, permanently, a girl of unknown age and disposition, and to keep her and be responsible for her during her lifetime. The idea was simply appalling. He even laughed at it. But when the letter was read, and the words "your sister," "consumption," "hospital," "only child," would repeat themselves with their suggestion that now was the time and opportunity to redress and atone for the past, until the man was almost half distracted with remorse on the one hand and nameless terrors on the other.

He stopped suddenly in his walk, and touched the bell. When the housekeeper appeared, he ordered his horse brought around. It was his refuge in all cases of perplexity. The exercise that drove the stagnant blood of old age bounding to the brain, cleared his faculties, and enabled him to think with calmness, judgment, and force.

CHAPTER II A CHANGE OF CURATES If the good pastor of Doonarragh, Lackagh, and Athboy was much disturbed in the year of our Lord 18—his future curate, Father Henry, or Harry, Liston (as every one called him) cannot be said to have been much elated on his promotion. He had a certain amount of respect for the condition of a curate; and it was rapid, and therefore honourable promotion, for he had been but a few years assistant. Yet he was not happy. The change meant for him the translation from town-life, to which he had been born, to country-life, with which he was quite unacquainted. But that would be a slight inconvenience at most. The major cause, that which drove his spirits below zero, was the reflection that he was now to be brought into intimate relationship with a parish priest, to whom he had always looked up with a certain kind of reverential dread.

"Two front bedrooms," continued his friend. "First two bedrooms, in same color; gray woodwork to be painted in lavender. He'll like that! Second room to be painted sage-green, all woodwork to be painted white; panels, sage-green. All down?" "All down!" said Henry. "Now, write: Back bedrooms, halls and staircase to be left to the option of pastor!" said Henry Liston, despairingly. "This would never do. He'd murder me!" "Never fear!" said his friend. "That last hint will fetch him completely. Left to option of pastor? By Jove! won't be stare? But, mark me, young man, 'tis your first and greatest victory. Come along now, and eat something. Oh, by the way, I was near forgetting. Write down: But I am going to have a stable to be tiled in small pattern, and chambered, with channels, drains, etc. That's all, I think. But we may remember something else as we go along!"